

9. His Conversation with Nicodemus

In our last study on the life of Jesus, we saw how he cast out the vendors and moneychangers who had set themselves up, with the complicity of the religious leaders, in the court of the temple. When the leaders asked Jesus what miracle he would perform to prove he had the authority to act this way, he did not perform a miracle on the spot. Instead he spoke to them, in a veiled way, of his resurrection from the dead. But the following verse in the Bible, John 2:23, informs us that Jesus did, nevertheless, many miracles during his stay in Jerusalem. "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did."

One man who was struck by seeing these miracles was Nicodemus. "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him'" (John 3:1,2).

When we consider the two details given concerning this man, it is a little surprising that he came to talk to Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish sect that was dedicated to observing the law and traditions in the smallest details. He is also called a "leader" of the Jews. This may mean that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jewish nation, which had the last word in all religious matters. Now, in reading the gospels, we see that most Pharisees were very hostile toward Jesus, and the Sanhedrin would eventually sentence him to death.

People often emphasize the fact that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. Some have suggested that he was afraid of the reactions of his peers and did not want them to see him. Others think that he was looking for a moment to talk to Jesus in peace, without the interruptions and noise of people who followed Jesus or came to be healed. The Bible does not tell the reason.

One Must Be Born Again So what would Jesus say to this very religious man who was so respected by the people? What he said was surprising. "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'" (John 3:3). As we have seen, Nicodemus began this

interview by talking about the miracles Jesus had done. Jesus quickly turned his attention away from the miracles and toward the need for a new birth in order to enter the kingdom of God.

The conversation follows the same stages as several others recorded in the Gospel of John: the questioner says something and Jesus responds in a way that is difficult to understand. The questioner does, in fact, misunderstand the answer. Jesus would then often make a statement that could be even more difficult to grasp, and after which came a speech or explanation. Thus we see that the person who received the teaching had to struggle to discover and face the truth which Jesus was revealing.

So Jesus says that a man must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God. It is perhaps a question of seeing it "from the inside", because two verses later, he will say that this birth is necessary to "enter" the kingdom. The Greek expression that is translated "born again" could be translated equally well "born from above." The new birth is actually a transformation in which man must cooperate with God. He must submit himself so that God may make a new creature of him. But Nicodemus got stuck on the idea of being born again, taking it to be in the physical sense. "Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?'" (John 3:4).

Nicodemus should have been able to understand what Jesus said in a spiritual sense, because the idea of a new birth was not unknown to the Jews. They spoke of it, however, only in regard to non-Jews who converted to Judaism. Since Nicodemus wanted to take the expression literally, Jesus specified that this birth had nothing to do with the womb of a woman. One must be born of water and the Spirit.

Water and the Spirit These two elements are associated with the new birth, or "regeneration," in Titus 3:5,6, where the apostle Paul says that God "saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior." This new birth or regeneration is by the Word of God, more specifically by the Injeel. "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of His creatures" (James 1:18). "Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but

incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:23). "For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15).

No one can be born again without having heard the true gospel, the word that is used by the Spirit to lead us to faith. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). When a person hears the Word of God, the Spirit convinces him of his sin and the true identity of Jesus (John 16:8-11). The person repents of his sins and makes a commitment to the Lord in baptism.

Having been washed of all sin, all the evil he has done in his life is erased, and he receives a new life. This life has an entirely new quality because the person also receives the gift of the Holy Spirit to help him walk in holiness. Being in Christ, we are new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus was speaking here of a spiritual birth, a process that is of the Spirit, since it begins when we hear and believe the gospel of Christ, and of water, since it is completed when we are immersed in water in the image of the death and resurrection of Jesus—that is, baptism.

The Kingdom of God Jesus says that this new birth is necessary for whoever wants to see or enter the kingdom of God. So what is this kingdom? Here again we are dealing with an expression that all Jews would have known but would not necessarily understand in its true sense. The Old Testament predicted in many passages the coming of the kingdom of God by a descendant of King David. Most Jews thought of this as a physical kingdom, where the nation of Israel would recover its independence... a kingdom where power, peace and material prosperity would be guaranteed to them.

Jesus spent a lot of time in his teaching clarifying the idea of a heavenly kingdom, which would actually be of a spiritual nature. Those who would share the benefits brought by the reign of the Messiah, the son of David, those who would be recognized as its citizens and would have the favor of the King, are those who would be born again. It is necessary to be "born" a citizen of the heavenly kingdom.

One who is a Christian is actually in the kingdom. Colossians 1:13 says, "He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." According to Daniel 2:44 and

many other passages in the Old Testament, this kingdom would be established during the time of the Roman Empire. Jesus preached throughout his ministry that the kingdom was near. And he said in Mark 9:1 that his disciples would see the establishment of the kingdom during their lives. This happened on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 when the church had its beginning. Since Jesus returned to heaven, he reigns over the whole world. But only members of the church, Christians, will be citizens of his kingdom. This is why Paul said in Philippians 3:20, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

If you hope one day to be with the King in heaven, you must become a citizen of the kingdom while here on earth. And one obtains that citizenship by birth, the new birth.

Conclusion Nicodemus had difficulty accepting what Jesus was saying because he already believed himself to be just before God. He was one of the chosen people. As a Pharisee, he followed his religion rigorously. He was a leader of his people, a respected man. But Jesus told him that all this was not enough. He would have to be born again, just like any heathen the Jews might try to convert. Today, some of you who are reading these lines are in the same situation as Nicodemus. You lead a good moral life. You are religious and respected by others. Maybe you've gone to church or the mosque since you were very young. But you haven't obeyed what Jesus said to do to be born again. You are not in the kingdom of God and you will not be with him in heaven.

Were you born into a religious family, living a good moral life? This is a great advantage. But it is necessary to be born of the Spirit. It is necessary to hear and believe the Injeel for yourself. You believe in Jesus? That's excellent! But it is necessary to be born of water. You must be immersed—baptized for the remission of your sins. If you have not been born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. Do not let yourself be held back by tradition, pride, what others think or anything else. Let God transport you today into the kingdom of the Son of His love.