

# JOHN 3:5

## A SCRIPTURAL ANALYSIS

Bible Doctrine Series

### John 3

**1** There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

**3** Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

**4** Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

**5** Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

**6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is

born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'



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## John 3:5 - Water & Baptism

When reading John 3:5, many hold to one or a combination of the following interpretations:

**(A)** Water refers to the natural birth associated with the flow of amniotic fluid. **(B)** Water is identical to the birth of the Spirit. **(C)** Water is likened to spiritual cleansing performed by the Word of God. **(D)** Water refers to baptism which is not simply a human action but a work God performs when individuals respond to his word. The water of baptism is a spiritual experience directly connected to washing and remission of sins. Let us briefly analyze these four views:

### **(A) Natural Birth?**

This interpretation is very unlikely for the following reasons:

- (1)** Here Jesus gives two requirements of being born- AGAIN. To be born again assumes that one has already been born the first time. Jesus is not responding to Nicodemus' question in verse four but continues his original thought interrupted by Nicodemus. If Jesus was responding to Nicodemus' question then he would have stated, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of flesh and spirit" as he uses the term in verse six. However, Jesus does not use "*flesh*" but "*water*" for a specific reason. After Jesus finishes his thought, he then responds to Nicodemus' question, rebukes and reminds Nicodemus that a spiritual leader should not be confused by this spiritual analogy of rebirth (v10). Jesus explains in verse six that to be born AGAIN is not in the flesh but in the Spirit.
- (2)** To interpret Jesus' instructions as "One must be born of physical birth (amniotic fluid) and spiritual birth to enter the kingdom" is redundant considering that all are already physically born. If birth of water means natural birth, then Nicodemus' reference to his mother's womb was valid and Jesus would not have rebuked him.
- (3)** Jesus may have made a parallel between water in natural birth and water in the new birth but the context of John 3 establishes that the word "*water*" in verse five is not referring to the natural. Jesus' two requirements of spiritual rebirth coincide with the larger context. John 1:32-33 links water and spirit together in such a way to indicate that each refer to a type of baptism. The first is a baptism of water preceded by repentance bringing supernatural cleansing and the



latter is a baptism followed by supernatural filling of God's Spirit. (We can see in Acts 10:44 that God in his sovereignty also celebrates a reversal of this order as well.) Likewise, the term "water" in John 3:22-23 refers to baptism and not natural birth.

### **(B) Identical to the Birth of the Spirit?**

According to this view, Jesus actually meant, "You must be born of water, which is the Spirit." Of course, to be born again is a spiritual experience and a few passages do liken the Spirit to water (John 4:14; 7:38). However, there are several difficulties if we try to apply this symbolism to John 3:5:

- (1) A natural reading of all major translations of this verse preserve a clear distinction between the words "water" and "Spirit."
- (2) Many other passages indicate that water and Spirit are two aspects of God's singular, redemptive work. (Ez 36:24-27, Titus 3:5)
- (3) In his later writings, John preserved the distinction between water and Spirit as they relate to salvation. "And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one" (I John 5:8). If John 3:5 actually equates water and Spirit, John would not have separated the two so sharply in I John, especially since both deal with the subject of salvation.

### **(C) Cleansing by the Word?**

This view depends heavily upon Ephesians 5:26, which says the church is sanctified and cleansed "with the washing of water by the word." However, this verse can cut both ways. If John 3:5 refers to baptism, then Ephesians 5:26 could refer to water baptism administered in accordance with the Word of God. In short, the Word of God is the origin of salvation likened to the seed causing conception, obedience to the word brings faith, faith brings repentance and repentance leads to the two components of the born again experience: water and spirit. This aligns with 1 Peter 1:23 "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God." Cleansing through obedience leads us to the final interpretation of the term "water" in John 3:5.

### **(D) Water Baptism**

This interpretation, namely, that water refers to washing of sins connected to water baptism, is what Jesus meant for these reasons:

- (1) Water is overwhelmingly used to refer to baptism in the New Testament church. For example, Peter asked with respect to Cornelius and his household, "Can anyone forbid *water* that these



should not be baptized?" (Acts 10:47).

(2) The context of John 3 proves that traditional Judaism-including John the baptist-viewed the water of baptism as an integral part in spiritual cleansing. (John 1:25-34 and 3:23). Likewise, after hearing the word of the Lord, the Ethiopian eunuch understood that water of baptism was the place which would mark his spiritual cleansing (Acts 8:36). The same Greek word for "water" is used in 1 Peter 3:20-21: "Only eight souls were saved on the ark through water. And this *water symbolizes baptism* that now saves you also- not removal of physical dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience before God." (Knowing one is made spiritually clean before God)

(3) This is the one meaning Nicodemus would have been expected to understand. As a devout Jew, he was very aware that baptismal fonts were regularly used for ceremonial washing in the Old Testament to prepare the priest and worshipers to experience the presence of God. He also would have been well-acquainted with John's baptism (Luke 20:1-7). Therefore it is not an interpretive stretch to infer that "water" points to spiritual cleansing in baptism.

(4) There is only one baptism (Ephesians 4:5), yet the Bible clearly teaches both water baptism and Spirit baptism. We can reconcile this apparent contradiction by recognizing that water baptism and Spirit baptism are two parts of one whole, with one being incomplete without the other. Water baptism is part of one spiritual experience.

(5) Water refers to washing. Titus 3:5 is a close companion verse to John 3:5. It describes a specific act of washing; distinct from the regeneration of the Spirit. Washing is part of the requirements of being born-AGAIN. It is more than just going under water but having one's spiritual sins washed away through the obedience of a physical act. This is why the Jews (Acts 2:38), Samaritans (Acts 8:12) and Gentiles (Acts 10:48) obeyed the word of God spoken through the apostles to be baptized for the remission of sins and receive infilling of God's spirit. The act of going under the water itself doesn't save but obeying the Word in faith and then going through this watery grave does (Romans 6:3, Mark 16:16). Even Paul himself was baptized through water so that his sins could be washed away (Acts 22:16). Baptism without faith and repentance is an empty ritual which will not remit sin. In short, Acts 2:38 was the early church's way of fulfilling Jesus' words in John 3:5 and Luke 24:46-49. We would do well to respond in faith to the word of God and do likewise.

