

12/28/25

Sermon Title: Am I born again of water and the Spirit?

Preacher: Pastor Kim Soonbae

Scripture Passage: John 3:1-15

Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit.

⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?

¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,
¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

We offer to the Lord the final Sunday worship service of the year 2025.

It feels as though 2025 has only just begun, yet we have already come to the time of its conclusion.

The vivid memory remains of November 2024, when the news was filled with talk of President Trump’s election and his upcoming inauguration in January.

In this way, everything in this world has a beginning and an end.

So does our life.

Even though it may feel as though we will live forever, that is not the case.

Not only our lives, but also the world in which we live is the same.

Though it may seem eternal, nothing in this world truly lasts forever.

The only things that are eternal are God and what belongs to Him.

That is why, as we live in this world, we must seek not the things of the world, but the things of God—namely, the eternal life that God has granted to humanity.

Today’s passage shows us the sure way by which we may obtain eternal life in this world.

One night, a Jewish rabbi named Nicodemus came to Jesus.

¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

^{2a} He came to Jesus at night

John introduces a man named Nicodemus very briefly, describing him simply as “a leader of the Jews.”

In reality, however, Nicodemus was a man of remarkable status and wealth, someone who exercised tremendous influence in society.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee who strictly adhered to orthodox doctrine.

When we hear the word *Pharisee*, we often recall Jesus' rebukes and therefore associate the term with a negative image.

Yet in fact, the Pharisees were people who earnestly sought to live lives set apart from others through rigorous obedience to the Law.

At that time, there were approximately six thousand Pharisees, and they were experts in the Law—conservative theologians who devoted themselves to the careful study of the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses.

In addition, Nicodemus was a highly influential Jewish leader, a member of the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin was the supreme governing body of Judaism, holding legislative, judicial, and administrative authority all at once.

In modern terms, it functioned as the highest national authority, overseeing the powers of the legislature (parliament), the judiciary (courts), and the executive (government).

It investigated and disciplined heresy, possessed full judicial authority except for capital punishment, and handled all official affairs between the Jewish people and the Roman authorities.

Yet this man of immense power came to Jesus secretly, under cover of night, to avoid the eyes of the public.

If so, why did he come to Jesus in this way?

He approached Jesus and opened the conversation with these words.

² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Before Nicodemus came to Jesus, Jesus had been traveling throughout the region of Galilee, healing every disease and sickness among the people.

(Matt 4:23) Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

(Matt 4:24) News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.

(Matt 4:25) Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

In addition, during the Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem and cleansed the temple when he saw people buying and selling there.

(John 2:13) When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

(John 2:14) In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money.

(John 2:15) So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

(John 2:16) To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!”

Considering these events, it seems that Nicodemus either personally witnessed what Jesus did at the temple in Jerusalem during the Passover, or at least heard reports about it.

For this reason, he came to Jesus, recognizing him as a teacher who had come from God.

However, Jesus responds to Nicodemus with an answer that is puzzling and difficult to understand.

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Jesus’ response sounds, at first glance, like a complete non sequitur—almost as if it has nothing to do with what Nicodemus has just said.

However, there is a clear reason why Jesus answers in this way.

Who is Jesus?

He is the One who searches and knows the deepest parts of our hearts.

Jesus already knew why Nicodemus had come to see him.

Therefore, instead of responding to Nicodemus’ polite greeting, Jesus directly addressed the very question Nicodemus had come to ask—the issue that was troubling him most.

Although Nicodemus says with his lips, “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him,” there is no way a Jewish rabbi would come to Jesus in the middle of the night merely to say such words.

What Nicodemus truly wanted to know, what he desperately needed an answer to, was this question: “Can I enter the kingdom of God?”

It is reasonable to assume that Nicodemus lacked assurance about this and was deeply unsettled because of it.

Jesus saw straight through his heart and knew exactly what was going on within him.

But what a shocking moment this must have been.

At the time, most Jews believed that as long as they did not commit apostasy or some obvious, serious sin, they would surely inherit the kingdom of God.

Yet here stands Nicodemus—a man who had devoted his life to studying God’s law and prided himself on keeping it more faithfully than anyone else—and Jesus tells him, in effect, that he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

To “see the kingdom of God” means to be raised at the end of the age, to enter heaven, and to enjoy eternal life.

Therefore, to be told that one cannot see the kingdom of God is essentially the same as being told that one cannot enter heaven at all.

Upon hearing this answer from Jesus, Nicodemus was not merely shocked—he panicked.

Although he had come to Jesus because he lacked full assurance about entering God’s kingdom, deep down he likely still carried a measure of confidence, thinking, “If someone like me cannot enter the kingdom of God, then who possibly can?”

That is why he is utterly thrown into confusion at this moment.

We can clearly see Nicodemus’ bewilderment in the question he asks next.

It is so awkward and elementary that it hardly sounds like something a scholar of the Law or a leader of the Jews would ever ask.

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Moreover, through this question of Nicodemus, we can see just how poor his spiritual understanding actually was.

Even so, Jesus responds graciously to Nicodemus’ extremely naïve question.

Jesus carefully and earnestly explains that the new birth He spoke of is not a physical birth, but a spiritual one.

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

To be “born of water and the Spirit” refers to a spiritual birth that is distinct from physical birth.

Because of sin, human beings are spiritually dead.

Therefore, in order to be made spiritually alive, sin must be removed, and the way this happens is through being born again of water and the Spirit.

Hearing these words of Jesus—words he had never heard before in his life—Nicodemus is left speechless and bewildered.

“Am I a teacher of the Law, and yet there is a way to enter the kingdom of God that I neither know nor have ever heard of...?”

Perceiving what was in Nicodemus’ heart, Jesus kindly explains it to him once again.

⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit.

⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Jesus explains that just as the wind is invisible yet undeniably real, so too is the new birth—being born again through the work of the Holy Spirit—though it cannot be seen.

At this point, Nicodemus’ attitude begins to change.

He opens his heart, draws closer to Jesus, and asks his question with sincerity.

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

Nicodemus' question carries several layers of meaning.

On what basis do you say that the Holy Spirit causes a person to be born again?

How do you know all these things?

Can we truly trust what you are saying?

Who are you, really, to speak in this way?

Through Nicodemus' question, the focus shifts to the issue that all humanity wonders about and that lies at the very heart of the Gospel of John: **Who is Jesus?** The conversation now reaches its climax.

Jesus then rebukes Nicodemus.

¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

The work of the Holy Spirit was already present in the Old Testament era.

There were many prophets who were anointed by the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus, a scholar of the Scriptures and a teacher of Israel, could not have been unaware of this fact.

Nevertheless, like the other Pharisees, Nicodemus sought salvation solely by strictly keeping the Law.

We human beings cannot attain salvation and eternal life by our own strength without the help of the Holy Spirit, because we are unable to keep the Law perfectly.

Therefore, in order to be saved, we must be born again by the Spirit.

Jesus teaches that the event which forms the basis for the Holy Spirit's work of giving us new birth is the lifting up of the Son of Man— that is, Jesus' death on the cross, His resurrection, and His ascension.

¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,

¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Because Jesus died on the cross in our place to save us, who deserved death for our sins, and was raised to life by God and exalted to the Father in heaven, all who believe in Him receive new birth and eternal life.

Just as in the days of the Israelites after the Exodus, when they grumbled against God over food and water, and many were bitten and died from the serpents God sent, Moses prayed to God on behalf of the suffering and dying people.

God then provided a way for them to live—a path of salvation: anyone who was bitten by a serpent and looked at the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole would not die but live (Numbers 21:4-9).

Jesus now reminds Nicodemus, who is well-versed in the Scriptures, of this historical truth.

He explains that, just as those bitten by serpents could be saved by looking at the bronze serpent, we who are destined to die because of sin can be saved by simply looking in faith at Jesus Christ, who was lifted up on the cross in our place. God has provided this gracious means of salvation for us.

Beloved members of Church of Godly Dreams,

2025 is ending, and next week the new year 2026 will begin.

Years like 2027, 2028, 2029 will come and go in the same way.

But how long will this continue?

We do not know the exact time, but one thing is certain: all of us will eventually disappear from this stage of the world.

We must live prepared for that time.

That preparation is to be born again of water and the Spirit.

Then, although we cannot avoid leaving this world, we will see the kingdom of God.

We will enter into heaven.

Going to church does not guarantee entrance into God's kingdom.

Knowing the Bible well does not guarantee it.

Giving generously to the church does not guarantee it.

Serving diligently in church does not guarantee it.

Keeping the law does not guarantee it.

We enter God's kingdom only by being born again of water and the Spirit.

Remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus and live a life without regret.

At that time, beating the ground in despair and lamenting will be of no use.

Are there any among you who, like Nicodemus, have not yet received assurance of salvation?

Be born again of water and the Spirit!

Believe in Jesus Christ and receive eternal life!

Jesus Christ alone is the only Savior of all humanity and our eternal Lord.