

Nicodemus Visits Jesus – Ye Must Be Born Again
(John 3:1-3)

1 *There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:*

2 *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.*

3 *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.*

We have seen that Jesus has begun to make himself known here in the early part of John. He was baptized by John. He has called at least five of his disciples. He turned water into wine at the marriage feast. He marched into the temple as one having authority and reformed the temple practice.

And then during this first Passover week, he performed many miracles.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did.

John 2:23

Now if this was all that was said about these people, you would assume that they believed in his name and they were saved. After all this is the message of John 3:16, isn't it?

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.

John 3:16

But something was wrong with the faith of these people who saw his miracles and then believed. They had a faith that fell short of saving faith.

But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men.

John 2:24

Now we come to the third chapter of John. And it might be helpful to our understanding if the chapter break was not right here, because what we have in chapter three is an expansion of the last three verses of chapter two. In the last three verses of chapter two we see many people in general who believed when they saw the miracles of Jesus, but Jesus did not commit unto these people because he knew their hearts. But none of these people were mentioned by name.

But when we come to chapter three, we have a specific person who is identified by name. And he is one of these people who had seen the miracles of Jesus and was highly impressed.

The Man Nicodemus

Now the person who came to visit Jesus at night is identified in verse one of our text as Nicodemus.

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

John 3:1

This verse tells us three things about Nicodemus. First of all, we see that he was a man. Now I suppose we could have determined this from his name only. But John takes pains to mention that there was a “*man of the Pharisees.*”

It seems that this forms a link between the previous two verses.

But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew what was in men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man. There was a man . . .

So, Nicodemus seems to be the specific example of those men in general who were believing in the name of Jesus because of the miracles which he did, but whose faith fell short of saving faith.

We also find here that Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Now there were at least three main religious sects of Jews in the day of Jesus. There were the Pharisees and the Sadducees and there was also a sect called the Essenes. The Essenes are not mentioned in the Bible but Josephus and other secular writers inform us that the Essenes were a group of Jews that believed in communal living. They were very much against worldly wealth. They almost believed that poverty was a virtue. It seems that they had a commune somewhere around the Dead Sea and they tended to be very reclusive, almost monk-like. They were kind of like the Omish of today.

The Sadducees were the religious liberals of the day. They denied the veracity of miracles. They denied the resurrection of the body. They denied the existence of angels.

The Pharisees were equivalent to our modern day fundamentalists. The Scriptures were their authority. But the Pharisees were very strict and legalistic. They were rigid in their adherence to the law, but also in their interpretations of the law they developed other rules or traditions that went beyond the law. The Pharisees were more correct doctrinally than the Sadducees. But the Pharisees tended to be self-righteous and legalistic. And Jesus had much to say about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

But notice that Nicodemus was more than a mere Pharisee. He was a ruler of the Jews. Nicodemus was no ordinary Jew. When it says that he was a ruler of the Jews, it means that he was a member of the ruling body of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a group of 70 high religious officers who were presided over by the High Priest. And they determined the rules and regulations of religious service. They also had the power to punish violators. Now for capital offenses, they had to get the approval of the Roman authorities, but for lesser offenses the Sanhedrin had authority to punish.

The Circumstances of the Visit

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.

John 3:2

I. Nicodemus came by night.

John doesn't tell us why Nicodemus came at night. But it seems to me that there is some significance to it. John doesn't just insert the clause "by night" for nothing. So, I suppose there was a reason that Nicodemus came by night rather than by day.

Probably the best guess is that Nicodemus came by night because he wanted to have a private meeting with Jesus. Now during the day, Jesus was busy healing and ministering to the needs of the multitude. And it is easy to conceive that it was difficult even to get close to Him while the crowds were crushing in around Him. And so, if you wanted to have an extended conversation with Him, or if you wanted to have a theological discussion with Him, it was nearly impossible during the day.

Also, some have speculated that Nicodemus came under the cover of night to protect his reputation because he was ashamed of being seen with Jesus. I suppose that is a possibility because Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin and it was not fashionable for these high-ranking officials to be fawning over Jesus. So, perhaps to protect his reputation and the reputation of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus came under cover of night.

Perhaps there is even a spiritual significance to his coming at night. The book of John makes a big

deal of the contrast between light and darkness. You might remember that in chapter one John said,

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

John 1:5

And so we have a spiritual picture here of a man characterized by darkness coming to the true Light. Nicodemus was a man after all who was yet in darkness. Though he had every advantage; though he knew the Law; though he was a religious ruler in a high office; his heart was yet in a deep stupor. To put it in spiritual terms, he did not have eyes to see. And when he came to Jesus, he came stumbling in the darkness of night.

II. Nicodemus came representing others in the Sanhedrin.

When Nicodemus addressed Jesus, he did not say, “*I know that thou art a teacher come from God.*” Rather, he said, “*We know.*” And so it appears that Nicodemus came to Jesus, not on *his* initiative alone, but on the initiative of either a group of Pharisees or perhaps even of the entire Sanhedrin. And Nicodemus came to Jesus on behalf of the group. And so he says, “*We know.*”

Now you should understand that Nicodemus is at this time a very mature man. He has risen through the ranks and is a ruler of the Jews. He is by this time a grey beard. And, he even says this about himself.

How can a man be born when he is old?

John 3:4

So, Nicodemus was an older man, and Jesus was just a puppy of a man. Jesus might have been about 29 years old at this time. And I am sure that the Sanhedrin had their eye on this young upstart. And they sent Nicodemus out to find out more about who this young man was.

III. Nicodemus came admitting a supernatural power behind the ministry of Jesus.

You will notice that Nicodemus came at least with words of respect. He called Jesus “Rabbi.” This was a title of respect that would not have normally been addressed to a younger man like Jesus. And it would not normally be addressed to a man who had no formal education. Nevertheless, Nicodemus addressed Jesus as “Rabbi” or “Master.”

And he acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher.

We know that thou art a teacher . . .
John 3:2

But what is really behind this outward respect, is that Nicodemus and his Sanhedrin buddies have recognized that there is a supernatural power attending the ministry of Jesus. They have been watching Jesus during this Passover festival just like everyone else. And they have seen the miracles. And therefore they are willing to acknowledge that this man is from God.

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.

John 3:2

The Response of Jesus

Nicodemus never asked a question, but Jesus answered the question of his heart anyway.

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.

John 3:3

This demonstrates the omniscience of Jesus over the hearts of men. This verifies verse 25 of the preceding chapter where it says that Jesus,

Needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

John 3:25

And Jesus knew what was in the heart of Nicodemus. Not only did he know that Nicodemus was in spiritual darkness, but he also knew the thoughts of his heart. And he knew his question before he ever asked. And Jesus' answer in verse three gives us a clue as to what was Nicodemus' central question.

Now Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." This gives us a clue as to what was on Nicodemus' mind. And apparently, he was there to inquire if Jesus was the One who would bring in the expected Kingdom.

Nicodemus was looking for the Messiah to come. He was looking for a Jew who was a descendant of David; who would come working supernatural wonders; who would overthrow the enemies of Israel, especially Rome; and who would exalt Israel to the head of all nations of the earth. And he anxiously awaited this kingdom.

Now the kind of kingdom that Nicodemus envisioned was undoubtedly an earthly kind of kingdom. And Nicodemus imagined the Messiah seated in a Jewish palace in Jerusalem with a Jewish flag by his throne and the Messiah would be as much a political figure as a religious and spiritual figure. And the Messiah would kick the Romans out and Abraham's descendants would finally live free of oppression in the land of Canaan. And I am sure that Nicodemus thought that if anyone in Israel was qualified to be the beneficiary of this kingdom it would be him – a Pharisee, a member of the Sandedrin.

But Jesus told Nicodemus,

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

John 3:3

Jesus clearly spoke of a different kind of a kingdom. Jesus spoke of a kingdom that was spiritual in nature rather than earthly. And he said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Now, of course, Israel was an earthly people that typified a spiritual people. They had sacrifices that typified the real sacrifice. They had a temple that

typified the real Temple which was Christ. They had a land that typified that real heavenly land. Their greatest king was David, who typified the real King. And David had a kingdom which typified the real kingdom of God. All of these tangible, earthly things in the Old Testament were pictures and types and shadows. And what we learned from the book of Hebrews was that you have to turn loose of the types in order to embrace the reality which is Christ and his kingdom.

Now there is a great prophecy in the book of Daniel which lays out the various, successive kingdoms of the world. You remember that as a young man Daniel was carried off into captivity into Babylon around 600 BC. And Daniel spent the rest of his life in exile. And when he was an old man, God gave Daniel a vision.

In this vision, Daniel saw four beasts coming out of the sea; a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a nondescript beast with iron teeth. (Daniel 7:4-8) Almost all commentators have identified the four beasts as four successive earthly kingdoms which ruled over Israel.

Of course the first, the one that ruled over Israel during the time of Daniel, was Babylon. Then, Babylon was thrown down by the Medes and the Persians. Next was the Greek empire, then, finally the kingdom of Rome. And when Jesus was born Israel was under the thumb of this Roman Empire.

But the thing you will notice about each of these worldly kingdoms is that they were all earthly kingdoms and they were all temporary kingdoms.

They all burned brightly for a short time and then their light was extinguished.

Example: When you shoot off fireworks on the fourth of July, you light it and you stand back and when it goes off it lights up the sky for about five seconds, and then it fizzles out and it is gone.

And this was the nature of these kingdoms. Over the course of six-hundred years before Christ, you had four worldwide kingdoms – Babylon, Media/Persia, Greece and Rome. And each of them had a day in the sun, and then like all earthly kingdoms their light fizzled out.

Ah, but there was another kingdom in David's vision. And it followed immediately after the kingdom of the last beast.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

Daniel 7:13, 14

Here we have a picture of one like the Son of man who came with the clouds of heaven. But you have to be careful here to note which direction he is coming. And the question is, "Is he coming down, or is he coming up?" Obviously at his second coming, Christ will come down out of heaven.

The Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

I Thessalonians 4:16

That will be at his second coming, he will descend from heaven.

But in our passage in Daniel, we have a picture of the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven and coming to the Ancient of Days. Of course, the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:13 is Jehovah. And the Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven to Jehovah and among other things he is given a kingdom.

Now there are two things that characterize this kingdom that was given to Christ. First, it was a kingdom that is composed of all people, nations and languages.

And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him.

Daniel 7:14

This is obviously different from the other kingdoms that have gone before. Each of those kingdoms was national in nature. But the kingdom given to Christ was international.

But there is another difference between these earthly kingdoms and the kingdom of Christ. That is, the kingdom of Christ is an everlasting kingdom.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

Daniel 7:14

Now when we come back to the gospel of John, I would suggest to you that there is another unique quality of Christ's kingdom, and that is, there is a spiritual requirement for entry into this kingdom.

To be a citizen of other kingdoms, you enter by an earthly birth. You are simply born physically to parents who are in the kingdom. But Christ's kingdom is a little different. His is a spiritual kingdom and to get in, you must be born spiritually.

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.

John 3:3

I. The critical importance of the principle.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "Verily, verily." This is like saying, "Truly, truly." It is a way of saying, "This is most certainly true. This is something of utmost importance." Jesus used this expression quite often in the gospels, and he did so when he was about to state something of great importance. And so, we understand that the subject of the new birth is a matter of great importance. But also notice,

II. The authority of Christ in stating the principle.

I say unto thee.

When the Rabbis taught they would refer to the Old Testament Scriptures and they would quote each other. And they would teach by saying, “Rabbi so and so says this” and Rabbi so and so says that.” But Jesus says, “I say unto you.” That’s why the Jews said, “Never man spake like this man.”

If you look at the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5-7, Jesus would say, “Ye have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you.”

And Jesus spoke with great authority as though there was no higher authority than him. And so, he told Nicodemus, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee.”

III. The principle stated.

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

This is the foundation principle of salvation. Ye must be born again.

A. Salvation is not by the first birth.

Now the first thing that we see here is that salvation has nothing to do with the first birth. Now this must have been startling to Nicodemus. He thought the first birth was the important one. The Jews mistakenly put the emphasis on being born in the line of Abraham. And they thought the first birth qualified them for the Kingdom of God. But Jesus upended this false premise by stating, “Ye must be born again.”

Many people even today, assert that there is some significance in the first birth. And they teach that the Jews have some prerogative into the kingdom because of their physical birth. Many people continue to honor the nation of Israel as though the first birth counts for the kingdom. But Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

The kingdoms of men are gained by the first birth. We are citizens of the United States by virtue of our first birth. And we share the benefits of citizenship by our first birth. Not so the Kingdom of God. The benefits of that Kingdom come by a second birth.

B. Salvation is by a spiritual birth.

Now there can be only one physical birth. Obviously, Nicodemus stated the obvious when he said,

How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

John 3:4

What Nicodemus was saying to Jesus is that a second physical birth is impossible. By very nature a physical birth is once and only once. And so, if Jesus speaks of another birth, he must be speaking of a spiritual birth. And of course, this is the very thing of which Jesus is speaking.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

John 3:6

C. Salvation results in seeing.

You will notice that Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Now since we are talking about a spiritual birth and a spiritual kingdom, we must also be talking about a spiritual seeing. The Scriptures often describe salvation as being enlightened. It is having our spiritual senses made alive. It is having our eyes and our ears opened. And here it says, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

This phrase, *seeing the kingdom of God* is equivalent to entering the kingdom.

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

John 3:5

Seeing the Kingdom of God or entering the Kingdom of God is a function of the spiritual senses. One enters the Kingdom of God by seeing it with the eyes of faith. He enters by believing with a heart of faith. And so, Jesus could have also said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot believe."

Now here is the difference between the Arminian and the Calvinist. The Arminian says, "Except a man believe he cannot be born again." The Calvinist says, "Except a man be born again, he cannot believe."

So to what do we attribute our salvation? Do we attribute it to our faith or do we attribute it to our spiritual birth? Do we take the credit, or do we give it all to God?

Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Salvation is nothing less than a change of heart. Salvation is a new birth. It is a new creation. Salvation is when God does a work in your heart and makes it alive. The Bible calls it a quickening. It is called regeneration. And we are wholly dependent on God for this operation in our heart.

There is nothing we can do to make our own hearts alive. Nicodemus had done it all. He was the most religious man on the face of the earth. Compared to others he was a righteous man. He was a law keeper. He judged others on the basis of the law. He went to the temple on a daily basis. He was a fundamentalist. He knew the Scriptures. He believed in Jesus when he saw the miracles which he did. But one thing he lacked, he was not born again.

Now it seems that somewhere along the line, Jesus committed himself to Nicodemus because at the end of the gospel, after Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus openly anointed the body of Jesus with spices and assisted in his burial. (John 19:39)

May we always remember that our salvation is attributed solely and exclusively to the work of God. I pray that each of you may have a part in the new birth.