

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 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.”

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. **18** Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. **19** This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. **20** Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. **21** But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Reset

In 1986 Nintendo released their NES but it wasn’t until 1988 that my brother had saved up enough money to buy us a Nintendo (although he called it his own). Now, it was advertised as an entertainment system we soon realized that it could just as easily be a frustrating device capable of upsetting even the most angelic children. But if the game wasn’t going well, if it was frustrating you

and you were worse off than when you started, you could easily hit the reset button, reboot the system, and start over back at the beginning.

If only it were so easy with life. There are any number of things in life that we wish we could just reset and start again. At times it's the poor decisions, the things we've said or things we've done that come back to haunt us. We wish we could undo and redo these things. Then there is the guilt that follows us. But is it possible reset and restart?

Nicodemus thought the idea was just too good to be true. He wasn't so concerned about sticking his foot in his mouth as much as he was worried about the question of salvation. He asks, "How can this be?" Jesus reset the system when he finished life with a perfect score. He didn't start over but he brings us into the Kingdom of God. Here we see the Kingdom of God in forgiveness. There is a reset as God gives us a new start.

But Nicodemus and the rest of the Pharisees aren't quite sure. They've studied. They're excelled. They're the experts in the law. When suddenly, Jesus a Galilean who hasn't come from any respected school starts doing things they've never seen before or thought possible. The Pharisees send their leader, the best, literally "Nico-demus - Nike Demos - The champion of the people steps forward, he comes at night but he doesn't berated, dishonor, or insult Jesus. He addresses him politely saying, "*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.*" Christians are divided as to whether or not Nicodemus believed at this point or just investigating these things for the council. He doesn't say, "I know," but "We know." But what they don't know is why Jesus doesn't compliment them, instead he's critical of the religious leaders. He clears the temple courts and even speaks of destroying this temple. Something is off.

In response to this statement Jesus points out, "**No one** can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." It's as if Jesus is answering questions Nicodemus hasn't even asked yet and suddenly we're talking about the Kingdom of God, a place from God, and how to get there. Jesus says, "One must be born again." or, "born from above." That's a familiar term for a Jew. People were born again all the time, when a Gentile converts to Judaism - the Gentile soul was born again to a Jewish souls. After a year studying the Torah a student was born again by immersing himself in water and taking on the yoke of the Torah. People were born again at marriage as they took up a new married life. Being on the Sanhedrin court, Nicodemus had to be married. Nicodemus was also a Rabbi, and the Head of Rabbis, with each one of these positions encountering a new birth, a new life. Nicodemus was familiar with the notion of rebirth for converts to Judaism for the Gentiles, but not with the idea that a Jew had to be reborn.

Nicodemus isn't asking a dumb question. He's asking, "I've been born again many times. What's left for me to do... climb back up into my mother's womb?" Jesus responds, "That's not good

enough.” This isn’t a video game. This isn’t a computer you can reboot and try again. (They tried that already back at the flood - how did that turn out?) This was not something Nicodemus could do on his own. It didn’t matter how many times he went to the religious washings and immersed himself in water. **“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 gives birth to spirit..... No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.** What makes the difference, what really matters isn’t how perfectly you play the game, it’s the Spirit, which is something you aren’t born with it is a gift of God.

That is a serious blow to the pride. For those who have been in church their whole life, dedicated their life to Christ, served him and his church for countless years, Jesus says, “That’s not enough. That won’t save you or get you into the kingdom of heaven. Last week, the day we celebrated Pentecost - we answered the question, “How do you know you have the Spirit? How can you be sure?” we responded that the Holy Spirit works through God’s Word and Sacrament. **“No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3)** We were reminded that we were baptized. God’s promised that his Spirit is always at work through his word. We have his promise. We have his Word.

The problem with the Word and even our confessions is that they speak plainly. Sometimes even bluntly. Like the Athanasian Confession *Those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. (John 5:28-29).* We don’t like Jesus or his Word to speak so forcefully. That isn’t exactly the favorite passage of people. Even the pope wants to hold hands with everyone and pretend all religions are equal... that there are many paths and many ways to God. We want to believe that it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are a good person. The truth is much harsher than that. We are often willing to compromise and set aside the truth in order “not to offend” people with the truth. Why?

There is a little universalist inside of each of us that wants to reduce salvation down to being nice or doing good. Distill Christianity and Lutheranism down to nothing but a warm body. And yet, these words and this faith are serious and yet so often taken for granted. This is why we practice close communion, why we follow biblical fellowship principles of distancing ourselves from Christians who teach falsely, this really matters. This is Jesus’ confession. This is our confession. The “who” we worship and what he has done is of utmost importance because unless this confession is right, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Nicodemus understood what Jesus was saying. In much the same way that Isaiah cries out, *“Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips....”* He knew he wasn’t perfect. Nicodemus understood what Jesus was getting at when he asks, *“How can someone be born when they are old?”* This is too good to

be true. 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?”

How can you say all things will be made new? Jesus has come down from heaven. Nicodemus has seen the signs. He knows Jesus is from God. But the suffering servant revealed in Isaiah, God’s plan is not yet complete. Jesus, however, reveals to Nicodemus the method of which the Messiah would save the world. *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.*”

Nicodemus came in the dark to the light of the world. The Holy Spirit began his work. The next time Nicodemus appears it would be questioning the Sanhedrin, “*Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?*”⁵² They replied, “*Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.*” I wonder when he finally understood. Was it when he saw Jesus lifted up like a snake on the cross? Was it when he lowered Jesus’ body from the cross with the help of Joseph of Arimathea and placed him in the tomb packed with 75lbs of spices? Or was when Jesus rose from the dead - rebooting life and bringing a new start to a world of death?

That is the way we are saved. Through Jesus work on the cross. Why? What caused this? ¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* ¹⁷ *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Because of God the Father’s great love for his creation. The Greek here refers to the Cosmos, so you can be as sure of his love for you as you can of the nose on your face. This is the world he loves. This is the world he cares for. This is the world he has died for. This is the world he rose for. Unlike a Hard reset - where it feels like you’re holding a pillow over your computer until it stops breathing. God didn’t just start over. He makes all things new. Through the Father’s love, the Son’s Work, and the Spirit’s wisdom. Here in his word we hear how all three are at work for our salvation. We are forgiven. Given not just a fresh start but a perfect life, a perfect record credited to our account. It’s not something you choose, just like you didn’t choose to be born the first time. This is a gift given, not a choice made.

This is Jesus’ confession which we make our own. At times we need God to speak to us forcefully in his Word, to remind us that salvation isn’t our doing, it is a gift from God.

That is the only one who saves. Yes, it is possible to be born again, such a reset exists - although it is not as instantaneous as the NES counterpart - it is a life restored in Christ. Amen.