

How to Be Born Again—John 3:1–21

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 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.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

“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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light,

and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” (John 3:1-21)

Throughout history there have been many great moments when great men had great meetings, but few have been so fascinating or far-reaching as the amazing nighttime meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus.

First, let’s meet Nicodemus, a fascinating man about whom we know amazingly much in spite of how little is said in the biographical sketch of John 3. Later in this gospel, in John 19:39, we learn that he was the one who brought 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes for the embalming of Jesus’ body. These embalming ointments were incredibly expensive and are still sold by the drop – not the pound! We can assume that only a very wealthy man could possibly afford to do what he did.

We can also guess that this man, Nicodemus, came from a well-known aristocratic family. There was a distinguished Jewish family with the name Nicodemus mentioned several times in ancient history. For example, in 63 B.C. an ambassador named Nicodemus was sent from Jerusalem to Rome to meet the Roman Emperor Pompey. Then about 70 A.D. a man identified as the son of Nicodemus was the one who represented the Jerusalem garrison in

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the surrender negotiations with the Roman army of Titus. It was a prominent family indeed. Now assuming that Nicodemus was related to them, and perhaps that is indeed only a guess,

and with the legitimate assumption that he was a wealthy man, we can introduce Nicodemus as apparently a wealthy aristocrat.

One of the things that we know for sure about him was that he was a religious Pharisee (John 3:1). The Pharisees were a religious party that flourished during the period of Jesus’ life on earth. At their peak they numbered only about 6000 which was a relatively small number in view of the religious population of Palestine. They were zealots of the first order — zealous for the word of God and zealous for the keeping of the law. In fact, a Pharisee would tell you that his life’s commitment more than anything

else was to keep the full law of God. He would live a separated life; in fact, the word Pharisee means “the separated one.”

They were fervently religious and dogmatically legalistic. The Pharisees depended upon the scribes who were the writers and interpreters of the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They developed a series of writings called the Mishnah. The Mishnah was an interpretation and codification of the five books of Moses, the first five books of our Old Testament.

Let’s take one example — one of the 10 commandments that says to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. A Pharisee would be committed to keep that commandment; so he would go to the Mishnah and there he would find 24 chapters on what it meant to keep the Sabbath day. And if he didn’t understand that, he could go from the Mishnah to the Talmud which was an interpretation and expansion of the Mishnah. He would soon discover that he is not to work on the Sabbath day, but he has to define work. Work was defined many ways. For example, work was defined as tying a knot. But there were legal and illegal knots. Sailors’ knots and camel drivers’ knots were illegal to tie or untie. Any knot requiring two hands was defined as illegal on the Sabbath. But knots which could be tied and untied with one hand were legal. Examples of legal knots were a knot to tie your cap on your head, your shoes on your feet, knots to tie a wine skin or an oil skin were okay on the Sabbath day, as was a knot to tie a women’s girdle.

Ingenuity became the way of life for the Pharisees. A man who wanted to tie a rope to a bucket for well water could not do so on the Sabbath. However, he could tie a woman’s girdle to the rope and a bucket to the girdle and that was legal! He hadn’t broken the law of the Sabbath day because the only knots that he had tied were the knots on a women’s girdle.

That was the party to which Nicodemus belonged and that was only one tiny detail of the massive laws they tried to keep. They were legalists. Legalists then, like legalists now, are people who tend to be narrow, condemning, self-righteous and unhappy. They seek to live by the letter of the law and the letter of the law eventually destroys. That’s what it meant to be a Pharisee and it was out of that destructive legalism that this man named Nicodemus came for spiritual help.

In meeting the man, first, we’ve seen that he was a wealthy aristocrat and, second, a religious Pharisee. We also see that he was a powerful ruler. In the first verse we are told that he was “*a ruler of the*

Jews.” The Greek word for “ruler” (*arkon*) was the technical term to indicate that he was a part of the Sanhedrin, a group of 70 men who served as the Supreme Court of Judaism. They were somewhat limited by the time of Jesus because of the Roman rule, but they were still acknowledged as the Supreme Court and ultimate ruling authority over all Jews, not just in Palestine, but everywhere in the world. They had tremendous power and Nicodemus was one of them.

Add to that that Nicodemus was a recognized teacher. In verse 10 you read that Jesus said, “*You are Israel’s teacher and do you not understand these things?*” Apparently Nicodemus was the number one religious teacher amongst all Jews living at his time. He was acknowledged as the very best, most important and most knowledgeable. Now this fascinating character, Nicodemus — wealthy, aristocratic, religious, powerful and a teacher — became a spiritual seeker who came to Jesus by night.

Through the centuries people have tried to guess why he came by night. Some have said that he was embarrassed; he was an important man and Jesus was an uneducated itinerate teacher from Nazareth. It just wasn’t fitting for Nicodemus to be seen with him. Others say that he came by night because he desired an uninterrupted conversation with Jesus, away from the press of the crowds. Still some others say that Nicodemus was on the verge of commitment but he wanted to make a private investigation of Jesus before he would make a public commitment to him.

We know that it really doesn’t make much difference why Nicodemus came. The important point is that Nicodemus came. He came and he acknowledged that Jesus was from God. He acknowledged that the signs and miracles Jesus performed could be done only by the power and the authority of God. He sought from Jesus a spiritual life that would set him free from the legalistic bonds in which he lived. He sought a spiritual light in the midst of a dark night. That’s the man – Nicodemus.

But more important than the man is the counsel that he received from the lips of Jesus. First, summarizing verses 3-8, Jesus told him, “Nicodemus, your greatest need is new birth.” If you take a look at verse 3, you’ll see a strange thing there. We’re told that Jesus answered a question that wasn’t asked. But do you remember how chapter two ended? We are told that Jesus could read minds, that he knew everything there was to know about man. He didn’t have to be told by anyone. Jesus knew what was on the mind of Nicodemus. He knew the question that was being asked even before Nicodemus asked it.

Jesus got right to the point and said that Nicodemus needed to start all over again. "...no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." The kingdom of God means the reign of God in a person's life, both now as well as the life after death. The "cannot" is not a matter of prohibition, it's a matter of inability. Then Nicodemus responds and he says, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Nicodemus wasn't stupid. He was an intelligent and perceptive man. He hadn't missed Jesus' point at all. He was following through on the analogy. He wasn't imagining that he was going to reverse and become younger and begin life all over again in his mother's womb. No, he knew what Jesus was saying. Jesus was saying, "Nicodemus you need a drastic change in your life. You need to start all over again." Nicodemus was saying, "I'm too old for that. I can't do that anymore than that I could start all over with a new physical birth. Is it hopeless?"

Then Jesus explained the source of new birth – the Spirit of God! In verse five he says, "*You must be born of water and of the Spirit.*" The water symbolizes physical birth accompanied by embryonic fluid. The source of spiritual birth is the Holy Spirit. Then verse 6 says, "*Flesh gives birth to flesh* (the water birth), *but the Spirit gives birth to spirit* (the spiritual birth)." Jesus is saying that if you've only been born physically, then you only have physical life; but if you've also been born spiritually, then you have spiritual life.

Good teacher that he was, Jesus explains with an illustration in verse 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." Most of us, Nicodemus included, don't understand a great deal about the wind — where it comes from or where it goes. We can't even see it, but we can see what it does.

You can visit a Mid-western farm after a tornado and see what wind can do. You can see a house that's been uprooted from its foundation and lands a mile away. You can see straw that's driven into the side of an oak tree. You know what it's like to be on a lake that's as flat as glass until the wind comes and then it becomes as choppy as the ocean. So even though you don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes, it's obvious in its effect.

Likewise, the Holy Spirit can't be predicted or

seen, but when he brings new birth, the results are obvious! And so Jesus is saying, "Nicodemus, your greatest need is new birth through the Holy Spirit." And then he adds his second bit of counsel, "Nicodemus, you must believe in the Son to be born again" (John 3:9-15). Nicodemus asked the obvious question, "How? How can I experience this new birth?" In these verses Jesus proceeds to explain that he is the authority of heaven who speaks God's truth and is the basis for eternal life. However, Jesus is hard pressed to explain more truth about heavenly things to Nicodemus if he can't even comprehend the earthly illustration about the wind.

Since Nicodemus was a teacher of the Jews, Jesus used an Old Testament story from Numbers 21 as an illustration to help him understand. It's the story of how the people of Israel had rebelled against God and God was judging them with a plague of fiery snakes whose bite was fatal. The people cried out to God for a way of deliverance and God instructed Moses to make a snake out of brass and put it up on a pole. If the people who were bitten would look at that brass snake, then they would be healed.

Nicodemus knew the story well and when Jesus said that as the Son of God he must be lifted up like that brass serpent on the pole, Nicodemus got the picture. He was an intelligent man and saw all the parallels. He saw that the source of salvation was provided by God Himself. Only God could provide salvation in the midst of death and sin's painful consequences. Nicodemus saw that the cure was based on faith and not upon works. Those people could have tried all the medicine they had, but they did not have a cure for the snake bites. All they had to do was look and believe. Nicodemus also saw the parallel that the brass snake had been put up on a cross shaped pole and now Jesus was saying that he, as the Son of God, would be put up on a cross shaped

pole. And Nicodemus must also have seen the parallel that the destiny of the individual way back there in Numbers 21 was based solely on the response to God's

invitation. It may have seemed stupid to some of those Israelis with snake bites to just look at a brass snake in order to be made better, and as a result they died. The issue was whether or not they would take God at his word and respond to God's invitation.

And so, Nicodemus must have come to the conclusion that new birth was possible only through faith in Jesus who was provided by God. The way of salvation, the way to be cured from sin and escape death,

Only God could provide salvation in the midst of death and sin's painful consequences.

was by believing in God's provision, Jesus Christ.

Do you get the picture? Do you see how it works? Here was Nicodemus — wealthy, aristocratic, religious, powerful, educated, a renowned teacher — but he still needed to be born anew. And the only possible way to new birth was through his personal response to the invitation of God to have faith in Jesus Christ who was lifted up on the cross.

We don't know if the next verses, verses 16 and 17, were spoken by Jesus to Nicodemus or whether they were added later by the apostle John as an explanation to the story. I guess that they were written by John, but they are no less true for they are equally inspired by God. And so we come to that tremendous verse, John 3:16.

Of all the verses that people choose as their favorite verse, John 3:16 must be the most popular. It has been called "everybody's verse." It tells how God feels about us — that he loves us. It tells how much he loves us — so loved. It tells who is the object of God's love — the world, which includes you and me. It tells us what he did — he gave his only precious son. And it tells us why — so that we can have the eternal life of God now and forever.

Then verse 17 explains the purpose of Jesus' coming. He didn't come to condemn, but to save! Lots of people think that God, in general, and Jesus Christ, in particular, are out to nail us to the wall and condemn us. Clearly, Jesus' primary purpose wasn't to condemn but to give eternal life. Now this is a truth that you can trust! It's good to have truths that we can trust when there are so many things that purport to be truths that really are untrustworthy.

Now add to that trustworthy truth, the truth of verses 18-21, that it is belief that determines destiny. Do you believe? Do you really believe that Jesus is God's Son, that he was lifted up and nailed on the cross to take the punishment for your sin? Do you really believe that God raised him from the dead to prove that all that he said was true and that the defeat of sin and death was valid? And do you really believe that in order to have new birth and eternal life, you must commit yourself to him and that your wealth, religion and politics don't really matter, only your commitment?

If your answer is yes, then you are not now condemned, nor shall you ever be condemned. If your belief, your faith, is in Jesus Christ there is now no condemnation, for Jesus Christ has taken all of the consequences of sin in your place. But if your answer to any of those questions is no, then you are condemned already, like a prisoner on death row awaiting execution.

There is a clear and sharp distinction in these

verses. On the one side is the person who has been born physically and that's all. That person is under condemnation, living in darkness with a life of evil deeds. On the other side is quite a different person — one who has not only been born physically but also spiritually. This person has placed faith and trust in Jesus Christ and therefore has been born again. This person is living in light with deeds motivated and controlled by God.

When I close my Bible at the conclusion of this story at first I'm a little disconcerted that we are not told what happened to Nicodemus. Did he believe? Was he born again? I'm quite sure this wasn't an omission or an oversight by the author, John. Instead, John has taken the story of Nicodemus and very carefully turned it around and made it into our story. It is no longer about a man from way back when, it's about us, here and now.

The question is, how does the story end? Do you believe? Will you be born again? My hope and prayer is that your answer is, "Of course I want to be born again. Of course I want this spiritual life. Of course I want to be free from condemnation. Of course I want to belong to God, to believe and go to heaven. I just didn't know before. But now I know as Nicodemus knew and my answer is "Absolutely yes!"

If your answer is yes, then I want to help you along the way. Here's what I suggest you do. If you have never been born again or if you have doubts about being born again, then pray to God and tell him something like this:

I admit that I'm a sinner who needs to be born again. I can't do it myself, but I really believe that Jesus Christ, God's Son, was raised up and nailed on that cross for me and I accept what he did as a payment for my sin. I claim him as my Savior and Lord, the Master of my life.

As you tell that to God, God promises that you will be born again. And it's that faith and trust and that sealing of commitment with God that makes the difference.

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