

# THE NEW BIRTH

## Why We Must Be Born Again



Bound by sin is Adam's race,  
Darkness deep within resides.  
Dead – until the light of grace,  
Glams with wonder in our eyes.

Early in His ministry, Jesus cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem, uprooting the merchants and moneychangers (Jn 2:13ff). Many of the Jewish leaders challenged Him. One man decided to visit Him. Nicodemus determined to get to know more about this Jesus of Nazareth and His teachings. Here is how their conversation began.

**There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be**

**born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again (John 3:1-7).**

## THE INVESTIGATION OF NICODEMUS

Many people living in twenty-first century America dismiss Christianity without ever giving serious thought to its claims. Many first century Jewish leaders treated Christianity's Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, likewise. Nicodemus was of a nobler sort, a seemingly extraordinary person. A combined three things suggest this.

First, he had a consuming desire to obey God's righteous laws, for we read that he was "a man of the Pharisees" (1). The Pharisees were the strictest sect in Judaism. They sought to meticulously observe the Law of Moses – to adhere to every letter of the law and thus fulfill their every duty before God and man. Striving to live righteously according to God's holy law is good. The bad came when the Pharisees added a slew of minute, manmade details spelling out exactly what it supposedly took to fulfill God's law. Then they got all caught up in their minor additions to where they could not see their major infractions. Some were proud, looking down on others; and self-righteous, trusting in their goodness, not God's grace (Lk 18:9-14). Some were hypocrites, supplanting God's commandments with manmade traditions (Mt 15:1-9). Nevertheless, the

Pharisees were apparently more righteous than most. Jesus said, *Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:2)*. He held their righteousness up as the human benchmark that men had to surpass to enter Heaven. The Pharisees, at least in appearance, were among the most righteous of men for they put forth an all-consuming effort to live righteously. This was Nicodemus.

Then also, Nicodemus was committed to justice. Our text says he was “a ruler of the Jews” (1b). He was one of 70 members of the Sanhedrin – the supreme governing body in Israel. It dealt with the great judicial matters that faced the nation. Justice, like righteousness, is something dear to God. God Himself is *a just God (Is 45:21)*. He stands against wrong and for right. He upholds justice, and requires humankind created in His image to do the same. Having been seated on the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus would have had a history of doing so, however imperfectly. Not only was he consumed with personal righteousness, he was committed to political right – to the politics of justice.

Furthermore, Nicodemus concerned himself with the communication of truth, for he was “a master of Israel” (Jn 3:10). The word *master* means teacher. Nicodemus was not just any teacher. Based on the definite article in the original text, he was *the* (distinguished?) teacher of God’s truth to God’s people, Israel. God’s Word had taken hold of him. He was passionate about it. He cared for others, concerned that they too know and understand the Holy Scriptures.

So, in Nicodemus we have a teacher caught up in communicating truth, a ruler committed to dispensing justice, and a Pharisee consumed with living righteously. He was

into righteousness, justice and truth – the things God loves, and calls us too as well. Yet, in so many words, Jesus is going to tell Nicodemus, ‘You are not fit for the kingdom of God, nor can you patch things up and make yourself fit. You must start over; you must be born again.’

By every human measure, Nicodemus was an extraordinary person; but when it came to some vitally important spiritual truths, he had an elementary perception. To his credit, rather than dismissing Jesus and His teachings, he sought to learn from Him. He “came to Jesus by night” – under the cover of darkness for the sake of his reputation among his peers? Whatever, at least he came. He took time to inquire, to investigate.

What compelled him to do so were the many miracles Jesus did. The miracles convinced him of two things. Nicodemus was convinced that “no man can do these miracles ... except God be with him” (2). He was convinced that God was on Jesus’ side, working through and by Him. It was simply impossible for a man on His own to do the things Jesus was doing. He cleansed lepers (Mk 1:40-42), cast out demons (Lk 4:33-37) and turned water into wine (Jn 2:1-11). He gave sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, legs to the lame and life to the dead (Mt 9). Nicodemus knew that only God could do these things. Which led to a second conviction: God sent Jesus. Nicodemus said, “we know that thou art a teacher come from God.” As did others, Nicodemus knew from seeing and hearing about His miraculous works, Jesus was on a Divine mission.

Although Nicodemus discerned that God was with Jesus, he did not realize that Jesus was *God with us* (Mt 1:23). And while he sensed that Jesus was a teacher come from God, he did not know that Jesus was Israel’s prom-

ised Messiah come to save - to die for our sins and live again, that we might live forever and never die (Jn 5:24; 11:25-26). Nicodemus' perception of Jesus was very elementary, but to his credit he responded to what he did know.

Nicodemus was not entirely alone in his response. Scripture says, *many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But [this is important] Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man (Jn 2:23-25)*. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. He saw something in the many who believed in Him that they did not see in themselves. Moreover, what He saw kept Him from entering into a committed relationship with them (as their Lord and Savior). Nicodemus was among these many. The miracles led him to believe in Jesus, but His faith is not yet saving faith. Spiritually, he was still in the dark; and in the dark of night, he comes to Jesus. He may have done so thinking, this teacher sent from God may have a message from Heaven for me. Indeed, Jesus did; and He wasted no time getting to it.

## THE ILLUMINATION OF JESUS

Jesus is *the light of the world (Jn 8:12)*. He is about to enlighten Nicodemus concerning spiritual realities he knows nothing about. He is about to open his eyes to the *necessity of a new birth* in order to enter God's glorious kingdom. According to the words of Jesus, this necessity is unmistakable, universal and understandable.

Jesus said, "*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*" (3). "*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of*

water and *of* the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (5). Twice, Jesus began his speech using the word *verily*, which means surely, or truly. It was a word used to confirm the truthfulness of a statement. Jesus said that unless a person is born again, they could neither *see* nor *enter* God’s kingdom. That is truly true; it is surely the case. In fact, in the New Testament’s original language, when the word *verily* was repeated it took on the force of a superlative, ratcheting up the truthfulness of the statement from surely to *most assuredly* (Thayer Greek-English Lexicon). And Jesus not only used the word *verily* twice, but twice repeated it, in essence saying, most assuredly, most assuredly, apart from a new birth, no one will enter the kingdom of God.

Then Jesus adds this statement: “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again” (7). Being born again is a *must*. It is not an option. It is not a suggestion. It is a necessity. Our Lord’s language has placed this beyond a shadow of a doubt. Outside of experiencing a new birth, you are outside the kingdom of God. There is no obtaining an interest in it, nor participating in the benefits of it, apart from being born again. Jesus has made our need of undergoing a new birth, of being born anew, crystal clear. It is explicitly unmistakable.

The necessity is also universal. Jesus twice says to Nicodemus, “Except a *man* be born again” (3,5). The word translated *man* is a word used throughout Scripture to refer to humankind as a whole. Thus, this message is not just for Nicodemus. It is not just for his race, the Jews. It is a message for all people of all races. This message is given to individuals. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “*ye* must be born again” (7). But even in this, one senses the universality of the message. If *this* man must be born again, surely

all men must be born again. When you hear Jesus saying this to Nicodemus, do you not hear Him saying it to you?

Then also, the necessity is understandable. “*Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again*” (7). Men often marveled at the Savior’s words. His teachings caused them to wonder. Nicodemus was dazed. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old” (4)? He argued, “How can these things be” (9)? Jesus says, don’t marvel at this! Do not think of it as incredible, or illogical. Instead, think about what God has revealed in His holy Word regarding fallen human nature. Then, the necessity of being born anew will not be unreasonable, but understandable.

What does God say in His Word about the fallen, sinful condition of humankind? Although difficult to swallow, we ignore the following divinely revealed truths to our peril.

Our nature is depraved

All of Adam’s offspring are born with a natural tendency towards evil passed down from one generation to the next. The Psalmist perceived this shared condition of fallen humanity when he declared, *Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me (Ps 51:5)*. Not, my mom’s sin resulted in my conception; but, she (and dad) being sinners when I began to exist, after my unformed parts were shaped, I was brought forth with a proclivity to sin. The apostle Paul sensed the power of this inbred corruption, testifying, *the law of sin ... is in my members (Rom 7:23)*. A sinful bent resides in all of us; our *flesh with the affections and lusts (Gal 5:24)* renders sin inevitable apart from God’s grace. *For ... in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing (Rom 7:18)* – certainly, nothing good whereby my carnal appetites can be mortified and my soul purified. That is spirit work; however:

## Our spirit is dead

Paul speaks of regenerate (born-again) believers as those *who were dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1)*. The unregenerate are spiritually dead, *alienated from the life of God*. Death is a state of insensibility and inability. In this state, we sense not the worth of God, the evil of sin, or the need of salvation; and are unwilling, apart from God's grace, to respond to the Holy Spirit's drawing. While created *for [God's] pleasure (Rev 4:11)*, we most naturally live our lives ignoring God and pleasing self. *But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth (I Tim 5:6)*. Moreover, to raise ourselves from this dead state is humanly impossible, for:

## Our will is dominated

Jesus said: *Whosoever committeth [practices] sin is the servant of sin (Jn 8:34)*. Sin becomes the unregenerate man's master, enslaving and bringing into bondage (see II Pet 2:19). *His own iniquities shall take [him] and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins (Prov 5:22)*. Paul says to believers, *ye were servants of sin (Rom 6:17)*, and we humbly nod. Unbelievers, like the Jews when confronted by Jesus (Jn 8:33), can *deny* they are slaves of sin, but they cannot *defy* sin. They cannot stop living for self and start living for God. They may live decent lives, thinking all is well; however:

## Our righteousness is defiled

In an effort to make ourselves acceptable to our self, others and God, we try to do good and live right by some standard of decency. However, in the light of God's holy standard, *we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rag (Is 64:6)*. All the good we do is sullied by the sin we do. To the



do-gooders who seek to justify themselves, Jesus said, *that which is highly esteemed in the sight of men is abomination in the sight of God (Lk 16:15)*. Being thought well of by others (or thinking well of ourselves) does not equate to being thought well of by God. As did Paul when he was converted, we should count all our righteousness as *dung (Phi 3:8,9)* – excrement of no value when it comes to right standing with God. This is difficult for fallen humanity to grasp, for:

Our understanding is darkened

Since Adam gave ear to the Devil and rebelled against his Maker, spiritual blindness engulfed the human race. Ephesians 4:18 states our current lot: *Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart*. Darkness, blindness, ignorance – this is the human condition. *The god of this world [Satan] hath blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them (II Cor 4:4)*. We need the light of God's truth to expose the errors of our way, because:

Our heart is deceitful

We do not know what we do not know - yet, we act as if we do. We trust our hearts. But here is the human condition as stated by God's prophet Jeremiah. *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jer 17:9)*. We think ourselves wise: no con artist will ever deceive me! Well, maybe not; but what about that little trickster within you the prophet Isaiah speaks of: *a deceitful heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand? (Isa 44:20)*.

The Word of God alone can help a person discern and discover their true heart. *For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart\_*(Heb 4:12). If we will not hear God's Word, we are deceived, whether we know it or not, and:

Our father is the Devil

Jesus said to those who would not hear and believe His words, *Ye are of your father the devil. ... He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God* (8:44, 47). In the parable of the wheat and tares, Jesus said, *the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one* (Mt 13:38). The apostle John also speaks of *the children of God ... and the children of the devil* (I Jn 3:10). We are all God's creation - but we are not all God's children. In order to be a child of God, we *must* be born again.

In contrast to all the darkness squatting in human nature, God dwells *in the light which no man can approach unto* (I Tim 6:16). In Scripture, light is symbolic of holiness. *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty* is the unceasing praise of Heaven (Rev 4:8). No one in his or her unregenerate, sinful state can approach the thrice-holy God and enter His Heavenly kingdom. Scripture says, *And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie* (Rev 21:27). Not only is God's holiness unapproachable, His habitat is undefiled. No one that could possibly dirty Heaven will gain entrance. Considering all the above truths, no one should marvel at the words of Jesus, "Ye

must be born again.” What should shock us is that anyone would think otherwise.

Now, while acknowledging the reality of humanity’s shared sinful condition, we also recognize degrees of sinfulness among individual humans. Many people live respectable lives. They love their families, support law and justice, and charitably give time and money to churches and civic organizations. They do not, as some, live in avarice, or in perverseness, or as troublemakers or lawbreakers. Yet, if we each honestly look carefully at our own conduct and character in the light of God’s righteous laws and holy love, we must all plead guilty to neglecting various duties, and to sinning against God. Hence, none should marvel at their need of this new-birth miracle.

As the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus continued, the subject turned from the *necessity* of a new birth, to the *nature* of this new birth. Jesus said, “That which is born of flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (6). At our first birth, our flesh and blood parents gave our soul living flesh for a dwelling. However, in our fallen, sinful condition, we are spiritually dead and lifeless. Like Adam after he sinned, we have no heart for God’s presence, no true desire to walk daily in close fellowship with Him. Nor do we have a mind to mind Him, to sincerely seek His will and do His bidding. In the new birth, the Holy Spirit awakens and enlivens. *And you, being dead in your sins ... hath he quickened [made alive] together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Col 2:13)*. With birth comes life. In the new birth, the Holy Spirit regenerates the spiritually dead and raises them to a new kind of life: to spirit life - life in the Spirit!

As to what this life looks like, someone penned the following lines:

Prayer, is life breathing;  
faith, is life trusting;  
love, is life adoring;  
service, is life laboring;  
submission, is life patiently suffering.

Having been forgiven all our sins that once worked death, new life now springs forth. The life of God pulsates within the soul of man. We become alive to God. Although ever so weakly, we begin to commune with Him, trust Him, love Him, serve Him, and even suffer for His name's sake. The spiritual realm becomes very real. We now see (perceive) the kingdom of God and the kingly rule of Jesus. We know ourselves to be part of His kingdom of *righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost (Rom 14:17)*. Physical life (life in the flesh) is ours at birth, but this spiritual life (life in the Spirit) is ours only by way of a new birth.

How is the new birth experienced? How is a person born again? Simply put, by faith. By a faith that owns up to the offense of our sin, and repents; and a faith that trusts in the sacrifice of God's Son, and rests. Jesus goes on to explain this to Nicodemus, summing it up in these words. *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (Jn 3:14-16)*.

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