

A Study in John 3:1–16

Nicodemus and the New Birth

We are reading from John chapter 3, beginning at verse 1.

"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 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."

"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. And so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

"Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a teacher in Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen, and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven."

The Lord's Knowledge of Man

Just before this passage, the close of John chapter 2 notes that the Lord needed not that any should testify of man, for He Himself knew what was in man. The word for knew there carries a force of full knowledge — it points to His omniscience, which is so prominent throughout John's Gospel. He had complete knowledge of what was in man without needing anyone to inform Him. And immediately following that statement, there was a man of the Pharisees.

Here is a sample of a man. And it is a sample of the best that man can produce. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews — almost certainly one of the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, the chief governing council. This is the best in man. And was that good enough?

He came to Jesus by night. There are creatures that come out by night, and the association is not a favorable one. Far ahead in this chapter, verse 19 says: This is the condemnation, that light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. Not only was that the condition of the man not yet born again — it was his preference. That is one more reason why the concept of free will in spiritual things is so misconceived. Nicodemus sensed something was wrong, and yet he also sensed that the world would frown on his inquiry. He was free to come to the Lord in the daytime — no outward persecution prevented him — but he chose not to be seen making this inquiry. Even so, praise God, he came.

The Lord Bypasses Logic and Goes to the Need

Nicodemus is courteous and logical. He calls the Lord Rabbi. He acknowledges that no man could do these signs unless God were with him. He approaches the whole matter from the standpoint of reasoning from evidence. But what Nicodemus needed was not theology and not logic. Those were not the answers to his problem. The Lord knew this by divine omniscience, without needing to be told. And He never met a person on the ground on which they presented themselves to Him. This man presents himself on the ground of logic and Pharisaic learning. The Lord gets directly to the issue of his soul in verse 3.

Faith and salvation are not arrived at by process of reason. That is not how one gets there. The natural mind is prejudiced against arriving at the proper conclusion based merely on what it can observe — and this is for a reason: if the most logical people arrived at the most blessing, then the cleverest would be best off. But God's purpose is to hide pride from man. So it is often that intellectual and capable people do not come to the Lord. They are too wise. But that does not mean no wise person ever comes — the scripture says not many wise, not not any wise. God was no doubt moving Nicodemus to come, that he might get a blessing.

Verily, Verily — Except a Man Be Born Again

Verily, verily, I say unto thee — this phrase appears many times in John's Gospel and should never be leaped over. It is grace on the part of the Lord Jesus to say verily once. It is extra grace when He says it twice. Then I — His blessed person. Then I say — communication, something to be listened to. Then unto thee — a message addressed directly to the hearer. Every time we can open our Bibles and hear, in the depth of our souls, the Lord Jesus speaking to our hearts, that is what is happening.

Except a man be born again — or born anew, as Darby renders it — he cannot see the kingdom of God. This is a profoundly anti-Arminian statement. The Arminian position would have it that there is some capacity in man, some little spark, that God works upon and fans into flame. But the Lord did not come to blow on a spark in the old nature. He did not come to improve what was already there. The new birth is not a modification of the old — it is the introduction of something entirely new.

The old nature is not human nature as such. Adam had human nature before the fall and after it. But after the fall, something else came in — what Romans 8:3 calls sin in the flesh. That is a root principle at work inside human beings, present from birth, which will only be eliminated by death and resurrection or by the Lord's coming and the transformation of our bodies. The Lord did not come to reform sin in the flesh. He came to give new birth — a new origin. Not a spark fanned, but something new introduced from outside.

Notice the three things Nicodemus says: verse 2 (a statement), verse 4 (a question), and verse 9 (How can these things be?). The more the Lord explained, the less Nicodemus understood and the more confused he became, until finally he threw up his hands. He had made at least some progress: at last he knew that he did not know.

Born of Water and of the Spirit

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Marginal notes in many Bibles refer this to baptism, but that misses the point entirely. James 1:18 gives the correct reference: Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth. It is the word of God that is used as the instrument of the new birth — born with the word of truth. Water is used here as a figure for the Word of God on account of its purifying and cleansing character. God says, is not my word like a hammer? He also figures it as water, as a sword, as seed — and here, born of water.

Baptism is an outward thing that puts a person into the sphere of profession. Nicodemus already had plenty of profession. He was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. What he needed was not more profession — he needed a new nature, a new life. The water here, being a figure of the Word of God, shows that God uses His Word as the instrument of the new birth. The Spirit is the acting power, taking the Word and applying it to the soul so that the new life — what Peter calls a participation in the divine nature — is implanted.

That divine nature is characterized by light and love, the moral features of God Himself. How those features get into our souls is through the new birth. God does not reach the spirit by acting upon the flesh. He enters through the conscience. That is how God deals with souls — not through outward ceremony or material means, but through the Word applied by the Spirit to the conscience.

Cannot See — Cannot Enter

Two exclusions: he cannot see the kingdom of God (verse 3), and he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (verse 5). One is the moral apprehension — the sight — of what the kingdom is; the other is exclusion from entrance into it. Unless you have the new birth, you would not receive the Lord Jesus even when He was here on earth. You could not see who He was. The little remnant who did receive Him were not wiser or more logical. By the grace of God they were born again, and that is what gave them sight to see.

A man must be born again — the must of verse 7. It is not a statement about human capacity; it is a statement of moral necessity. The same must appears in verse 14: the Son of Man must be lifted up. And in 1 Corinthians 15: He must reign. One answers morally to the other. If the Son of Man must be lifted up — and He was — then He must reign. The moral necessity runs through them all. And for anyone to participate in any of it, there is the prior moral necessity: he must be born again. Born anew. Not modified, not improved, but anew.

The Order of Things: New Birth, Faith, Repentance

One point deserves careful attention. The Lord does not say to Nicodemus: repent, and then be born again. That order is not possible — what would a man repent with? He is characterized by sin in the flesh. He is a slave to sin. Ephesians describes him as spiritually dead toward God, needing to be quickened. What is he going to repent with?

Repentance follows the new birth. Once divine life is given from God, then repentance takes place, because that new life is dealing with the reality of sin. In Romans 7, the man with the inner man — the new birth, the new life — is the one who struggles, who cries out, who says, O wretched man that I am. That struggle is only possible where there is already divine life. Without the new birth, there is no basis for repentance, because the old nature cannot repent.

So faith and new birth come together simultaneously, and God works repentance in the soul through that new life. God commands all men everywhere to repent — they owe it in obedience to God. But only as God works in a soul does a man actually arrive at that place of genuine repentance. The new nature and the faith acting together bring him to it.

Earthly Things and Heavenly Things

The Lord says in verse 12: If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things? The new birth is for relationship with God here on the earth. Every saint

from Adam onward, through to the end of the millennium, must be born again to have a relationship with God. But there is more than the new birth: there are heavenly things. That is of another order. And no one can receive heavenly things who is not first born again — that is the beginning point.

This Gospel assumes the rejection of the Lord Jesus from its very first chapter: He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. The first three Gospels trace the rejection; this one assumes it from the outset and operates on that basis. That is why heavenly things are introduced here — because the broader, heavenly scope of the Gospel is distinctive to John, given the rejection of the Lord Jesus by His earthly people.

Nicodemus at the End

Nicodemus has three appearances in John's Gospel. Here, coming by night. In chapter 7, where he makes a token protest before the council: Does our law judge a man before it hears him? And in chapter 19, where Joseph of Arimathea comes to beg the body of Jesus — and there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight. He knew what to bring, and brought it. That says something about the state of his soul.

The Lord did not come merely to stump the theologians and prove how foolish we all are, and then leave us there. He came to give life. The hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes that Nicodemus brought suggests that something had changed in him — that the one who came by night in confusion had found the light.

Lord willing, we will continue with John 3 next time.