

024: Born Again Is Not a Regeneration Term

(based on Sermons #17 & #18 in the Life of Christ Series)

At least two modern U.S. Presidents have claimed to be *born again* — Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush. In fact, they popularized the term in American culture.

- Most non-religious folks assume that becoming *born again* is “getting Jesus” or, minimally, “getting religion.”
- Most Christians, on the other hand, including these Presidents, assume that to be *born again* is to be saved, regenerated, in the sense of Eph. 2:8-9 and Titus 3:5.
- But is that how Jesus uses the term in John 3, when speaking with Nicodemus?
- Some may find this surprising, but in this study I am going to point out that, in this context, the term *born again* is not referring to regeneration.
- To that end, I will give four evidences that Christ’s conversation with Nicodemus is not at all about matters of salvation.

Evidence #1: The Jews Were Already Saved

- One of the reasons that so many Christians assume that being born again is equivalent to being regenerated, is because they have been taught the paradigm that first century Jews were predominantly unbelievers.
- However, that paradigm is upside-down, as we shall see, for it views the Gospels through the lens of New Testament theology, superimposing theological ideas onto the text that do not belong.
- In exegetical studies it is critical to have, not merely a correct grammatical understanding of the text, but also an historical one.

- Unfortunately, while most expositors of Scripture would give lip-service to this standard rule of interpretation, they fail to understand the historical setting.
- To interpret correctly we must ask the question, “What were these first century Jews thinking when Jesus was speaking to them?”
- It is imperative to put yourself as the interpreter in the shoes of first century Jews who are listening to Jesus.

The Jews of Jesus’ day are not unbelievers, as is traditionally taught.

- They are what we might call, “Old Testament believers.”
- They believe Jehovah, and they further believe the prophetic message that Jehovah will one day send His Messiah to establish a kingdom on Earth, and they long for that kingdom to arrive.
- Furthermore, these Israelites are the same people who applied the blood to their doorposts back in Egypt, thereby availing themselves of the blood of the lamb to save them.
- Though they don’t yet understand the type being presented that will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus, the Lamb of God, they, nonetheless, had been saved in Egypt, baptized in the Red Sea (see 1 Cor. 10:2), and Jehovah referred to Israel as “my firstborn son.”
- These are hardly unbelievers.

They are Old Testament believers!

- For that matter, they continue sacrificing lambs annually at the Passover in remembrance of the national salvation.
- The resounding picture that God gives is that Israel is a believing nation, awaiting their Messiah.

- When Jesus comes along, claiming to be Messiah, the nation is naturally skeptical.
- They know Him as the carpenter's son from Nazareth, hardly a city of pomp and circumstance.
- Why should they believe Jesus and follow Him as Messiah?
- They must be certain of His claims.
- New Testament Christians need to be careful not to force their post-crucifixion theological understanding backwards onto the Gospels.

Jesus did not come to offer salvation, in the sense of regeneration, to Israel.

- That was not their need. He came to call these sons of Jehovah back to fellowship with Him, for they had been living sinfully and selfishly.
- The heart cry of both John the Baptist and Jesus is a message of repentance, calling the nation to get right with Jehovah in the spirit of 2 Chron. 7:14:
- 2 Chron. 7:14 if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

What is the urgency? Why does Jesus want to call the nation to repentance?

- Because “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
- Most tend to interpret “kingdom of heaven” as Heaven, but that is incorrect.
- As explained in a previous study, the “kingdom of heaven” (literally, *the kingdom of the heavens*) is the ruling realm of the Messianic kingdom, the New Jerusalem.

- The typical explanation given is that Jesus is offering to launch His Messianic kingdom if Israel will accept His salvation (i.e., *regeneration*).
- But this traditional paradigm seems faulty.
- It is important to get the paradigm right.
- Jesus is not offering the launch of the kingdom, generally speaking.
- He is, more specifically, offering inclusion in the *kingdom of the heavens* if Israel will become qualified.
- In other words, what seems more reasonable to conclude, based on the historical evidence, is that Jesus is offering the nation of Israel — which is already a “saved” nation, having believed Jehovah and applied the blood of the Passover —
- the privilege of inheritance in the kingdom of the heavens, the New Jerusalem, the ruling realm of the kingdom, if the nation will repent and continue to live righteously.

As explained in a previous study, the kingdom will have two realms, not merely one.

- The earthly realm will be Israel's domain, having been promised since the time of the prophets, guaranteeing Israel rulership over the other nations on Earth.
- But the heavenly realm is New Jerusalem that, according to Rev. 21-22, will hover over Earth during the kingdom age and will be Christ's dwelling place, along with His faithful bride and co-rulers who will rule over the affairs of mankind.
- Only those who live in a manner pleasing to God (i.e., righteously) — Jews or Gentiles of any age — will be rewarded with an inheritance in the New Jerusalem.

- Understanding the historical paradigm explained above is essential to correctly interpreting the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.
- Jesus is not talking with this ruler of Israel about matters of salvation (regeneration), but about the importance of living righteously and thereby qualifying for a special inheritance in the Messianic kingdom.

John 3 describes Nicodemus as a Pharisee and as a ruler of the Jews.

- This description implies that he is a member of the prestigious Sanhedrin, a body of seventy-one elders of Israel who formed what was essentially a supreme court for resolving religious disputes.
- The Pharisees were the predominant religious sect in Israel, having great influence on the spiritual life of the nation.
- They controlled the synagogues and were known as experts in the laws.
- The Holman Bible Dictionary adds:
- *The term “Pharisee” means “separated ones.” Perhaps it means that they separated themselves from the masses or that they separated themselves to the study and interpretation of the law. A common assumption is that they developed from the Hasidim, the ultra-orthodox loyal freedom fighters in the time of Judas Maccabeus.*

Many generations of Christians have been taught in their churches and Bible colleges that the Pharisees depended on their good works for salvation.

- That is an incorrect assumption that arose out of the Reformation, but has since been debunked.

- Since the late 1970s, biblical scholars are in general agreement that the literature of the second temple period does not support this.
- The second temple period is the era extending from the reconstructed temple after the exile, by Ezra, to the destruction of the temple in AD 70.
- It includes the time of Christ.
- The point to be made here is that the Pharisees were already believers in an Old Testament sense when Christ came on the scene.
- They were not expecting righteous living and good works to regenerate them but, rather, to keep them in good standing with God.
- That, of itself, is not a problem.
- God commands obedience of all men, particularly, those who are His children.
- However, they were guilty of legalistic observance of rules that God had not prescribed in the law, while neglecting the important matters that God had commanded in His Word.
- That is a huge problem.

Doesn't that sound like many fundamentalist groups today who insist their “separation” standards need to be upheld if Christians are to please God?

- They assume these standards are biblical, having the attitude of “thus saith the Lord,” when in reality, the Lord has not spoken.
- For example, they establish rules — whether explicit or implicit — for their congregations and Bible colleges regarding music styles, clothing and hair styles, mode of worship, Bible versions, etc.
- Then they push their standards on everyone else, looking down their noses at those who have “lesser” standards.

- I have experienced this repeatedly throughout my life from modern-day Pharisees, who refer to themselves as fundamentalists.
- But one thing is certain.
- They are not of the spirit of the historic fundamentalists of the early twentieth century who banded together over matters of like doctrine.
- Rather, they are a movement of modern fundamentalists who separate from anyone who differs with them on minor matters of separation, thereby creating hundreds of splinter groups even within fundamental Christianity.

In an attempt to make themselves appear biblical, they elevate their separational positions to the level of doctrine.

- But isn't that essentially what the Pharisees did? Jesus said to them:
- "You reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition ... making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down." (See Mark 7:1-13).
- Thus, while the Pharisees were Old Testament believers, having believed Jehovah on the basis of blood atonement, they were sticklers for keeping man-made rules, assuming those rules would make them spiritual in the eyes of God. Ironically, the opposite was happening from God's perspective.
- Jesus said:
- Matt. 15:8-9 These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

What the first century Pharisees needed is what twenty-first century fundamentalists need:

- To drop the list of rules they think is required for pleasing the Lord.
- In fact, the "keeping a list" mentality has to go entirely. Instead, the focus should be turned to obeying the law of Christ, which is summed up in both Old and New Testaments similarly:
- Matt. 22:37-39 Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and love your neighbor as yourself.
- If this command of Scripture, emphasized by Jesus, was applied consistently in the lives of believers, Christianity would be radically different, for the better.

To summarize the first point, Nicodemus is not seeking how to go to Heaven when he dies.

- He is a Jew, of the house of Israel, an Old Testament believer who is expecting Messiah to come and establish His kingdom on Earth.
- Jesus knows that Nicodemus is a sincere Pharisee who suspects that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of Israel.
- In fact, this ruler of the Jews comes to Jesus at night, apparently covertly, and says to Jesus:
- John 3:2 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.

Nicodemus has seen the signs performed by Jesus, which clearly attest to His power and authority as One sent by God.

- He surely knows that signs are like road markers, drawing Israel's attention to revelation from God.
- Perhaps he comprehends that Christ's miracles of healing demonstrate Israel's desperate need for spiritual healing.

- Furthermore, this ruler of the Jews has heard the preaching of John and Jesus, urging the nation to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (See Matt. 3:2; 4:17).
- He is undoubtedly convicted about his own life and wants to know what he must do to prepare for the coming kingdom.
- Jesus gives Nicodemus a puzzling answer: “You must be born again.”
- That leads to a second evidence that Christ’s conversation with Nicodemus is not about matters of salvation.

Evidence #2: What a Teacher of Israel Should Have Known

- For many years I was taught and, therefore, understood the term *born again* in John 3 to be a regeneration term, as referring to a second, spiritual birth.
- But I could not figure out why Jesus says to Nicodemus in v. 10, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?”
- That never made sense to me, because how could an Old Testament man understand the concept of being born again, having a second birth?
- That concept is not spoken of in the Old Testament, nor is it used by way of illustration.
- It would be completely foreign to Nicodemus, which would explain why he asks:
- John 3:4 How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?

The term *born again* implies that one must be reborn, and that makes no sense to this man, for he is already regenerated.

- Interestingly, Jesus does not use the Greek word for *regeneration*, which means rebirth (see Titus 3:5).
- He uses a different word.
- One of the definitions of the Greek word *gennaō*, translated *born*, is “to bring forth.”
- That is obviously the nuance that Jesus is using, as evident from His illustration of water and Spirit, which will be demonstrated below.
- The Greek word *anothen* translated *again* is “from above.”

In fact, that translation is more frequently used in the New Testament where this Greek word is found.

- Thus, the term *born again* is best translated *brought forth from above*.
- That is how Jesus intends for Nicodemus to understand this word, because *brought forth from above* more clearly conveys the idea of Christ’s commentary in vs. 5-6:
- John 3:5-6 Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born (brought forth) (out) of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born (brought forth) of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born (brought forth) of the Spirit is spirit.”

That should be a major clue to a first century Jewish teacher of the law.

- First, Jesus is talking about spiritual matters, not physical.
- Second, Nicodemus should be able to “connect the dots” back to a time in Israel’s history when the nation was brought forth out of water and of the Spirit.
- Nicodemus should be thinking of events following Israel’s Exodus from Egypt.

- He knows the nation was saved by applying the blood to the doorposts, and national salvation has continued, generation after generation, through the offering of lambs at the annual Passover observance.
- The Passover pictures regeneration, which is not Christ's focus with Nicodemus, for this ruler of the Jews is already a believer in an Old Testament sense.
- He has participated in the national salvation.
- To what, then, does Jesus refer?

Being brought forth out of water is pictured in Israel's Red Sea crossing.

- After God miraculously parted the waters, the nation descended to the seabed, a picture of burial following death of the firstborn in Egypt.
- Then the Israelites ascended up on the other side, a picture of resurrection and newness of life, no longer in bondage to Egypt.
- The apostle Paul referred to this as Israel's *baptism* in 1 Cor. 10:2.
- As a ruler of Israel, Nicodemus should have instantly thought of this event from Israel's history.
- For New Testament believers, water baptism following regeneration is the first major step of obedience, picturing the believer's desire to identify with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.
- The apostle Paul spoke of the spiritual ramifications of our new life in Christ in Romans 6:

Rom. 6:4-8

- 4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

- 5-6 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.
- 7 For he who has died has been freed from sin.
- 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.

What is Paul's point in sharing this with believers?

- Is it to challenge them to become saved (regenerated)?
- Of course not! Believers are already regenerated.
- His purpose is to challenge believers to be *brought forth from above*, in the sense that they would live in newness of life as enabled by the Holy Spirit.
- Paul shares the purpose for this later in Romans 6:
- 22 But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.
- 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- Paul's point is that God bestows the *gift* of eternal life upon those who believe Jesus for it (v. 23), so they can be set free from sin and live in newness of life, holy and righteous, and thereby qualifying for the *reward* of eternal life (v. 22).

Paul connects these truths with the kingdom later in the epistle:

- Rom. 14:17 The kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus is essentially telling Nicodemus, a regenerated Old Testament Jew, the same thing, using illustrations from Israel's history that he would have understood.

- Being *brought forth out of water* is the picture of Israel dying to the old life in Egypt, being buried symbolically in the Red Sea, and then rising again to newness of life on the other side.
- If Nicodemus wants to enter the kingdom of God, he must be *brought forth out of water* in the sense that he must live in newness of life.
- But Jesus also uses the illustration that Nicodemus must be *brought forth of the Spirit* (John 3:5).
- The mind of Nicodemus should have carried him back to the time when the Spirit of God led the Israelites through the wilderness toward the Promised Land in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.
- The Spirit was also represented by the shekinah glory that glowed intensely over the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle.
- The apostle Paul also spoke of this for New Testament believers in Romans 8:

Rom. 8:1-6

- 1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.
- 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.
- 3-4 For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.
- 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

- 6 For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

Jesus essentially shares this same truth with Nicodemus by pointing his attention to an Old Testament illustration with which he should have been familiar:

- “Nicodemus, if you want an inheritance in the Messianic kingdom, then you must be brought forth from above by living in newness of life and by following the leadership of the Holy Spirit.”
- Why is this message so important for this Old Testament Jewish believer?
- Nicodemus is genuinely impressed by Jesus and apparently believes that He is the Messiah of Israel.
- What a tragedy it would be for this Pharisee to continue in disobedience, honoring God with his lips, but not his heart, assuming that by keeping man-made rules he is living righteously before God.
- In other words, Nicodemus can continue in his fleshly behavior and face the consequence of wandering in the wilderness, so to speak, never inheriting a place in the Promised Land, the kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem.
- Or this ruler of the Jews can wholeheartedly embrace Christ’s offer and find the *gift* of eternal life — the abundant life of Jesus — to be the means by which he can walk in newness of life, led by the Spirit of God, resulting in the *reward* of eternal life, an inheritance of ruling with Jesus.

Unfortunately, many commentators assume the kingdom of God is Heaven and that entering it is essentially getting a ticket to Heaven by getting saved.

- Of course, those who hold this position view Nicodemus as an unbeliever on his way to hell.

- They have missed the point entirely.
- The terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God were never used in the Old Testament to describe Heaven or, for that matter, the Messianic kingdom.
- They were new terms introduced by Jesus, to refer to the ruling realm of the Messianic kingdom, the New Jerusalem, which is the city of reward for those believers who qualify.
- That is what Jesus is offering to Israel at His first coming, and that is the very thing He is offering to Nicodemus in John 3.

Some commentators attempt to distinguish between the following statements:

- v. 3 Unless one is born again (brought forth from above), he cannot *see* the kingdom of God.
- v. 5 Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot *enter* the kingdom of God.
- *Seeing* the kingdom of God and *entering* the kingdom of God are not two different concepts.
- They are referring to the same thing.
- Verse 5 is simply additional commentary on v. 3.
- Those believers who are not brought forth from above — out of water and of the Spirit — will not qualify to be included in the kingdom of God, the new Jerusalem city of reward.
- That leads to a third evidence that Christ’s conversation with Nicodemus is not about matters of salvation.

Evidence #3: The Serpent Illustration

- John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

- Nicodemus surely knows the account in Numb. 21 to which Jesus refers.
- The Israelites had grown discouraged in the wilderness, but instead of trusting God, they complained miserably and tested Him.
- They moaned about having no food or water and how much they disdained the manna that God had provided.
- As punishment, God sent venomous serpents to bite those who were complaining, so that many died.
- The people admitted their sinfulness and asked Moses to pray to God on their behalf.
- He did, and God ordered him to erect a serpent made of bronze on a high pole.
- When those who were bitten looked at the serpent, they lived.

Why would Jesus use this bronze serpent to illustrate His impending death to Nicodemus?

- If we take the traditional position on John 3 — that Jesus is telling Nicodemus how to be saved (regenerated) — then how does this serpent pole contribute to *that* narrative?
- Frankly, it doesn’t.
- The Israelites who tested God by complaining were not pagan unbelievers on their way to Hell who became instantly saved (regenerated) when they looked at the serpent, as if they were looking at the cross of Jesus.
- They were God’s covenant people who had applied the blood at the original Passover and experienced national salvation.
- They had subsequently been baptized in the Red Sea and followed the Spirit into the wilderness.

But in short order they became disobedient, wayward sons of God, so that He had to punish them, even to the point of death.

- But in His wrath, God remembered mercy (Hab. 3:2).
- He sent the means of healing, in this case, a bronze serpent on a pole, but in the bigger picture, His Son to die on the cross.
- By using this particular illustration, what message is Jesus conveying to Nicodemus?
- Jesus is demonstrating that the present spiritual condition of Israel will result in judgment.
- John the Baptist had already warned of the axe being laid to the root of the national tree, undoubtedly a prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 if the Jews would not repent.
- Jesus, like the serpent on the pole, provides forgiveness and healing for those wayward children of God who look to Him humbly with a heart of confession.

In a New Testament sense, this is 1 John 1:7, 9:

- 1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us (continually) from all sin.
- 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
- In this conversation in John 3, because of the particular illustration that Jesus uses, Nicodemus is surely not thinking of salvation in the sense of regeneration.
- He is thinking of wayward Israel's need (along with his own need) to get right with God in the spirit of 2 Chron. 7:14.

- That brings this discussion back around to the message he has heard John and Jesus preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand!"
- That leads to a fourth and final evidence that Christ's conversation with Nicodemus is not about matters of salvation.

Evidence #4: The Offer of Eternal Life

- The first time (chronologically speaking) the term *eternal life* is used in the New Testament is in Christ's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3.
- The term is used only once in the Scriptures before that, in the Old Testament book of Daniel (12:2 — *everlasting life*), where it refers to reward at the judgment for faithful Israelites, contrasted with loss (*shame* and *contempt*) for those who are unfaithful.
- That's instructive, for it lets us know what is running through the mind of Nicodemus when Jesus uses this term.
- Seeing that Nicodemus is already a regenerated man and Israel is already a regenerated nation long before Jesus arrives historically in the first century, then what is this ruler of Israel thinking when he hears the term *eternal life*?

Based on his Old Testament knowledge, he is surely thinking about matters of reward for faithfulness.

- Is that what most twenty-first century Christians think when they hear the term *eternal life*?
- Unfortunately, for several centuries, dating back to the time of the Reformation, Christians have grown sloppy in their understanding of the term *eternal life*.
- Most assume it is endless life in Heaven.

- Thus, the tendency of modern saints is to think of those who possess eternal life as possessing a ticket to Heaven.
- Some gospel tracts even refer to becoming saved as “getting a ticket to Heaven.”
- But is that really what Jesus is talking about?

The word *eternal* in the term *eternal life*, is translated from the Greek adjective *aionios*, which comes from the noun *aion*.

- Interestingly, *aion* means “age” or “eon,” and *aionios* means “age-lasting,” “age-during,” or “for the age.”
- That’s quite different from our English word *eternal*, which means “unending” or “forever.”
- English Bible versions have muddied the waters by translating the adjective *aionios* as *eternal*, which is incorrect.
- How did our English Bible versions drift so far from the correct meaning?
- Several scholarly books have been written on the subject, but only a summary can be provided here.

The general consensus is that — despite the correct meaning of *aion* and *aionios* used by Jesus and the writers of Scripture

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- something happened in the early centuries of the church to skew the definition for later generations of Christians.
 - The early fifth century church leader known as Augustine admittedly could not read Greek.
 - Latin was his native language.
 - Thus, he was compelled to study Scripture, using Jerome’s recently translated Latin Vulgate.
 - The Vulgate is known to have many translation errors, not the least of which was the translation of the Greek word *aionios* as *aeternus*, which is Latin for eternal.

- Augustine popularized the use of *aionios* as meaning *eternal*, though incorrect.
- During the centuries known as the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church popularized the meaning further, until it became the established lexical definition.
- By the time of the Reformers — who hailed Augustine as a theological hero — *aionios* was being unquestionably translated *eternal*.
- Of course, our modern English Bibles are products of the Reformation, including the revered King James Version.
- The unfortunate consequence is that generations of Bible readers have assumed *eternal life* to be unending life.

Marvin R. Vincent (1834-1922) was a Presbyterian minister and an esteemed professor of New Testament exegesis at Union Theological Seminary.

- He is well known for his Word Studies in the New Testament, a multi-volume set which is often found in the libraries of pastors and professors.
- He wrote an extensive note as to the correct meaning of the adjective *aionios*.

I will only quote some short sections:

- “*Aion*, transliterated *eon*, is a period of time of longer or shorter duration, having a beginning and an end, and complete in itself ... The word always carries the notion of *time*, and not of *eternity*. It always means a period of time ... It does not mean something endless or everlasting.”
- “The adjective *aionios* in like manner carries the idea of time. Neither the noun nor the adjective, in themselves, carry the sense of *endless* or *everlasting* ... *Aionios* means *enduring through* or *pertaining to a period of time*. Both

the noun and the adjective are applied to limited periods.”

- “*Zoe aionios, eternal life*, which occurs 42 times in N.T. ... is not endless life, but life pertaining to a certain age or eon, or continuing during that eon ... Life may be endless. The life in union with Christ is endless, but the fact is not expressed by *aionios*. “
- “Thus, while *aionios* carries the idea of time, though not of *endlessness*, there belongs to it also, more or less, a sense of *quality*. Its character is ethical rather than mathematical. The deepest significance of the life beyond time lies, not in endlessness, but in the moral quality of the eon into which the life passes.”
- Vincent is not the only scholar who makes this point.
- Many others do as well.
- We should not allow Augustine, the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformers to hijack the correct understanding of this term, eternal life.

When considering the correct definition for *eternal*, what is Jesus offering Nicodemus?

- Though it will become more fully developed as the ministry of Christ unfolds, following is the correct definition of eternal life:
- Eternal life is the provision of Jesus within believers as the means by which they can live righteously and thereby qualify for age-lasting (millennial) inheritance.
- Those who believe Jesus receive the *gift* of eternal life, which is not a ticket to Heaven as is commonly taught.
- Eternal life is the life of Jesus dwelling within believers *now*, guaranteeing resurrection prior to the millennial age, but also providing the spiritual resources needed to live righteously, in a manner that pleases God, so they

can be rewarded following resurrection, at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

- In other words, the *gift* of eternal life, if appropriated and put to good use, will result in the *reward* of eternal life, which is rulership in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly headquarters of the Messianic kingdom.

The *gift* is not a *guarantee* that one will receive an inheritance, a place of ruling.

- It provides the *means* by which one can qualify for the *reward*.
- Thus, the *reward* is not automatic.
- It must be earned as one applies the provision that has been given.
- To be clear, the *gift* is received by faith alone, but the *reward* is according to works.
- Though he is a Pharisee, Nicodemus truly desires to please the Lord. What he needs is the life of Jesus to enable him.

Something else is missing in most English translations of John 3:16, 18.

- Listen to these verses as quoted from Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible (1862):
- 16 for God did so love the world, that His Son — the only begotten — He gave, that every one who is believing in him may not perish, but may have life age-during.
- 18 he who is believing in him is not judged, but he who is not believing hath been judged already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.
- Is the difference obvious?

- Young’s Literal brings out the correct verb tense (present active participle in Greek) — *is believing* — which implies continuing action.
- If Jesus were speaking to Nicodemus about matters of salvation (in the sense of regeneration), then He would not use a present active participle in Greek, for salvation occurs the moment one believes.

But when speaking to a believer (such as Nicodemus), it is appropriate to speak of continuance of belief, which is at the heart of sanctification and spiritual growth.

- Those believers who keep believing are abiding in Christ, living the abundant life, preparing to receive the *reward* of eternal life at the Judgment Seat of Christ.
- Though Nicodemus is apparently not quite ready to “come out of the closet” with respect to his belief in Jesus as Messiah, he is, nonetheless, a believer that Jesus challenges to become a disciple.
- Should we be surprised that he is later seen defending Jesus (John 7:50) and assisting Joseph of Arimathea in anointing Christ’s body for burial (John 19:39)?
- I challenge you to THINK ON THESE THINGS