

“The New Birth”

John 3:1-15

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Now we finished chapter 2 with John’s observation that the Lord Jesus knew what was in the hearts of men. There follows now in the Gospel a series of conversations in which the Lord Jesus goes to the heart of individuals of very different backgrounds. First Nicodemus, the Jewish rabbi; then a Samaritan woman, then a Gentile official, then a paralyzed man. In this case, 3:1 following immediately upon 2:23-25, suggests that Nicodemus was such a man who *in some sense* believed in Jesus, but with a very unformed and inadequate faith and understanding. That point is confirmed by the fact that Nicodemus, was chiefly impressed by the very signs that are said to have produced this superficial faith in many according to 2:23.

- v. 2 “at night.” No doubt that is a historical detail, but it also serves John’s purpose, for he makes a great deal in his Gospel of the night as a metaphor for spiritual darkness and blindness. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, perhaps to avoid anyone seeing him with Jesus, but “his own ‘night’ was blacker than he knew.” [Carson, 186 citing Hengstenberg; Lightfoot]

Though Nicodemus was himself a rabbi (v. 10) he addressed Jesus with respect as a fellow rabbi. But, you notice he says “We” not “I.” Nicodemus sees himself perhaps as representing others who see Jesus as he does, but also the “we” may betray a certain nervousness. He doesn’t want to go out on a limb by himself. He pays the Lord compliments and we need not doubt their sincerity, even as we “taste their diplomatic flavour.” [Temple, 44]

Nicodemus did not ask a question formally, but his implied question seems to be: Who and what exactly are you? Are you the Messiah?

- v.3 As often in the Gospels, Jesus’ reply turns the tables. Nicodemus thinks he can understand the matter, if Jesus only gives him some further information. The Lord replies that without the necessary spiritual change, even a rabbi cannot see, cannot understand spiritual things and certainly cannot understand Jesus of Nazareth.

“To see the kingdom of God” in the parlance of OT Scripture and Nicodemus’ first century Judaism meant to participate in the consummation of the Lord’s reign at the end of history and to have eternal life. Elsewhere in the gospels “to enter life or to enter life in the world to come” and “to enter the kingdom” mean the same thing. [Mark 9:43,45 w/ 9:47] One of the startling uses of this terminology of “entering life” and “entering the kingdom” in the Gospels is that it is not regarded as something to be done only in the future. One can enter that eternal life and the final kingdom of God even now in this world, even before one enters it fully and completely in the world to come.

In that day, it was customarily taught, Nicodemus would have taught, that all Jews would enter the kingdom of God at the end of the age – except those who were excluded by

apostasy or notable wickedness – but here is Jesus telling Nicodemus that even he -- a rabbi and spiritual elder -- could not enter the kingdom unless he was born again.

Now you are aware, perhaps, that the word translated “again” in the phrase “born again” can also mean “from above.” Nicodemus in the following verses takes it to mean “again” and, of course, the Lord is certainly talking about a second birth, after and different from one’s natural birth. But it is a birth by the power of the Holy Spirit who comes from above and the other uses of the word in the context and in the Gospel do mean “from above” as in 3:31. Probably John intends both thoughts and, in any case, “from above” includes the idea of “again.”

- v.4 Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant. It is a frequent pattern in the Gospel: misunderstanding on the part of someone is followed by the Lord’s further explanation.
- v.5 “No one can enter the kingdom” here means the same thing as “no one can see the kingdom” in v. 3.

 “with water and the Spirit” looks back to the OT, and especially Ezekiel 36:25-27, where again we find water and the Holy Spirit brought together in describing the transformation of the heart, by which a person is cleansed from sin and given new life. In other words, this is the transformation of life promised in the OT. Being born again, then, is the same thing as is meant by being given a new heart, a cleansed, purified heart.
- v.6 Natural birth produces people who belong to this world; only the Spirit of God can produce children of God.
- v.8 We don’t see the wind, can’t predict it, but we can see its effects. Where he works, new life appears. And the people of this world – people born but once – will never understand the children of God or how they come to be so.
- v.9 Such a mysterious thing, over which a person had no control, had never been part of Nicodemus’ teaching about how people will enter the kingdom of God! This is the last we hear from Nicodemus. Now the Lord replies and then, later, John will reflect on the conversation.
- v.10 You are a professor of religion, an authority on Holy Scripture, and don’t understand this? What I’m teaching, Jesus as much as says, is what the Bible has always taught! Ezekiel 36 is just one such text.
- v.11 The “we” is curious because Jesus does not usually include his disciples with him. It may be simply rhetorical. In any case the new birth has been seen already in Jesus’ ministry. It may be known from the experience of those who have been born again themselves.
- v.12 “Earthly things” seem to refer to the things Jesus has just explained, the new birth, which takes place on earth and the evidence for which can be seen on earth. If Nicodemus stumbles over this, the higher things will certainly be beyond him.

- v.13 Jesus is the one man who has authority to speak of heavenly things. He has come from there! Heaven is his home! There were many stories in the Judaism of that day of saints of old who had ascended to heaven and received insight into God's ways and plans. Many of them concerned Moses. But only Jesus really knows what is true of heaven! The grammar is complicated, but John's Greek in v. 13 does not necessarily mean that the Lord Jesus had already ascended once to heaven.
- v.14 The other uses of "lifted up" in John all refer to Christ's being lifted up on the cross *with a view to his exaltation* later. He has talked just now of his being in heaven and he will be there again, but after his work on the cross has secured new life for all who trust in him. You turn to Jesus for new life as Israel turned to the Bronze snake. Nicodemus, at this point, did not yet believe, as v. 12 indicates. But he would later, as we read in John 7:45-52 and 19:38-42).

The new birth was certainly not what Nicodemus thought they would be talking about when he came to Jesus that night. He wanted to talk about Jesus and his marvelous miracles and what it all meant. I'm sure he certainly had every expectation of fitting what he learned into his already existing understanding of God and God's ways. Perhaps he was hopeful that the Lord would prove to him that night that he was indeed the Messiah and that the growing enthusiasm of the crowds was entirely justified.

But, instead, he got an embarrassing interrogation about the "new birth," whatever that was, and a not so subtle rebuke that, being a Jewish rabbi, he should have known all about this new birth. Nicodemus came to speak to Jesus about Jesus and Jesus, instead, insisted on speaking about Nicodemus and, in particular, about Nicodemus' need for the new birth. Here was Nicodemus, a theology professor, a church leader, an authority on the Scriptures and the faith of Moses, being lectured to as if he were a school-boy and being told that he needed this mysterious new birth or he could never see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus wouldn't have known this, of course, that night. But the reader of the Gospel of John is getting a clearer and clearer picture. To be born again, or to be born from above, obviously is equivalent to what John had already, in 1:12, called becoming "children of God" and, in 1:13, had called being "born of God." Being born of God is the same thing as here in 3:8, being "born of the Spirit." In both places it is being explained how someone becomes a child of God. Only a few of Jesus' own people, we read in 1:11, believed in him, but those who did, did so because they were born of God, or born again.

And the mystery of it all, it being past our understanding and taking place beyond our sight and sense, as the Lord says here in comparing the new birth to the action of the wind, is simply another way of saying what has already been said in 1:13, viz. that the children of God were not born by natural means, but born by the power and working of God.

Nicodemus wasn't expecting to hear about the new birth and he wasn't interested in the new birth. Nor was it what anyone was thinking about or interested in in England before the

Reformation or, two hundred years later, before the Great Awakening. But it was the great need of men in Nicodemus' day and has been in every day since.

Take, for example, the preaching of George Whitefield that ushered in the Great Awakening in England in the 1730s. One of Whitefield's great themes was the truly sinful condition of the natural heart of men and women, what they really were in themselves. But, following on that emphasis, was his emphasis on the new birth. Men cannot save themselves, they cannot please God in themselves, they cannot trust in Christ in and of themselves. God must work in them a new life, they must be born again by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. Whitefield himself said that his sermon, entitled "The nature and necessity of the new birth in Christ," preached many times over, began the awakening in London, Bristol, Gloucester, and Gloucestershire. He was convinced that it was this sermon, on the necessity of the new birth, a message just such as Jesus himself gave to Nicodemus here, that really led to the Great Awakening. [Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans*, 120]

You see, the Lord's challenge to Nicodemus is straightforward and clear, and it will be the challenge he makes all through the gospel. These people thought salvation was entirely in their grasp, it was a matter of doing what was required. The Jewish theologians of that time debated precisely *what* was required, but they all thought of salvation in terms of doing what was required. Nicodemus was a teacher of the law. He had spent his life teaching others what the law required. To have a part in the kingdom of God, when it finally appeared – Nicodemus had taught multitudes of people this – one must keep the commandments. And he taught them in great detail what precisely was required by each of the commandments. Do those things and you will live. That had been his message for years now. And, not to put too fine a point on it, it has been the message of most religious teachers ever since, including a very large number of those who called themselves Christians.

And, now here was Jesus, another rabbi, a rabbi whose credentials seem to have been sent down from heaven, who was performing miraculous signs that took one's breath away, and he was saying that entering the kingdom of God required a new birth, a completely new beginning, and, what is more, that this beginning did not lie within man's power to effect. Only God and the Spirit could bring it to pass. This stood Nicodemus' entire theology of salvation on its head. He had always talked of what men and women should *do*; Jesus talked of what had to *be done* for them and in them by God himself.

Nicodemus' understanding of salvation was that we should all strive to be *good* men. Jesus' understanding was that we needed to become *new* men.

Whitefield himself, as a teenager, a teenager who had chosen irreligious and sin-loving friends, suddenly found himself aware of the blackness of his own heart and the yawning chasm that separated him from a holy God. How those powerful impressions came into his heart he could not say, but they were there. And he resolved to change. And he worked very hard to change, much harder than people ordinarily work who wish to change themselves. He denied himself every luxury, he wore dirty clothes, he ate only those foods he didn't like, he fasted twice a week, gave his money to the poor and spent whole nights in prayer, prostrate on cold stones or

wet grass. But it didn't really change him. He knew it didn't. It was all like painting over rotten wood. He remained the same person inside.

Then a friend, it happened to be Charles Wesley, gave him a book. It was Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. He read it with amazement. Scougal taught him what he had never known before: viz. that true religion is a union of God himself and one's own soul, what we would call today a personal relationship with God, Christ making himself known to us and living within us. He knew after reading Scougal that it could no longer be a case of his own *doing*. He needed to become a different man. Christ needed to do something in him and to him that he could not do himself.

Then it happened.

“After having undergone innumerable buffetings by day and night, God was pleased at length to remove my heavy load and to enable me, by a living faith, to lay hold on his dear Son. And oh! with what joy – joy unspeakable and full of glory – was I filled when the weight of sin left me and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God broke in upon my disconsolate soul!”

“His first act in his ecstasy was to write to all his relatives, ‘I have found,’ he [told] them, ‘that there is such a thing as *the new birth*.’” [Frank Boreham, *Treasury*, 65-66]

We are not told what Nicodemus' response to the Lord's words was that night. Perhaps there was no immediate understanding. But the Lord's words were as Henry Scougal's to Whitefield. Because Nicodemus was, at some point, born again himself and found himself a follower of Jesus Christ having repudiated the theology of salvation that he had taught so long to so many others. He had told them nothing about a new creation, about a new heart, about a new birth. He had always taught them that salvation was something in their grasp; that it required only their obedience. But he knew different now. He knew that it required from him what he would *never* do or be able to do in and of himself, and especially, it required his believing in Jesus Christ and the surrender and submission of his life and his hopes for life to him. Something men would never do apart from the powerful working of the Spirit within them. The rest of the Gospel will be the proof of that.

Nicodemus, like Whitefield centuries later, came to understand that, as C.S. Lewis was to put it, “When we have gotten a wrong sum at the beginning of a sequence of calculations, we cannot improve matters ‘by simply going on.’” [Plantinga, *Not the Way its Supposed to Be*, 125 citing *The Great Divorce*, 6]. But that is precisely what the Jews did, even with the Son of God among them. They kept going along their old path, with a still greater frenzy, until finally, sure they were serving God, they had crucified the Lord of Glory!

What they needed was a new heart, a new start, a new birth, that would open up to them a completely different life and reality and understanding. The one they had, religious as it was, zealous as they were, would never take them to the kingdom of God, never bring them to eternal life. They never grasped that salvation, the salvation of any soul, took nothing less than the

incarnation, suffering and death of God the Son *for* them and the life transforming work of the Spirit of God *in* them.

Life, like water, cannot rise above its source. Eternal life, heavenly life, must come from heaven and from God himself. He must create it in us, which is what is meant by the new birth.

Every Christian's experience of the new birth is not the same, of course. Some are born again in their mother's wombs, some convulsively, as Whitefield was, for others the Lord's work in them in a process akin to the coming of dawn in northern latitudes where it is hard to tell exactly when night has become day. But, what the Lord said to Nicodemus is true for everyone: "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

To make any man or woman, boy or girl, a saint, a true believer in Jesus Christ, it takes a mysterious, powerful, supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit within, recreating, illuminating the mind, cleansing the heart, redirecting the fallen will. No one, however apparently sincere, can effect these changes by himself or herself, nor, in honesty, would they want to. As Paul would say later, talking about the same thing, "the mind of the flesh is hostile to God, it will not submit itself to God's law, nor can it do so." So God himself, by his powerful wind, must change the mind. And that is what he does.

And it is what he has been doing ever since. Think of Eta Linnemann, whom I have told some of you about. Like Nicodemus, she was a professor of theology. The first woman ever to hold a professorship in NT in a German University, a disciple of the celebrated Rudolf Bultmann, who convinced a generation of biblical scholars that there was little of historical value in the Bible's account of Jesus Christ. When I was in graduate work in NT in the middle 1970s, Eta Linnemann was simply a name among many other names in the world of unbelieving German NT scholarship. But then a transformation. It began painfully, with growing alcoholism and personal disillusionment, an addiction to watching television. And then, in the providence of God, some vibrant Christians came into her life, and God, the living God, began to speak to her in the words of these Christians. She found herself a believer in Jesus and her world turned upside down. She would eventually leave her professorship, repudiate the books she had written on the NT, and become a missionary teacher in Indonesia. She has written other books now in defense of the divine authority of the NT.

"My destructive addictions were replaced by a hunger and thirst for his Word and for fellowship with Christians. I was able to recognize sin clearly as sin rather than merely make excuses for it as was my previous habit. I can still remember the delicious joy I felt when for the first time black was once more black and white was once more white; the two ceased to pool together as indistinguishable gray." [*Historical Criticism of the Bible*, 18]

What she was saying, in other words, was that she had been born again, born of water and the Spirit. She had been given a new start, a new life, even a new nature. She was, as Paul would put it, a new creation. And God had done it, not she herself. What she could not do, he had done.

How like another testimony that comes from centuries earlier, this of the great 3rd century African bishop, Cyprian.

“I used to wander blindly in the darkness of night, buffeted this way and that in the stormy sea of the world; [here] and [there] I floated, ignorant of my own life, and a stranger to the truth and the light. Given the manner of life I lived in those days, I used to think that what God in his tenderness promised me for my salvation was difficult, indeed distasteful. How could a man be reborn and quickened for a new life...? How could one be regenerated and have done with all the past, and, without physical changes, be altered in heart and soul? How, I asked myself, was such a conversion possible? For I was captured and held prisoner by the countless sins of my past life; I did not believe it was possible to be rid of them. So I became slave to my vices, I despaired of better things. I learned to make excuses for my faults which had become my familiar friends.”

But then, Cyprian goes on:

“A light from above entered and permeated my heart, now cleansed from its defilement. The Spirit came from heaven, and changed me into a new man by the second birth. Almost at once in a marvelous way doubt gave way to assurance, what had been shut tight, opened; light shone in dark places; and I found what had previously seemed...impossible could be done.

Mankind will always be naturally and powerfully averse to this teaching, this claim that to see the kingdom of God one *must be born again*. For think about it. It represents a radical rejection of what he now is – what you are now will not do, you must begin again. Further, what is necessary lies wholly outside his own control. The Spirit must work. What must be done he or she cannot do. And, then, finally, it amounts to the surrender of one’s entire inner life to God – thoughts, attitudes, feelings – a complete surrender. Certain public duties, religious acts will not be enough. God is requiring a new heart, a new life from you. Men instinctively understand the implications. Most Jews in Jesus’ day would have nothing to do with this doctrine. But the Spirit gave Nicodemus that new beginning, that new birth, and, as a result, he came to believe in Jesus Christ and was with Joseph of Arimathea when he requested the body of the Lord for burial.

Those of you who know that you have been born again by the Spirit of God, have reason to be thrilled at the knowledge of what was done in you by the power of God himself and to be shaken by the thought of what you would never have believed and how you would all your life have loved darkness rather than light had the Spirit never come to you and made you a new creature in Jesus Christ.

But there may be those who know they have not been born again, but know, somehow you know, that you need to be born again, you need to believe in Christ, you need your heart to be other than it is, you need to escape the bondage of your present life. You know full well that such deliverance lies beyond your power. Perhaps you've tried to change. God alone can do it for you. Well, plead with him to do it and don't stop until you find yourself a new man, a new woman, with a new life. Until you find yourself in the kingdom of God. And, as Alexander Whyte put it, in regard to vv. 14-15, where the thought of Christ crucified and glorified finishes this discourse

on the new birth and its necessity: "...look well and look long at Jesus Christ if you would fall in love with the new birth." [*Walk, Character, and Conversation*, 129] You look to Jesus, trust in him, and leave the changing of your heart to the Holy Spirit.

Alfred Lord Tennyson once sighed in a poem:

Ah for a man to arise in me
That the man I am may cease to be.

He would have done better to pray:

Lord make me that new man,
for you alone can!