

Ye Must be Born Again

It was dark outside as the man made his way through the busy streets of the city. He wanted no one to notice him, no one who would be able to tell who he was. He was a very important man, a religious man, and couldn't afford to have someone see him and where he was going. He wound his way through various neighborhoods, out of the affluent neighborhood he was used to and toward a poor neighborhood to which he was unaccustomed. But onward he went. He wanted to go back to his house, but he knew that even if he did, he would never be able to sleep. He had to go to see the person tonight. It could not wait. So onward he went. Finally, in the distance, he saw the house. It was dark, but he knew that the person he wanted to see was still awake. Once again, he paused, but pushed ahead.

As this religious leader reached the house, he heard a noise coming from the roof. He paused, then tried in the darkness to make out where there might be a stairway leading up. He found it when his eyes adjusted, and so he cautiously climbed the stairs. It was brighter on the roof because of the moonlight, and he could see a lone figure near the edge. The figure, a man, was on his knees with his face toward the stars. The ruler cleared his throat to make his presence known, and the man on his knees slowly turned his head toward him. He smiled in recognition, even though the two men had never met. His smile took the edge off of his nerves, and he smiled weakly in return. The man rose to his feet and greeted the ruler, taking no notice of his expensive clothes. In the moonlight, this religious man could see the kindest eyes he'd ever seen.

"I have been waiting for you," said the man, and he gestured toward a mat on the corner of the roof. The ruler was taken aback, for he had not arranged this meeting. How could he have known? No, he couldn't have. He is just playing games with me. But this kind man was not the sort who would be deceptive. He put the thought out of his mind. This man really knew that he had intended to come. He moved toward the mat and the man sat nearby on a mat of his own. The ruler bowed and started to say, "My name is-" but before he could finish, he heard his own name fall from the lips of the man; "Nicodemus. I know. I told you: I have been expecting you." This was too much for the ruler, and he sat on the mat and stared at the man.

"Yes, my name is Nicodemus. I have come to speak to you, Jesus." The man smiled and his eyes intensely looked into the face of Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. Jesus said nothing, but his kind smile and fiery eyes invited him to continue. Nicodemus didn't know where to begin. The reports of this Jesus had been coming to the Jewish leadership for almost a year, ever since they had started to investigate Jesus' cousin, John. John had been an unusual individual, dressed in camel skins and eating locusts. He had come out of the deserts and was calling people to turn from their evil works. The Jewish leaders, called the Pharisees, had no problem with this, of course. They, too, wanted people to turn from their sins, or repent. They were the shepherds of Israel. This they did not mind. What they did mind was when John turned his speech on them and said, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."

This kind of talk made them think differently of the Baptist, and they would have acted against him, but Herod Antipas had had him killed before they could. But before John had been arrested by Herod, he had shifted his focus to the man sitting before Nicodemus. John had pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" From then on, all the attention, including the attention of the Pharisees, went to Jesus. The Pharisees so far did not like what they saw in this rabbi Jesus, but could not dispute the miracles they had seen. There was division among them about who Jesus was. Nicodemus decided that that is where he would start.

"Rabbi," he began carefully, "we know that you are a teacher come from God. No man can do these miracles that you do except God be with him." This was intended as an introduction, and perhaps to take away some of the intensity coming from Jesus' eyes. Nicodemus had said what he had been afraid to say in public. There was

no doubt that Jesus was someone special. He was a rabbi, a teacher, and he had to be from God, because of his miracles. Nicodemus himself had never seen any of these miracles, but he had heard from credible sources. The one that had first arisen was that Jesus had supposedly taken six waterpots of water at a wedding, and turned them into six waterpots of wine. And the witnesses say that it couldn't have been a trick, because the governor of the wedding had remarked to the groom how it had been the best wine he had ever tasted. Surely this was a sign that this man was from God. Jesus had done other miracles in Jerusalem, and by then gathered a small following. That wasn't so bad, but it was Jesus' teachings that were so radical...

Nicodemus was deciding how to proceed with his next thought, when Jesus broke in upon them and said, "Nicodemus, I am telling you the truth when I say this: Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The statement hit the Jewish ruler as if he had been struck. It was that kind of teaching that made Jesus so dangerous. He was always talking about things that made little sense. It seemed he was always talking in riddles. Jesus was a man who was completely respected, but at times one got the sense that he was so completely different from everyone else. What he said made no sense to Nicodemus.

The Pharisees had no problem thinking about the kingdom of God. Jehovah Himself had promised that one day He would send His Anointed, the Messiah to come and rule the Earth. Prophecy said that someday the Rock cut without hands would come from heaven grow into a mountain, establishing a kingdom, God's kingdom, over the entire world. This was a promise of God, and would certainly take place. The Jews of Jesus' day especially liked that promise, since they were under the oppression of the Roman Empire. Every night the Jews ended their prayer asking for the King of kings to come, who would rid them of Caesars troops, which were an everyday sight in the holy city of Jerusalem. The question before them was this: was Jesus this king? Was he the promised One, the Anointed of God? No, Nicodemus had no problem thinking about the kingdom of God.

But it was the first part of Jesus' statement that confused him. He spoke about being born again. Nicodemus knew as well as anyone else: You are only born once. It would be difficult at best, probably impossible, for a newborn infant to re-enter his mother's womb. The problem was that Jesus had been speaking to adults with this message, and now, even now was speaking to a man who was over fifty years old. His own mother had died ten years earlier, but when she died Nicodemus towered over her.

As he tried to comprehend Jesus' statement, he asked aloud, "How can this be? 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 was a rabbi, and the only way to talk to rabbis was to ask questions. It was a matter of respect, but Nicodemus was truly interested in this rabbi from Nazareth. Could it be that he was the King from God? Nicodemus asked his questions with his eyes turned downward, but now lifted them to meet Jesus' kind eyes. Jesus repeated himself, "I am telling you the truth: except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." But this time Jesus continued, and as he spoke, Nicodemus tried desperately to grasp what he was saying.

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh. And that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't marvel that I tell you: you must be born again. The wind blows where it wants, and you hear the sound, but you can't tell from where it comes. Every one who is born of the Spirit is like that." Jesus finished and sat back. He had a way of taking something utterly confusing and deep and making it seem as if he had just told a children's story. Jesus looked at Nicodemus as if to prod him to understanding. He merely sat there and took in Jesus words.

Nicodemus took each phrase and carefully turned them over in his mind. What did it mean to be born of water and the spirit? Obviously, Jesus wasn't really talking about physical birth. He understood this much. Jesus made a distinction between flesh, or the physical birth, and the spirit, which is not physical. 'Born again' must mean that you must be born of the spirit. The Spirit of God must make you a new type of person, just as if you were re-born. But how did that happen? What did that have to do with God's kingdom on Earth? Wasn't God's Messiah going to set up a physical kingdom? Nicodemus had always understood that God's anointed was going to set up his kingdom, and all those who had been born Jewish would be the loyal subjects. They would be

vindicated for all the centuries of torture, war, and captivity. The Gois, or Gentiles, would be put under their feet to serve them. Nicodemus himself was from a tremendous pedigree. He was sure of a spot in the kingdom, if it was purely physical.

But why, then, was Jesus talking about the Spirit? The Spirit had no place in a physical kingdom on the physical Earth. The two didn't go together. Then, Jesus had talked about the wind. It was true that the wind blew across the plains of Judea, and that no one could tell from where the wind came. That was a question for philosophers, not scientists, and certainly not for theologians like Nicodemus. But Jesus had said, "Born again" then "Born of the Spirit." They must be the same thing, but they couldn't reconcile in his mind. Nicodemus tried his best to understand and formulate a question, but the only words that came out of his mouth were: "How can these things be?" The words flowed forth like water, and he hoped Jesus had felt the force of his unbelief. Jesus was simply mistaken, and could not understand his own words. Nicodemus looked to Jesus' face and saw the reaction. Jesus looked as if he were feigning surprise. He smiled slightly, and admired Nicodemus while he asked his next question:

"Are you a master in Israel, and you don't know these things?" Jesus' eyes were beaming, but Nicodemus could tell that Jesus was not mocking him. Jesus, he could tell, desperately wanted him to understand. But Nicodemus had come tonight with the authority of the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, Israel's ruling power, and had questioned this strange Galilean. They were the authority; Jesus was the newcomer. He was on trial, and he, through wisdom and an authority Nicodemus had never seen before, had turned the tables on him. Nicodemus was now on trial, and Jesus was passing judgment. But, oh, what a judge! Nicodemus could not help but remain silent. Jesus continued: "I am telling you the truth. WE speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen, and you do not receive OUR witness."

Jesus spoke, this time with the weight of a prophet. He seemed to be speaking for himself and for God. He, in fact, was claiming that the words that he had said were as good as if God Himself had come and given the words. It was true, and he had the miracles to back him up. This made Nicodemus' mind reel. He couldn't comprehend what it would mean if this man, probably only thirty years old, was speaking in the place of God. He had said, "You do not receive OUR witness." He was right. They, the Pharisees, had rejected what was plainly in front of them. They couldn't add it all up, of course, but they had denied obvious facts about this wonderful man in favor of weak theories about a poor carpenter. But Jesus was not done speaking:

"If I have told you earthly things, and you don't believe, how will you ever believe me if I tell you of heavenly things?" At the mention of heaven, Nicodemus' eyebrows raised, but Jesus' raised with him and he finished, "No one has been in heaven to see those things, except the one who came down from heaven. I'm talking about the Son of Man, the one who is in heaven." Jesus' wide eyes looked at Nicodemus as he let the words sink in. Nicodemus understood what Jesus was saying. Jesus was saying that he knew about what he was talking about because he had seen them. Jesus knew about the Spirit because he had seen the Spirit. He knew about God's kingdom because he had seen God. He knew about heaven, because he had seen heaven. He had been there. He was from there.

Jesus had called Himself the Son of Man. This was a title used for the Messiah in the Book of Daniel. It was a name for the man who would one day come to Earth from heaven and would speak and work on behalf of God. Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah, and the one who would someday rule over the entire Earth. However, Nicodemus knew that Jesus wasn't talking about defeating Rome. He had made no claims of a physical army. The kingdom he spoke of was spiritual, and so must be entered into spiritually. Nicodemus had a mixture of emotions at this realization. The first was disappointment. He knew at that moment that the Jews would never be free from Rome. The Promised Messiah, if he was Jesus, was making no promise to that effect. Rome would remain in power for the foreseeable future. This was true, and in AD 70, Titus the Roman general broke into Jerusalem, burned the temple, and crucified everyone inside. Israel would not be a nation again until 1948. Jesus had no intention of ruling physically at this time.

The next feeling Nicodemus had was joy. He was in the presence of the Messiah, and he had the opportunity to know for sure that he was at Shalom, or peace with God. Jesus was not there to make Nicodemus look foolish. He was there to help him to understand. He was concerned for Nicodemus. "If it were too late for me," thought Nicodemus, "Jesus wouldn't have told me about the Spirit and the kingdom of God." No, Nicodemus knew that he had a chance to enter heaven with God someday, and that whatever chance he had rested in the man seated in front of him.

But the final feeling Nicodemus had was fear. How would he be able to know how to enter? Would he have to renounce his position on the ruling council? Would he have to stop being a Jew? Surely not, Israel was God's people. He had entered into covenant with Jehovah when he was eight days old at his circumcision. But Jesus seemed to be talking about a new birth and a new way of entering covenant with God. Nicodemus didn't understand it all yet, but he was beginning to realize. Jesus read all of this on his face and continued to speak, slowly and softly, yet firmly and seriously. Nicodemus knew that Jesus was telling him the way that he could enter the Kingdom. This was the way to have peace with God. In the cool, night air, Jesus said:

"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." The words hung in the air and Nicodemus again felt as if he were on the wrong track. He didn't understand. Jesus had referred to a story in their Torah, the Law of Moses. The story was found in the book of the Numbers. The story went like this:

The Israelites had left Egypt and were going to the Promised Land. They had hoped to go through the land of Edom, where there was water, but the Edomites would not let them, and they were forced to go around their land. Because of the additional way in the desert and the lack of water, the people became very angry at God. They started to wonder if God really loved them. "If he did," some said, "We would have water here!" Others said, "How can we trust a God who can't even provide water for us?" The hotter the sun got over their heads and the longer their cattle went without water, the angrier they got against God. But God could hear and He was angry, too, that they didn't believe Him. He had provided for them over and over, and still they doubted whether He could provide for them. Some even wondered if there was a God.

In the camp, suddenly, cries went out, scattered throughout. One man emerged from his tent grasping his leg, "I've been bitten!" he cried, and he fell to the ground. Others emerged from their homes as well, all claiming to have been bitten. It did not take long for the Israelites to find out that snakes had infiltrated their camp. Poisonous snakes were biting people, and they were dying all around. Immediately, the people recognized that it was punishment from the Lord: He had sent the snakes to punish them. Quickly, they went to Moses and said, "Please! Ask God to take these snakes away from us! Tell him we turn from our sin!" Moses did just that, as people died throughout the camp. Finally, God spoke to Moses and said this: "Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live."

God revealed His plan for saving those who had been bitten. He wanted Moses to create a snake made out of brass and put it on a pole. Then he was to put it in the middle of the camp. Moses did so, and explained to the people: "If you have been bitten, look at the brass snake on this pole, and God has promised that you will have life. The snakes will not hurt you." Some went and looked at the snake on the pole, and did not die. Snakes that should have been deadly were now harmless. Some others refused to believe that simply by looking at a brass snake could you be made to live. Those who would not believe, when bitten, died from their bites. Little by little, the snakes subsided and finally disappeared. God had delivered His people from His wrath.

That was the story in the book of the Numbers, but why was Jesus using it now? What did it have to do with Spirit, Messiah, Kingdom, and being born again? Was Jesus saying that Moses would return? Was he saying that the Son of Man would ascend? No, Jesus had said that the Son of Man must be lifted up. The brass serpent

was put on a pole. Jesus was saying that He, the Son of Man, was the serpent on the pole. That meant three things.

One, it meant that those who looked to Jesus could be healed. Only Jesus had spoken of the spiritual, not the physical. Therefore, Jesus was saying that those who looked to Him could be spiritually healed: forgiven. The spiritual snakebite of sin from Satan could be reversed. Two, it meant that belief was the only means of that forgiveness. No one in the story of Numbers had a chance apart from the brass snake, and the only stipulation was that they exercise the faith they had in God and look at the brass snake. Three, it meant that as the serpent was on the pole, Jesus would be put on a pole? But what did that mean? Was it a physical pole or a spiritual pole? As soon as Nicodemus' mind thought, "physical pole," his mind raced to something he'd seen only the day before.

He had been walking out of the city by an old rock quarry and he had seen two young men being crucified. Crucifixion was a punishment that had been introduced to Jerusalem by Rome. It was a cruel method of punishment, where the victim was nailed through his wrists and through his ankles to a wooden pole and crossbeam, and hung there to eventually die. This was the only form of punishment that the Jews found reprehensible. In fact, their Law said that whoever was hanged on a tree was in fact cursed by God. They were proven to be enemies of Jehovah. Surely Jesus did not mean that he himself would be put on a Roman cross. But try as he may, Nicodemus could conceive of no answer for the strange meaning except for the cross of crucifixion.

Jesus now leaned forward in the cold night and whispered to Nicodemus. As Nicodemus heard them, he memorized them, knowing it was important to hear. It was 25 words he knew offered hope. It was 25 words he knew held answers for him for which he had long sought. It was 25 words he needed to hear. He would meditate on them as Jesus continued.

Jesus said, "God did not send His Son into the world in order to condemn this world. He sent him so that the world might believe, through Him. He that does believe in the Son is not condemned. But he that will not believe is condemned already, because he would not believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God." Nicodemus knew that what Jesus said was the truth. All men enter the world condemned. We all choose our way, and like the book of Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way..." But as Nicodemus thought on that verse in Isaiah, he remembered what the other verses around it said. They said, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

Finally it started to make sense to Nicodemus. Jesus was not going to set up a physical Kingdom on Earth, but a spiritual one. He was offering to all mankind the chance to enter into peace with God: forgiveness of sins and healing from spiritual snakebites. But that would mean that Jesus would have to suffer. He would die and be crucified, just as the Scriptures said. But when He died, Nicodemus knew he would take his sin with him. God's wrath would be satisfied with the death of His Son. The punishment that you and I deserve would be put upon the Perfect Son who never sinned. Then each man must make his choice. Would he believe God and trust what Jesus did, or would he not believe God and die in his sins? If you will believe God: repent and trust Jesus, you will be born again, a new person in Jesus. Nicodemus didn't know all of this, but what Jesus had told him was enough.

Nicodemus thanked Jesus for speaking with him, and Jesus bade him a tender farewell. Nicodemus descended the stairs and began his long trek back to his home. The night seemed to have warmed slightly, and Nicodemus was glad to be able to focus on what Jesus had said instead of the cold. He thought about what Jesus said, and those 25 words. He knew that there was something about Jesus, and that he was as authentic as anyone could be, but he still had doubts. But Jesus had made it very clear: "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he

that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Jesus had gone on to say: “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”

Nicodemus knew how much he had loved the darkness of sin in times during his life. He had despised light, exposing light that showed his faults. He looked back and saw the figure kneeling on the roof again, eyes lifted toward the sky. Jesus was special, but was he more than that? Certainly more, he was a prophet. But was he more than that? Nicodemus found himself drawn to that answer, and he decided as he walked that he would utter those 25 words Jesus had told him: “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.”

Friend, this is a story that is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 3. I have added some things to make it come to life, but you can read it for yourself in your Bible. There is an important message there. “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.” That means that you can have eternal life with God in heaven when you die. All you need to do is trust what Christ did on the cross. Believe that Jesus alone paid your price when He died on the cross. The Bible says that whoever believes will not perish, or suffer in that place called Hell.

This was intended to be a message to those of you who do not know Christ as your personal Saviour. It could be you had never heard this news before. It could be that you have heard it and never acted upon it. Remember, the Bible says that whosoever does not believe is condemned already. Later in this same chapter it says: “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” Friend, we don’t want you to ever have to suffer the wrath of God. Neither does God. That is why He sent His only begotten Son Jesus: to die to take your place. Will you trust Him today? If you have any other questions, please don’t hesitate to contact us. You can do so in the following ways:

You can stop by our church building, which is located at 909 W. 8th St., by the softball diamonds. You can call us at 732-3321. You can E-mail us at church@fbcpr.org. That’s CHURCH at F B C P R dot O R G. Or you can log on to our website, which is www.fbcpr.org. If you would like to have a copy of this broadcast, either in audio or transcript form, you can find it on our website tomorrow. I would like to once again invite you ladies who are interested to our ladies Bible study. It meets every Monday for the next several weeks at our church building from 11:45 to 12:30. Feel free to bring a lunch with you and study the book of Ruth with us. Please join us again next week for the Way of Truth Radio Broadcast, brought to you by the First Baptist Church of Park Rapids, Minnesota.