

The New Birth

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CHAPTER TWO

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW BIRTH

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

"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: 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. 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 2:23-3:3).

Christianity is not mere religion. Christianity has a religion, but in itself it is not a religion. Religion is essentially the forms in which a creed, and the life it represents expresses itself. These forms include the place of meeting, the groups that gather, the clothing worn, the order of service, the statements of faith, the organization, the officers, the pattern of instruction, the postures assumed, the forms of speech, and many more.

As such, religion is a perfect refuge for the flesh. There the flesh feels perfectly at home.

- religion is external and does not expose the flesh.
- religion is ceremonial and does not disturb the flesh.
- religion is superficial and does not indict the flesh.
- religion is ritual, thus providing an area in which the flesh can exercise itself and lull itself to sleep.

CHRIST came into a world which had reached the peak of perfection in religion. Judaism, a God-given religion, though intended to represent life in relation to GOD, had been emptied of its spiritual significance by the religious sects of Jewry and had become a barren waste of forms (Matthew 15:7-9). This is what CHRIST confronted when He came. And immediately He found Himself at cross-purposes with it at every turn. This was the condition and character of all the religions of the Middle East, and Judaism generally was no different. Almost from the very beginning Christianity too began to slip in the direction of mere religion.

After 1900 years Christianity generally has become very much like Judaism when JESUS came. It is asserted that more than one hundred million of our population are Christians. And at every turn we are reminded that religion is on the increase, this increase to be understood as Christianity. Upon several occasions the writer saw the sign along the road,

"Ye must be born again -
Go to Church."

Precisely what was this sign intended to mean? I do not know. It is true that there may be a connection between the New Birth and going to church, though this is not necessarily so. But certainly they are not the same thing. The writer can think of at least four possible explanations.

- (1) People often experience the New Birth when they attend public church services.
- (2) People who experience the New Birth usually want to gather with others in public worship.
- (3) People may expect to experience the New Birth as a result of attending public services. And to these might be added the fourth,
- (4) People who attend the public services of the church are actually experiencing the New Birth.

Assuming that the one who erected those signs understood the truth, perhaps one or both of the first two suggestions were in his mind. But the facts are that the rank and file of humanity gravitate to the last two explanations, and thus the New Birth is reduced to mere religion.

How pertinent, then, to our times is the teaching of the third chapter of John's Gospel. In the conversation between CHRIST and Nicodemus the real issue is brought into focus. In the person of Nicodemus all humanity is confronted anew with this primary and fundamental relationship to GOD. Apart from the New Birth there is no such thing as spiritual life. It is therefore hoped that every reader of these meditations will search his own heart and experience to determine whether he is truly born again or merely going through the motions of religion and thus blithely deceiving himself.

In this study three matters of importance emerge from the text. First, the reason for the Nicodemus story appearing at this point in the Gospel of John; second, a review of the position and character of the man Nicodemus as set forth in the Gospel of John; and, third, the real reason for Nicodemus making the night mission to CHRIST.

I. THE REASON FOR THE NICODEMUS STORY AT THIS POINT IN THE GOSPEL

Three reasons have been given for the appearance of this story at this point in the Gospel: (1) chronology of events, (2) importance of the event, (3) appropriateness to the purpose of the writer. It is very possible that the full truth is to be found in the combination of all three, for these suggestions are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

1. Chronologically, it is declared, this story comes at this point in the experiences of CHRIST.

But this can hardly explain in full why John recorded this event at this point. For the experiences of CHRIST were numerous, so multiple that John had to exercise great care in the selection of

material in order to compress the wealth of material within the limits of his Gospel (John 21:25).

2. The importance of this event is another suggestion that has been offered as a possible explanation.

This assumes as fact that John selected only the most important events in the life and ministry of CHRIST for his Gospel. On the premise that this event was more meaningful than others, it was therefore introduced at this point in the narrative. As it stands, this can hardly be conclusive. Surely there is more to be said to explain its appearance here than its mere importance. This event is important, as all must agree, but even important events are introduced into the narrative on the basis of some guiding principle or controlling purpose.

3. The appropriateness of this story, as an explanation, seems to be by far the best, and includes the meanings already suggested.

In the narration of events, according to this explanation, the story belongs here because it not only happened at this point of time, but it also fits in with the purpose of the writer and the movement of thought.

We must go back to chapter two to pick up the thread of discourse. There he learns that the crowds were enamored of the miracles JESUS performed, and thus led to believe on Him. **"But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man"** (John 2:23-25). **"There was a man of the Pharisees"** (John 3:1).

This man Nicodemus is thus set in contrast, at least mild contrast, with the people CHRIST confronted at the Passover. Since this is true, there is reason to make a more careful scrutiny of Nicodemus in order to observe the particulars in which he stood in contrast with them. To them JESUS did not commit himself. To Nicodemus He did commit himself. Only by following this procedure will it be possible to appreciate fully the man Nicodemus and the message JESUS unfolded to him.

II. A RESEARCH INTO THE POSITION AND CHARACTER OF NICODEMUS

The position and prominence of this man first comes into view and then his character and integrity.

1. In examining the position and prominence of Nicodemus, it is to be noted that the text asserts three things.

The first two of these is stated by John in verse 1. The third is an evaluation made by CHRIST in the course of the conversation (10).

(1) Nicodemus was a Pharisee, therefore a man who had religious connections.

It has been a perennial habit among expositors and preachers to hold Nicodemus up to ridicule because he was a Pharisee. But it is a safe conclusion that almost without exception, most

expositors of this passage who are willing to approach it in all seriousness would have been Pharisees had they been living at the time of Nicodemus.

- they would not have been Sadducees; they were the rationalists of the day.
- they would not have been Essenes; they were the ascetics of the day.
- they would not have been Herodians; they were the worldlings of the day.

They most certainly would have been Pharisees.

It was no mean distinction to be a Pharisee. Pharisees were the strictest religious sect in Israel. And they had an illustrious past. They came into existence during those dark days in Israel when her fortunes were threatened by the infiltration of Greek culture from without and by the forces of disintegration and decay from within.

At that tragic moment in history there rose up in Israel a group who declared:

- that they believed in the Old Testament law;
- that they believed Israel was the chosen people of GOD;
- that they believed Israel had high destiny in the plan of GOD, and
- that they were willing to lay down their lives for Israel and her cause.

Humanly speaking, it was a group like this that preserved Israel during those dark and hazardous times.

It is true, that the farther one is removed from the origin of a movement, the more apt he is to note that people have lost the viewpoint of the founders. That is certainly true in our own nation. And it was certainly true in Israel. Phariseeism degenerated through the centuries until in the days of Nicodemus there were few who longer held the viewpoint of the founders. But there were some who did, and among them, most certainly, was this man.

(2) Nicodemus was also a ruler.

This meant that he had *political connections*. Being a ruler, he belonged to the supreme governing body in Israel, the Sanhedrim. This body was made up of 72 men out of the commonwealth of Israel and was constituted of three classes: the chief priests, professional men such as scribes and lawyers, and the elders of the chief families in Israel. Nicodemus undoubtedly had his place on this council by virtue of being a member of the professional class, namely, a teacher.

His place on the Sanhedrim gave him the same distinction in Israel as membership in the Congress of the United States would in our own nation. This set him aside from the rank and file in Israel as a leader in his own right and therefore worthy of the high honor of sitting in the ruling body in Israel.

(3) In addition to his religious and political connections, he had civic connections.

Nicodemus was also a teacher. The Lord JESUS singled him out as such. "**Art thou a master of**

Israel . . .?" (10). It is evident that this man had reached the top in his profession, having distinguished himself as a man of erudition, insight, and experience. This gave him the right to speak the final word in all matters pertaining to the understanding and interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Here was a man of deep and sincere conviction, a man of honorable political connections, and a man of wide learning and broad experience. Yet it was to a man like this that CHRIST addressed an amazing statement, "**Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God**" (3).

2. A glance at the character and integrity of this man further sets him aside from those people at the Passover.

(1) Here is a man of high character.

He was not fickle and vain as the crowd at the Passover. They were attracted to the Lord JESUS because of the glamorous and the spectacular. They believed on Him "**when they saw the miracles which he did**" (23). "**But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men**" (24). "**There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus**" (1), one totally different from them to whom JESUS did commit Himself.

(2) Nicodemus was also a man of deep conviction.

He was not carried away with what is merely apparent or on the surface. All that glitters is not gold. Miracles of however spectacular nature were not ends in themselves. If there was anything about them of any moment, then they must point to something deeper. And being a man of deep and lasting convictions, he was not to be swept along with the crowd, even by a miracle worker.

(3) He also exhibited the qualities of clear thinking.

Unlike the crowd he was reserving conclusions until he had more facts and time for deliberation. The pattern of the crowd is to conclude that things have an inherent relation simply because they appear together. Nicodemus had long since learned that this may be only accidental. And if one is to discover proper relationships, he must look farther and deeper.

(4) Along with this quality there goes wise caution.

"**The same came to Jesus by night**" (2). This statement appears three times in the Gospel of John (3:2; 7:50; 19:39). Its usage indicates that it identifies Nicodemus and singles him out from other men who bore that name. In this passage it records the fact that Nicodemus came to JESUS by night. On the fact of the statement itself it cannot be construed to mean anything more than that Nicodemus came at night time to see JESUS. But in spite of this fact, this statement has been used regularly to depreciate Nicodemus. While it is a fair inference that his coming by night did not necessarily mean that he was slinking fearfully through the darkness, the rank and file of expositors have insisted on putting this interpretation upon the statement. But another conclusion can be drawn.

Nicodemus was a fairly old man (cf. 3:4). Years of experience and wide learning had taught him

a few things, especially in his relationship to the Sanhedrim. His place on the Sanhedrim imposed special responsibilities. As a leader he must exercise wisdom and caution in all that he did. Though irresistibly drawn to this great teacher from GOD, he must exercise care lest he mislead the people. Once he had opportunity to investigate and verify the identity and genuineness of this teacher, he could then come out into the open and endorse him. But until then, he must exercise wise caution. Coming by night exhibited his caution and wisdom, as well as providing an opportunity for investigation.

(5) It is now in order to state that Nicodemus was a man of great courage.

Once the expositor establishes the fact the Nicodemus used the cover of darkness because of fear, he then makes the bold declaration that Nicodemus was a great coward. But this was not necessarily true. In fact there was evidence to the contrary.

Two years later when the Sanhedrim had passed sentence against CHRIST and were then closing in upon their victim, Nicodemus demonstrated his courage. The officers sent by the Sanhedrim to apprehend CHRIST returned without Him. Their reason, "**Never man spake like this man**" (John 7:45-46). This aroused the members of the Sanhedrim and provided the occasion for Nicodemus to make his own position clear. "**Nicodemus saith unto them, he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them, Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?**" (John 7:47-51). Nicodemus could not help but know what would happen. The deep-seated hatred of this group of men would be turned upon him. And it was (John 7:52).

Less than a year later, the crucial moment came. Humanly speaking, the Sanhedrim had gained its desperate end. CHRIST had been betrayed into their hands. Courts instituted for justice viciously condemned an innocent man. And then, suffering ignominy such as no other person, CHRIST died alone, even His own disciples having fled.

In this hour of darkness and tragedy, Nicodemus dared to join with another member of the Sanhedrim to give tender and decent burial to CHRIST, and this at the risk of their own lives (John 19:38-40). Knowing the irresistible pressures at a time like this, and certainly Nicodemus was sufficiently aware of them, it is inconceivable that Nicodemus could be anything other than a man of great courage.

(6) It follows, then, that this man was one possessing a sensitive conscience.

Here was a man who must follow the truth where it leads. The truth indicated that here was a teacher from GOD with a fresh message from Heaven (Ch. 3). The truth demanded that Nicodemus insist upon justice being done (Ch. 7). The truth of CHRIST's innocence induced Nicodemus to risk his life to provide decent burial (Ch. 19). CHRIST undoubtedly recognized this in Nicodemus "**because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man; for he knew what was in man**" (John 2:24-25).

This evaluation placed Nicodemus in bold contrast with the crowds at the Passover. To them "**Jesus did not commit himself**" (John 2:24). But to Nicodemus He did commit himself in the most wonderful way. In this committal of truth to Nicodemus there unfolds the most intimate and

penetrating discussion of the New Birth to be found in the Bible. There is therefore reason to believe this message was received in an honest and good heart and in due time brought forth fruit (Luke 8:15).

(7) Finally, it is proper to assert that Nicodemus was a man of amazing conquest.

His name is a compound Greek word meaning "*conqueror of the people*." The name may not have any significance in itself, though names of that day were often intended to convey meaning other than mere identification. On the other hand the amazing achievements of this life find no better caption than this name. The intensive disposition of this man led him into the strictest religious sect in Israel. It was this disposition that produced in him diligence and energy for study so that he finally reached the top in his profession. His religious connections and professional achievements qualified him for membership in the ruling body in Israel. And it was undoubtedly his insatiable thirst for knowledge of GOD's will and purpose that sent him out that night to talk with JESUS.

No better time could have been selected. The day was crowded with personal responsibilities in his professional and political career. And JESUS was thronged with multitudes, which made him almost inaccessible. When the shades of night had fallen, the crowds dispersed, and the duties of the day were laid aside. It was then he could reach JESUS and engage in an intimate heart to heart discussion, of some of the things that the teaching of JESUS had aroused in his mind.

3. There is no doubt that there was the prospective Christian in this man Nicodemus.

Seldom are all the qualities noted above found in one man. In position, a Pharisee, a ruler, and a teacher; in person, a man of high character, deep conviction, clear thinking, wise caution, great courage, sensitive conscience, and amazing conquest, this was a remarkable man.

- in his first appearance in the narrative, he is seen seeking the truth (Ch. 3).
- the next occasion of introduction into the story, he is defending the truth (Ch. 7).
- and finally as the story of his life closes, so far as the sacred record is concerned, he is seen following the truth (Ch. 19).

As great and as wonderful as this man was, to him JESUS had to say, "**Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God**" (John 3:3).

III. THE REAL REASON FOR THE MISSION OF NICODEMUS TO CHRIST

The Biblical account does not assign any reason for the mission of Nicodemus to CHRIST. It merely states the fact that "**The same came to Jesus by night**" and addressed him (3:2). This arouses the curiosity of every reader and provokes all sorts of speculation. The fact that the text does not state a reason does not mean that Nicodemus did not state his reason. The silence of the text might only mean that the reason was not deemed important by the writer.

On the other hand, if the reader is to assume that the record substantially represents the encounter, then it appears as though Nicodemus did not have an opportunity to express the reason for his coming. In any case, it is still valid that Nicodemus had a reason for coming.

1. Many suggestions have been made to explain this mission of Nicodemus.

Some have thought that he came to act as a spy for the Sanhedrim. This was an effort to verify any public statements CHRIST had made. But the suggestion seems utterly untenable in the light of the succeeding conversation. Others have suggested that he was in search of any new teaching CHRIST might have. Since Nicodemus acknowledged him as a teacher come from GOD, perhaps this was in his mind. This is not wholly impossible especially if it is related to some specific teaching. It has been further suggested that Nicodemus was in search of the way of salvation. If it were not for the fact that Nicodemus was probably not sensitive to any such need, this might be a plausible suggestion. Akin to this, it has been advocated, that he was seeking further information about the New Birth. Of course, this suggestion grows out of the conversation about the New Birth, and as a suggestion has become the most popular of all the reasons assigned.

2. Of the many suggested explanations, there are two that seem to be the most possible solutions.

The clue for the one appears in the address of Nicodemus, "**for no man can do these miracles which thou doest, except God be with him**" (3:2). At this early period in the ministry of CHRIST, this would have been significant to a teacher like Nicodemus as he reflected upon the relation of miracles to the coming kingdom. At a later period the thought occurred to many others, "**When Christ cometh, will he do more miracles than these which this man hath done?**" (John 7:31). It is possible then, that Nicodemus sought information as to the precise method by which the revolution was to be precipitated in the ushering in of the Kingdom. This is most attractive as a solution, except for the fact that it almost assumes that Nicodemus knows more about the Kingdom than he really does, and that he apprehends in some small way the identity of CHRIST, which it is quite clear he does not.

3. The most likely solution draws its clue from verse three.

JESUS declared that "**Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**"

The expression "**kingdom of God**" implies that Nicodemus had sufficient knowledge to know what JESUS meant. If JESUS meant the well known Kingdom clearly set forth in the Old Testament and was here making clear reference to it, then Nicodemus must have come to CHRIST with some burning question for which he sought information. Something in the previous ministry of CHRIST must have provoked that question.

When John the Baptist went forth to herald the approach of CHRIST, his message was "**Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (Matthew 3:2). This could not have helped but excite the attention of this ruler in Israel, especially since he was a most proficient student of Old Testament prophecy. Six months later "**Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (Matthew 4:17). When this reached the ears of this man, he was now thoroughly aroused. The attestation of miracles to the teaching ministry of CHRIST awakened Nicodemus to the fact that here was a teacher from GOD. His message was the latest addition from Heaven. If the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, he must reach him in some way and be more thoroughly instructed as to the time this new order would be ushered in.

4. At last he reached CHRIST by night and was about to propose his question when he was confronted with the most important matter.

"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom or God" (3:3).

Time is indeed a most important matter, but there is something even more important than the time this kingdom is to be set up. It is the qualification for entrance. Unlike any other kingdom, this kingdom cannot be experienced except there is an intrinsic and essential change in the nature of the man who expects to enjoy this kingdom.

JESUS knew what was upon this man's heart, and He ignored it. As a student of prophecy, Nicodemus was earnestly seeking to understand the signs of the times and to know the seasons. But in all his earnestness, along with the people of his day, he had completely overlooked the most important thing of all in the teaching of the Kingdom, namely, that it would be realized only by people who had experienced a New Birth.

JESUS knew that this man was a true representative of the prevailing thought of the day. He was the most prominent teacher of his day in Israel. This meant that his opinions on the interpretation of Old Testament truth relating to the Kingdom were accepted as authoritative.

On the earthly level, kingdoms changed by revolution, reorganization, and reformation. And these changes always took place in the externals. It never occurred to them that the Kingdom of GOD would also include a change of internals,-regeneration of nature in those who constitute the subjects of that kingdom.

JESUS therefore proposed the solution to the basic need of all kingdoms, which element will not be absent in the Kingdom or GOD. Men, all men, able and good men, if they expect to experience the Kingdom of GOD, must become "**partakers of the divine nature**" (II Peter 1:4). This means that they will have experienced an operation in which the essential life of GOD has been communicated to them, and as a result they possess "**all things that pertain to life and godliness**" (II Peter 1:3).

In the words of CHRIST to Nicodemus, they "**must be born again**" (John 3:7).

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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