

The New Birth

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CHAPTER SIX

THE FOUNDATION OF THE NEW BIRTH

"Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of 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 received 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. And 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" (John 3:9-15).

The preceding studies in this third chapter of the Gospel of John impress the reader with the importance of the New Birth, and unfold something of its nature and mystery. In these studies the reader has felt, though he may not have perceived something of the increasing wonder in the mind and heart of this master in Israel as he listened intently to this strange and wonderful teacher from GOD. The reason the reader has felt this increasing wonder is because he himself, just like Nicodemus, has been feasting on this mysterious and wonderful and soul-stirring manna from Heaven.

By this time, the mind of Nicodemus is satisfied as to the reality and need of the New Birth. But his heart is not at rest.

So the almost inarticulate cry of the heart forces its way to his lips, and he interrupts with another question. It is the very question that has been forming itself in the mind of the reader as he has followed carefully the progressive reasoning of the great teacher. In fact, it is the question which issues from every sin-sick heart that suddenly realizes its utter deficiency in the presence of His all-sufficiency and longs to drink of His fulness.

It is this question that finally brings the teacher in Israel and the teacher from GOD heart to heart. Mysteriously but methodically these two great personalities have gradually drawn together. At first they were as two men who met for the first time and found themselves face to face. The startling admission of Nicodemus was an approach. But the amazing declaration of CHRIST suddenly swept away any psychological barriers and these two men were mind to mind, plunged in deepest thought. The issues deepened as they turned over and over the greatest

problem of the universe, the problem of personality. Now they are ready to move one step nearer, the last and final step, when two hearts beat as one.

They have now reached the moral and spiritual center of the universe, the heart.

Satisfied intellectual curiosity constitutes illumination and may serve as a means to an end. But in itself it does not produce experiential operation in life. It is the moral and spiritual center that must be touched in order to convert information into experience and produce transformation in life. With the skill that only a teacher from GOD could exercise, CHRIST now besieges the citadel of the human heart. The heart of GOD is seen seeking His own, and the heart of man is beginning to pulsate with life breathed from Heaven. Within the sanctuary of the heart a transaction is made that issues in the communication of new life.

In this study there are three movements of thought. The first is a plea for information concerning the process of new birth (9). The second is the preparation of Nicodemus for the answer that will be given (10-12). The third is the provision made for men to experience the New Birth (13-15).

I. THE PLEA FOR INFORMATION CONCERNING THE PROCEDURE OF THE NEW BIRTH

"Nicodemus answered and said unto him. How can these things be?" (John 3:9).

This is now the second time Nicodemus has interrupted with the use of the word "**how**". In this instance as in the preceding one (4), he is emphasizing process. But now it is not a mere satisfaction of mental curiosity as in the former instance. Now he desires information of process in order to personal experience.

1. The central idea in this question concerns a change of condition.

In the English text it is the word "**be**". "**How can these things be?**" that is, "how can this become," or "come to pass." It is the usual word in the Greek to express a change of condition. This is the word used in John 1:14 with reference to the incarnation of CHRIST. "**And the word was made flesh.**" In this instance CHRIST, who existed only in the condition of GOD, experienced a change of condition, taking on human flesh, so that by incarnation He came to exist also in the condition of man.

In the context at hand the verb "**be**" or "*become*" has reference to one who has only the nature of man, but who by virtue of the experience of New Birth receives in addition the nature of GOD. In this manner such an one experiences a change of condition. The reception of the moral and spiritual nature of GOD through the experience of New Birth is a crisis just like the physical birth. This is indicated by the tense (aorist) of the verb, indicating that Nicodemus was clear at this point, even in the way he asked his question. Just as physical birth is a crisis, and not a progressive change or period of growth, so he understands the New Birth to be a crisis experience and not a progressive change or period of growth. Growth always follows birth. But Nicodemus is not now concerned with that, but rather with that crisis by which one receives the new life.

2. The constituent elements of this change are expressed by the phrase, "these things," in this question.

When Nicodemus asked, "**How can these things be?**" he certainly had in mind the things that JESUS had already uttered with such telling force in the course of this discussion. Every added detail had produced increasing amazement in Nicodemus, and now he makes reference to them in this phrase.

To enumerate them, they are these:

- first, a birth, a new beginning of some kind;
- second, a birth from above, one that is supernatural in origin;
- third, a birth from above, the efficient instrument for which is the water, a symbol of something that cleanses;
- fourth, a birth from above, the life-giving agent of which is the Spirit of GOD.

It is also a reasonable conclusion that Nicodemus is asking about the constituent elements of New Birth, keeping in mind the hedge CHRIST erected in verses 6-8 to protect this great truth. He is keeping in mind that the end-product of spirit must operate on the level of spirit; that a supernatural life must come from a supernatural origin; that a spiritual birth reaches beyond complete human understanding; that such a birth can, nevertheless, be examined as to the reality of its effect in human life.

With all these things in mind Nicodemus is inquiring as to the method by which one can experience these things in his life.

3. The course of action necessary, or the order of events necessary for this change of condition is the precise intent of this question.

How is it possible for these things to come to pass? The emphasis once more is upon the word "**how**." It seems quite evident that Nicodemus is convinced from the teaching of CHRIST that such an event, a birth, ushering one into a new condition is possible, though its possibility depends upon GOD. But even such a change does not happen without following an orderly sequence of events. Every effect must have a sufficient cause. He is sufficiently acquainted with the Old Testament to know that this is true.

The announcement and explanation of JESUS has thrilled the soul of Nicodemus. His vision has been enlarged to the infinite possibilities arising out of it. His sincerity has led him to think of this own need and to desire the experience for himself. But he is confronted with the problem of "**how**." Knowing all men, JESUS does not fail to recognize the yearning in this man's heart, and now, that this man has expressed the deepest desire of his heart, namely, to know the method by which this can be effected in a life, JESUS does not hesitate to respond with the answer.

II. THE PREPARATION OF NICODEMUS FOR THE ANSWER TO HIS HEART-FELT APPEAL

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of 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?" (John 3:10-12).

This passage consists of a gentle but firm reprimand for the failures of Nicodemus and the group whom he represents. This was needed in the light of the fact that JESUS had things to say to him that would make a demand upon his faith far beyond the things he had just discussed. The things CHRIST was about to tell him would call for faith that would produce in him almost a total revolution in his thinking.

In the first place he would be amazed to learn that certain Old Testament Scriptures meant more than what he had originally thought.

And in the second place, he would learn the meaning of other Old Testament Scriptures that would place a strain upon his faith almost to the breaking point.

1. In the first place CHRIST reproved Nicodemus for not recognizing these things in the Old Testament Scriptures.

"Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" (John 3:10). The intent of this question was to chide him for his intellectual ignorance. This is a rhetorical question the answer to which is obvious. Yes, he was the most popular teacher in Israel, and he did not know these things. He had achieved professional renown as a scholar in the Old Testament Scriptures, but he was ignorant of the existence of Scriptures which speak authoritatively upon the subject of New Birth. The vast learning of this man had given him a place in the estimation of his own people that set him aside from all other scholars of his day into a class all by himself. He was called **"teacher."** But his scholarly excellence still had not qualified him to recognize and understand that GOD had already spoken on the most momentous issue of life, the New Birth.

More than 700 years before GOD had spoken through the mouth of His prophet Isaiah, **"For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring"** (Isaiah 44:3).

During those dark days when Nebuchadnezzar was already moving in upon the Southern Kingdom to lay it waste, through the mouth of the weeping prophet, GOD said, **"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord; But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more"** (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Far across the desert to the east in the land of Babylon, Ezekiel found himself among the

captives of the early deportation. Even among them there were no signs of turning to GOD. When every vestige of hope was gone, a message of hope came from the Lord to this faithful prophet. **"For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them"** (Ezekiel 36:24-27).

How any scholar, much less one with the professional acclaim of Nicodemus, could have missed this message of hope so clearly stated in the Old Testament Scriptures, cannot be debated here. But it is clear that CHRIST reproved this ignorance and intimates later that it was wilful. Nicodemus must acknowledge his guilt if he is to be prepared for a greater message after which he is now seeking.

2. In the second place CHRIST hastens to reprove Nicodemus for not receiving the testimony of those who have borne witness.

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness" (John 3:11).

This is clearly directed at the moral indisposition of Nicodemus and the group whom he represented. The reader should be careful to note that though CHRIST is addressing Nicodemus, the reproof is for a larger group. "Ye" is plural and includes Nicodemus but it reaches out to that larger body of people whom he represented. This group undoubtedly included in large part the leaders of the people of Israel down across the years.

By using the plural pronoun "we," CHRIST was identifying himself with a group, that illustrious line of prophets who had served as GOD's mouth-piece to his people for more than 1500 years. What they knew they spoke; and what they had seen, to that they bore testimony among the people. But the rank and file of its leadership had turned a deaf ear. The experiences of Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were now being repeated all over again in the experiences of CHRIST. Nicodemus knew only too well that this was true. Aside from himself, there was only one other in the ruling body in Israel who showed any disposition to treat with honesty and sincerity the message JESUS brought. They had rejected the testimony of John the Baptist (Matthew 21:25). They would reject the testimony of CHRIST.

Many years later the apostle John wrote in confirmation of this statement of JESUS and linked it with the experience of Isaiah and the prophets.

"But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them . . . For they loved the praise of men more than the

praise of God" (John 12:37-40, 43).

The effect of this reproof is undoubtedly intended to clarify the thinking of Nicodemus.

Intellectual ignorance is indeed a fault, when it exists in the atmosphere of knowledge. But there is something far more blameworthy, and that is ignorance that persists in the presence of knowledge. There is one explanation for such a condition and that is a moral determination to close one's eyes to truth. Natural limitations may explain ignorance, but for wilful ignorance there is no excuse. And now that CHRIST is among them, He who is the truth, and the leadership of Israel is not now receiving the truth in Him, they are culpable beyond measure. Surely this word will arrest Nicodemus, and prepare him for the larger revelation that is to come.

3. In the third place CHRIST reproved Nicodemus for not responding to the things revealed in the Old Testament.

"If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" (John 3:12).

In these words CHRIST is striking at the very root of the difficulty, the spiritual inability of men to apprehend spiritual things by means of unaided human powers. Again CHRIST is addressing Nicodemus, but enlarging His words to include the entire group represented by Nicodemus.

The identity of the earthly things and the heavenly things have mystified most people who read this passage of Scripture.

Many suggestions have been made, but the best one identifies earthly things with regeneration about which CHRIST has just been speaking, and the heavenly things with redemption about which He will shortly speak. Regeneration or New Birth is something that comes from above but it is experienced among men in the earth. It is earthly only in the sense that it takes place in the earth. From time immemorial, men have believed that there must be some supernatural influence from GOD among men experienced through secondary means. Even the Jews believed this. But the error of Nicodemus and his group lay in the fact that they did not believe in the immediate entrance of the Spirit of GOD into men.

But with heavenly things the matter is entirely different. That these things are heavenly seems apparent from the way CHRIST speaks in verse 13. Three times He mentions Heaven. Verses 13-15 gather about the incarnation of CHRIST and the supreme event which took place at Calvary. This is the most unthinkable of all things. It involves the permanent incarnation of the second person of the Godhead in flesh. As God-man He must finally die and rise and ascend to Heaven. Every step of this person from Heaven to earth and back again runs contrary to every known principle operating on the plane of deity and on the plane of humanity. These heavenly things constitute a stumbling for all men.

If men cannot believe that GOD will send His Spirit to impart life and powers to men in the moral sense, then how can they believe that all the fulness of the Godhead will dwell bodily in man; that this fulness in man will suffer death; that this fulness in man which suffered death will rise from among the dead and take a position in the heavens far above all intelligences on the

plane of deity. Nicodemus must understand that "**the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned**" (I Corinthians 2:14). "**As it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit**" (I Corinthians 2:9-10).

III. THE PROVISION MADE FOR MEN TO EXPERIENCE THE NEW BIRTH

"And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And 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" (John 3:13-15).

After delivering the reproof for intellectual ignorance, moral indisposition, and spiritual inability, CHRIST does not linger, but proceeds immediately to the answer which Nicodemus sought. He assumes that Nicodemus is properly prepared for revelation concerning heavenly things. If any portion of this chapter can be described as more important than any other, then it must be said that this is the most important. Herein is the record of divine provision for New Birth. Here is the one and only way men can enter into this experience. This describes the heavenly drama enacted in order that men might have immediate experience with GOD.

1. The central figure in Heaven's drama is the Son of man.

"And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man" (13). The KJV adds "**which is in heaven.**" As a statement of fact, this is true.

The expression, "**Son of man,**" is the favorite way CHRIST referred to Himself. It appears 85 times in the New Testament and 83 of them were from the lips of the Lord JESUS. This term does not imply mere humanity. Any such claim would have branded CHRIST as mentally unbalanced. It was only too evident to all men of that day that CHRIST was perfectly human. Nor has the passing of the centuries changed the evaluation of most men. This expression was intended to define the humanity of CHRIST in a sense like no other of the sons of men. This Son of man is the one of whom Daniel wrote, "**I saw in the night visions, and behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven**" (Daniel 7:13). This one is altogether human, but He is also altogether divine, for He is clothed with garments of deity. The clouds of Heaven are His robes of majesty. In these clouds of glory He comes to serve as the Mediatorial king over the Kingdom GOD establishes in the earth.

In the words of CHRIST recorded in verse thirteen, the heavenly drama is drawn from its beginning to its end, and is described as though it were already a completely finished performance. No man has ascended up to Heaven, but the one who came down from Heaven, even the Son of Man who is now in Heaven. Except for the descent from Heaven, the rest is all future to Nicodemus. To John as he writes it is complete. And to CHRIST it is complete. For He can speak of the things that are not as though they were.

2. The central fact in this heavenly drama is the event that took place on Calvary's brow.

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (14).

It is the expression "**lifted up**" that arrests the attention. Out of the entire sweep in this heavenly drama from Heaven to earth and back again to Heaven, this one event is selected for emphasis in this discussion of the New Birth. This event is declared to be something performed in the same manner as the lifting up of a serpent in the wilderness by Moses. The precise significance therefore cannot be understood apart from that event some 1500 years before.

A discouraged people in the wilderness spoke against GOD and Moses. The crime was of such dimensions that GOD sent fiery serpents among the people and many of them died. This brought the people to their knees and they came to Moses confessing that they had sinned, pleading that Moses would pray to GOD to take away the serpents. As instructed of the Lord a serpent of brass was lifted up upon a pole, and any serpent-bitten man could look upon it and live (Numbers 21:4-9). In this same manner the Son of man must be lifted up. As an innocent brazen serpent became the object of judgment in the stead of the serpent of sin within each man, in the same manner must the innocent Son of man stand judgment for those who were bitten with that Old Serpent and justly deserve to die.

The thought is unthinkable. It has never been reconcilable in the minds of men operating on the level of the natural, human, and unholy. That another can pay the penalty for the sinner is beyond human invention. That an innocent person could perform this feat is more preposterous. That a perfect man must intervene in behalf of sinning men is insufferable blasphemy. That a divine-human, innocent person must substitute for the sinner is the product of a feeble mind. Nevertheless, this is the declaration made by CHRIST to this teacher in Israel of long ago.

3. The central feature of this heavenly drama is the result of all this in behalf of men who are willing to believe in CHRIST.

This is it, "**That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life**" (John 3:15).

In this statement CHRIST is insisting that men must identify themselves with CHRIST who is suffering judgment for sin. His suffering is not for His own sins. He has none. But He is suffering for sin. It is the sin of guilty men. The sinner must recognize that this is for his sin, which has shut him out from GOD and every positive blessing He has to bestow.

If the sinner recognizes all this, and then is willing to acknowledge this and appropriate the judgment upon CHRIST in his own stead, this person shall not perish. He cannot perish for the judgment was fulfilled in CHRIST, and GOD will not exact penalty twice. The moral barrier which hid the face of GOD from the sinner is now rolled away. The one thing that stood between a holy GOD and an unholy sinner and prevented GOD from entering into immediate relation with him is now removed forever.

For such an one there will follow immediately the experience of New Birth. In CHRIST he shall have eternal life. This is the life of GOD Himself communicated through the operation of the

Holy Spirit. Believing the word of CHRIST's death on the Cross cleansed him from the penalty of sin so that he could not perish. Immediately the Spirit of GOD performed the divine act of communicating eternal life in the event of New Birth.

At last the process has been explained to Nicodemus.

He now knows how it is possible for these things to come to pass. Until the moral problem of sin was settled at Calvary, GOD could not minister the New Birth to men. Until men are willing to acknowledge that GOD dealt with sin in CHRIST, no search will ever reveal the way to New Birth. Until each man is willing to confess and appropriate the judgment of his own sin in CHRIST at the Cross, he cannot enter into the family of GOD by New Birth.

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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