

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^d must be born from above.’^e ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you^g do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.¹

This week I spend half my time assisting my supervisor and a colleague to write a proposal to help to reintegrate Ex-Offenders returning to Detroit and Wayne County. We had to show how many crimes were committed, how many persons were convicted, how many returned home, and how many committed another crime and returned to prison. We also had to tell about poverty, the unemployment rate and how many people dropped out of school. Some people think government spends too much money trying to rehabilitate these individuals. They think those who they label criminals are beyond help...they will never change. But in our scripture today Jesus explains that each of us has the potential to change, to be born again.

Last week we talked about Jesus’ preparation for his ministry. John Chapter 2 tells us that Jesus had begun his ministry by performing miracles and signs. Nicodemus was

^dThe Greek word for *you* here is plural

^eOr *anew*

^gThe Greek word for *you* here and in verse 12 is plural

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Jn 3:1-17

initially attracted to Jesus because of the miracles He did. He wanted to know more about Jesus and the doctrines that He taught. Nicodemus himself was “the teacher of the Jews” (John 3:10) and he had the responsibility to question Jesus to make sure he was not a false prophet.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which meant he lived by the strictest possible religious rules. In many ways the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. There were never more than 6,000 of them; they were what was known as a brotherhood. They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the scribal law. They said: “The Law is complete; it contains everything necessary for the living of a good life; therefore in the Law there must be a regulation to govern every possible incident in every possible moment for every possible man.” So they set out to extract from the great principles of the law an infinite number of rules and regulations to govern every conceivable situation in life. So Nicodemus represented the best in the nation. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The Sanhedrin had 70 members who were responsible for religious decisions and also, under the Romans, for civil rule. Evidence indicates that Nicodemus was deeply sincere in his quest for truth. He came to Jesus by night, not because he was afraid of being seen, but most likely because he wanted to have a quiet uninterrupted conversation with the new Teacher “come from God.” The fact that Nicodemus used the plural pronoun “we,” and Jesus responded with the plural (John 3:7) may indicate that Nicodemus was representing other religious leaders. He was a man of high moral character, deep religious hunger, and yet profound spiritual blindness.

In order to instruct Nicodemus in the basics of salvation, Jesus used different illustrations.

Jesus began with that which was familiar, birth being a universal experience. Jesus said he must be born “again” or “from above.” Though all human beings have experienced natural birth on earth, if they expect to go to heaven, they must experience a supernatural spiritual birth from above.

The Jew knew all about rebirth. When a man from another faith became a Jew and had been accepted into Judaism by prayer and sacrifice and baptism, he was regarded as being reborn. “A proselyte who embraces Judaism,” said the rabbis, “is like a new-born child.” So radical was the change that the sins he had committed before his reception were all done away with, for now he was a different person.

But this well-educated religious leader, Nicodemus, did not understand what Jesus was talking about! Jesus was speaking about a spiritual birth, but Nicodemus thought only of a physical birth. The situation is no different today. When you talk with people about being born again, they often begin to discuss their family’s religious heritage, their church membership, religious ceremonies, and so on. But to be born again is to be spiritually transformed into a child of God.

Being a patient teacher, Jesus picked up on Nicodemus’ words and explained the new birth. To be born again means to be born of the Spirit of God (John 3:5) and the Word of God (James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and, when the sinner believes, imparts the life of God.

Baptism is a part of our obedience to Christ and our witness for Christ (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 2:41) and shows we have repented of our sins and that we have been cleansed from the sins of our past.

Human birth involves pain (John 16:21), and it is the same with the birth from above. Jesus had to travail on the cross so that you and I might become members of the family of God (Isa. 53:11). Concerned believers have to travail in prayer and witness as they seek to lead sinners to Christ (1 Cor. 4:15; Gal. 4:19).

Birth involves a future, and we are “born again to a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3, NASB). A newborn baby cannot be arrested because he or she has no past! When we are born again into God’s family, our sins are forgiven and forgotten, and our future is bright with a living hope.

Nicodemus must have had a surprised and bewildered look on his face, because Jesus had to say, “You must not be surprised that I told you that all of you must be born again”

(John 3:7, PH). But Nicodemus was born a Jew! He was a part of God's covenant people! (Rom. 9:4–5) Certainly his birth was better than that of a Gentile or a Samaritan! And his life was exemplary, because he was a faithful Pharisee! He could have understood Jesus telling the Romans that they had to be born again, but certainly not a Jew!

It is probable that the evening wind was blowing just then as Nicodemus and Jesus sat on the housetop talking. The word wind in both Hebrew and Greek can also be translated "spirit." Like the wind, the Spirit is invisible but powerful; and you cannot explain or predict the movements of the wind. When Jesus used this symbol, Nicodemus should have remembered Ezekiel 37:1–14. The prophet saw a valley full of dead bones; but when he prophesied to the wind, the Spirit came and gave the bones life. It was the combination of the Spirit of God and the Word of God that gave life. The nation of Israel, Nicodemus and his fellow council members were dead and hopeless; but in spite of the morality and religion of the people, they needed the life of the Spirit.

The new birth from above is a necessity, but it is also a mystery. Everyone who is born of the Spirit is like the wind: you cannot fully explain or predict either the wind or the child of God! For that matter, human birth is still a mystery, in spite of all that we know about anatomy and physiology. Each new life is exciting and different.

Nicodemus came "by night," and he was still in the dark! He could not understand the new birth even after Jesus had explained it to him. Jesus said that Nicodemus' knowledge of the Old Testament should have given him the light he needed (John 3:10). But "the teacher of the Jews" knew the facts recorded in the Scriptures, but he could not understand the truths.

One problem was the religious leaders would not submit to the authority of Jesus' witness (John 3:11). The religious leaders claimed to believe Moses, but they did not believe Jesus (John 5:37–47).

"I have used earthly illustrations," said Jesus, "and you cannot understand. If I began to share the deep spiritual truths, you still would not believe" (John 3:12).

Jesus made one more attempt to explain. The story in Numbers 21:4–9 was certainly familiar to Nicodemus. It is a story of sin, as the people of Israel rebelled against God and were punished. God sent fiery serpents that bit the people so that many died. But it is also a story of grace because Moses prayed for the people and God provided a remedy. God told Moses to make a brass serpent and lift it up on a pole for all to see. Any snake bitten person who looked at the serpent would immediately be healed. So, it is also a story of faith: when the people looked by faith, they were saved.

The verb lifted up has a dual meaning: to be crucified (John 8:28; 12:32–34) and to be glorified and exalted. In his Gospel, John points out that Jesus' crucifixion was actually the means of His glorification (John 12:23ff). The cross was not the end of His glory; it was the means of His glory (Acts 2:33).

As the serpent was lifted up on that pole, so the Son of God would be lifted up on a cross to save us from sin and death. In the camp of Israel, the solution to the “serpent problem” was not in killing the serpents, making medicine, pretending they were not there, passing antiserpent laws, or climbing the pole. The answer was in looking by faith at the uplifted serpent.

The whole world has been bitten by sin, and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). God sent His beloved Son to die, not only for Israel, but for a whole world. How is a person born from above? How is he or she saved from eternal perishing? The answer is by believing on Jesus Christ; by looking to Jesus in faith.

The difference between perishing and living, and between condemnation and salvation, is faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus could well have come to this world as a Judge and destroyed every rebellious sinner; but in love, He came to this world as our Savior, and died for us on the cross! He became the “uplifted serpent.” The serpent in Moses' day brought physical life to dying Jews; but Jesus Christ gives eternal life to anyone who trusts Him. He has salvation for a whole world!²

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Jn 3:1

We don't know whether verse 16 and 17 were spoken by John or Jesus, but they are an important summary of the gospel. God's motivation toward people is love. God's love is not limited to a few or to one group of people but God's gift is for the whole world. God's love was expressed in the giving of His most priceless gift—His unique, beloved Son (cf. Rom. 8:3, 32). On the human side, the gift is simply to be received, not earned (John 1:12-13). A person is saved by believing, by trusting in Christ. Eternal life is a new quality of life, which a believer has now as a present possession and will possess forever (cf. 10:28; 17:3). For God's part, He desires that everyone be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).^{3 4}

To be born of the spirit means to believe in Jesus. It means believing with all our hearts that God is as Jesus declared him to be. It means believing that God loves us, that God cares for us, that God wants nothing more than to forgive us. It was not easy for a Jew to believe that. He looked on God as one who imposed his laws upon his people and punished them if they broke them. He looked on God as a judge and on man as a criminal at God's judgment seat. He looked on God as one who demanded sacrifices and offerings; to get into God's presence man had to pay the price laid down. It was hard to think of God not as a judge waiting to exact penalty, not as a task-master waiting to pounce, but as a Father who longed for nothing so much as to have his erring children come back home. It cost the life and the death of Jesus to tell humans that. And we cannot begin to be Christians until with all our hearts we believe that. We must also believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that in him is the mind of God, that he knew God so well, was so close to God, was so one with God, that he could tell us the absolute truth about God. We must believe that God is a loving Father because we believe that Jesus is the Son of God and what he says about God is true and we stake everything on the fact that what Jesus says is true. When Jesus tells us to cast ourselves unreservedly on the mercy of God we must do

³Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:280

⁴Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 680

so. We must take Jesus at his word. Every smallest action in life must be done in obedience to him.

We are like that Ex-Offenders that we hope to serve if we receive the federal funding for our reintegration program. We can receive Jesus Christ as Savior, or we can stay in our sin and reject his love and stay or return to be prison of our prisons of sin.⁵ Receive him in faith and become children of God. Amen.

⁵ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of John : Volume 1*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 120