

The New Birth

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CHAPTER THREE

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE NEW BIRTH

"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 3:1-3).

In the former study we were introduced to a man with all the qualifications of a great and good citizen, one whom any community would be glad to own. Yet here was a man, who, under the scrutinizing eye of Deity, was found to be like all other men in one respect. He lacked the one necessary thing to qualify him for entrance into and experience of the Kingdom of GOD. Here was intellect and character at its best, so far as the natural man is concerned, but still a man deficient in that which is essential for entrance into the Kingdom of GOD.

In this study we shall look at this man with more careful scrutiny than in the previous meditation. His meeting with JESUS was strange and singular. This master teacher in Israel had sought out the wandering peasant from Galilee. And he had done so after the shades of night had fallen. The meeting must have made an indelible impression upon the apostle John, and with the artistry of an eyewitness some of the details are woven unobtrusively into the account.

For one thing, this man trampled under foot a whole series of barriers in order to get to JESUS. The urgency of his mission impelled him to surmount every obstacle that stood in the way. He stepped outside the realm of Pharisaic isolationism to get to JESUS. He descended from the perch of political prestige to reach him. He trampled under foot professional pride. And he completely ignored the customary proprieties of time and place. Though the labors of the day were over, he made use of the night for prolonged personal consultation. And he did an unheard of thing when he condescended to seek out JESUS amidst the plebian society where JESUS was staying.

We see them now, as John saw them, face to face. First impressions are often lasting impressions, and they are often true ones. At least that was true upon this occasion. JESUS took the measure of this man. For **"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 man took the measure of JESUS and

was attracted to Him. With unhesitating, unstudied, and unrestrained description, he gave voice to his evaluation of CHRIST and the emotion that had been piling up within him.

In this study we shall note two movements of thought: first, the startling admission from the lips of Nicodemus as recorded in verse two; and finally, the amazing declaration from the lips of CHRIST as recorded in verse three. The first is an address that assumes the nature of an admission. The second is the answer that carries with it the announcement of the New Birth.

I. THE STARTLING ADMISSION FROM THE LIPS OF NICODEMUS

"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).

Careful examination of this passage reveals six things appearing in the course of this opening statement. Each one is seemingly more remarkable than the preceding one. And each helps to open up the heart of this man Nicodemus.

*1. In his address, he admitted his personal subordination to CHRIST. He calls Him "**Rabbi**."*

This is an interesting fact in the light of Hebrew usage. Three words appear in the Hebrew, each with rising importance: *rab*, *rabbi*, and *rabban* or *rabboni*. The first means great one or great teacher; the second means my great one or great teacher; the third means my very dear great teacher. It was the third of these that was used by Mary at the tomb (John 20:16). It was the second of these that was used by Nicodemus. Thus in this address, he was not only admitting that CHRIST was a great teacher (number one), but he was also claiming Him for his own. It may be assumed that this was the mark of mere respect and refinement, and nothing more. But this is hardly a just conclusion in the light of the immediate context and the subsequent conversation. Taking the word "**Rabbi**" at face value, it must be admitted that Nicodemus addressed Him as "*My Teacher*."

2. At the outset he confessed that he had made a careful investigation concerning CHRIST.

That this is the meaning of the words "**we know**" is a justifiable assumption. This was the duty and the responsibility of the members of the Sanhedrim laid down in the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 13). Already such an investigation had taken its course in the case of John the Baptist (John 1:19-28). It is therefore reasonable to suppose that some such investigation had also taken place in connection with CHRIST. And Nicodemus, with the keen, professional insights of an accomplished theologian, joined the members of the Sanhedrim in this. That is the reason Nicodemus identified himself with others in the plural "**we know**," but it seems quite apparent that Nicodemus was the only one of the entire company at this time that was willing to follow the truth where it led. The investigation had resulted in some preliminary though settled conclusions, but Nicodemus was the only one who was willing to admit them. It was the same story at the close of CHRIST's ministry. **"But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: . . . For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God"** (John 12:37, 43).

3. Again you will note that Nicodemus confessed CHRIST's constituted position as a teacher.

He says, "**Thou art a teacher.**" From the lips of this man, this was no mean affirmation. Surely this most popular teacher in all Israel knew what he was saying. His training, achievement, and experience qualified him to speak with authority on this point. All that follows indicates that he had weighed those words. Careful examination of the use of the word teacher makes it clear that such a person was regarded as the authoritative source of doctrine. Such a person had to be officially constituted with such authority by a course of training in a recognized school and with proper certification by public officials. This procedure is almost modern. But JESUS had neither of these. He was a peasant from the despised Galilean village of Nazareth never having attended a professional school nor having been certified for public office (John 7:15). During his entire life and public ministry JESUS never held any public office or filled any duly constituted position in Israel. To hear Nicodemus affirming that CHRIST was a teacher can only mean that he recognized in Him gifts and qualifications which basically and fundamentally constitute men for position and office.

4. It will be seen that Nicodemus came to grips with the real situation when he admitted that JESUS as a teacher had supernatural authorization.

There can be no other conclusion from the complete statement, "**thou art a teacher come from God.**" Nicodemus put the emphatic idea first in his statement, as a literal rendering of the statement reveals. He said, "From God you have come a teacher." In this statement, he made it clear the sort of thoughts that were coursing through his mind. But the reader is not to assume that Nicodemus was confessing that JESUS CHRIST was the Son of GOD just lately come out of Heaven. He did not mean that by this statement. What he did mean is exactly what is affirmed of John the Baptist in chapter one. "**There was a man sent from God, whose name was John**" (John 1:6). This was true of all the Old Testament prophets. They were men who received their authorization from GOD. As a sincere and accurate student of the Old Testament Scriptures Nicodemus knew this. These qualities and qualifications transcend the limited attempts of men to train and induct such trainees into office. Having observed these qualities in CHRIST, he did not hesitate to confess divine authorization.

5. To confirm in the mind of JESUS the thoughtfulness of his admissions, Nicodemus pointed to the divine certification of his office.

"**These miracles that thou doest**" were His credentials, and Nicodemus recognized them as such. The Old Testament taught this great truth, as this astute student of the Scriptures knew. And the New Testament has confirmed the fact that Nicodemus was right. Miracles or signs were intended to point to something. But the crowd at the Passover became enamored with the glamorous and the spectacular and overlooked the meaning. From them CHRIST turned away. But Nicodemus was not like the crowd. He looked below the surface of the signs and saw the meaning, at least a part of the meaning, sufficient of the meaning to recognize that these were divine credentials of office and message. But to this man, CHRIST committed Himself in such a way that it is fair to conclude that Nicodemus was finally saved. On the day of Pentecost Peter gave full expression to the thing that Nicodemus saw three years before. "**Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him, in the midst of you, as ye yourselves know**" (Acts

2:22).

6. To seal all the above admissions, Nicodemus declared that CHRIST had an intimate relation with GOD.

Such is the significance of the words, **"Except God be with Him."** In this statement Nicodemus affirmed far more than appears on the surface. He was not affirming mere association with GOD. That was true, but Nicodemus had more than that in mind when he used these words. Nor was he affirming mere empowering, though that was true. The preposition **"with"** points to an intimate relation, as though he were saying that GOD was in the very midst of CHRIST. This preposition marks a fellowship of nature and purpose. Could it be that Nicodemus had noted a distinct difference between miracle workers of his day who claimed to be from GOD and the Lord JESUS CHRIST? With those men there was an absence of those qualities that mark out a holy and spiritual character. Here was one who was perfumed with the presence of GOD, whose actions were redolent with odors of Heaven, whose speech and bearing were of such character that they had to be fed from the fountain head of all holiness, GOD Himself.

After surveying these admissions, it must be agreed that they are nothing short of amazing. It may be argued that he spoke better than he knew. But it is still a reasonable assumption that there was at this moment a flash of intuition, a powerful premonition, produced by the Spirit of GOD which prepared the way for the ensuing conversation.

Whether Nicodemus meant to go on, we shall never know until we get to Heaven. At least he never had the opportunity to state his mission. Whatever it was that weighed so heavily upon his heart was lost in the glory of something infinitely more wonderful. It is possible that in the brilliance that now flashed across his horizon, he realized that he had been playing with pebbles when the ocean of truth was lying before him.

Nevertheless, by these admissions he maneuvered himself into a teachable position. They were undoubtedly genuine admissions and CHRIST recognized them as such. For He did not hesitate to commit Himself to this teacher. Had there been any trace of doubt in the mind of CHRIST concerning the sincerity of this man, JESUS would never have foolishly cast before him the pearl of wisdom in the most amazing declaration ever to fall from the lips of man.

II. THE AMAZING DECLARATION FROM THE LIPS OF THE LORD JESUS

"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 statement follows swiftly upon the admission of Nicodemus, breaking in upon the conversation before the voice of Nicodemus had died away. It does not give him an opportunity to continue. This statement came like a bolt of lightning out of the blue, crashing across all of the psychologies and the philosophies and the theologies of men. This amazing statement runs contrary to all human reason and threw Nicodemus' train of thought into confusion. Transcending all human thinking, and announcing as it did something never dreamed of by mortal man, it dispelled from the mind of Nicodemus his original purpose and never again did he return to it. Close analysis of this declaration reveals seven things that require careful scrutiny in

order to the understanding of the entire statement.

1. The declaration is introduced by words which mark the certainty of the statement which follows.

When JESUS used the words "**verily, verily**," he was putting Himself in a class all by Himself. No other person ever dared to use these words to introduce a statement, so far as the Biblical record is concerned. The language from which this word comes is Hebrew. It is the word "**Amen**." This is transliterated into the Greek and all other languages, and is used by every nationality in its own language. Basically the word means *firmness, solidity, unchangeableness, dependability*. It may be translated *verily, truly, surely, certainly, absolutely, positively*. This word appears just once before the statement it introduces in each one of the first three Gospels. But it always appears twice before the statements in the Gospel of John. If CHRIST can speak with surety in any aspect of His humanity as revealed in the first three Gospels, then He can speak with double certainty as GOD manifest in flesh as revealed in the Gospel of John. When it is known that this word describes the nature of GOD (Isaiah 65:16), and is the name of the Lord JESUS CHRIST (Revelation 3:14), it is like signing His name to the statement which follows to guarantee its veracity. Thus Nicodemus can be assured that he is about to hear the enunciation of an eternal and an abiding fact.

2. The intolerance of this statement from the lips of CHRIST will be sure to command the attention of this master in Israel.

"**Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**" Nicodemus is sufficiently well acquainted with rabbinical tradition and literature and contemporary schools of thought to know no such limitation had ever been laid down in relation to the Kingdom of GOD. He knew the field of interpretation and how widely men differed, but was also aware that within the area of diversity there was also the atmosphere of tolerance.

For this peasant teacher to strike across all the noted teaching past and present and declare it null and void by this narrow decree, this would be sure to strike fire. Men writhe under such narrow limitations. And the men of Nicodemus' day were no different than others. This would arouse a torrent of abuse and criticism. However, the intolerance was not arbitrary, but necessary (3:7). Though this was not apparent to Nicodemus at this point in the discussion, before JESUS is through He will make it very clear that it is in the very nature of the case that a man must be born again if he is to experience the Kingdom of GOD. (3:6). At this point, however, Nicodemus cannot help but be impressed with the infinite inviolability of this intolerance.

3. The universality of the application of this principle is so clearly and simply stated that it could not escape the attention of this able teacher.

With extreme finesse JESUS said, "**Except a man (anyone) be born again.**" He was directing this to everyone. By this method of speaking He was including the very esteemed gentleman whom He was addressing. It was very possible that Nicodemus, because of his position and prominence, had grown cold to personal need. It may be that personal need may never even so much as entered his mind. He may have fallen into the snare of professionalism, so subtle is it in its operations. It is the snare and pitfall of all who serve or minister in holy things. Being

constantly in their presence, ever handling such precious things, it is not long until the senses grow dull and such things are treated as common. If this were the case with Nicodemus, as it certainly was with most of those in Israel who shared like positions, then the universality of application completely dispels the notion, not only for him, but also for that vast host like him, then, and since, and to come.

*4. It is only fair to assert at this point that the central idea or subject in the entire statement made by CHRIST is expressed in the words "**Be born**" (3).*

Nicodemus was also sufficiently mentally alert and intellectually keen to catch this point. This was exhibited in his response, when he went straight to the point and countered, "**How can a man be born?**" Birth refers to the communication of seminal substance in the propagation of kind. The order is always from parent to offspring. This is true among animals. It is true among men. It is equally true in the family of GOD. The parent is the origin, and the child is the result. Never is it ever true that the child generates himself. Though the thinking of men has been divers and errant on this point, the fact still remains that the child never has any part in initiating the process of birth. This is true on the lowest level of creation among the animals. It is true on the higher physical level among men. And it is true on the highest of all levels, the spiritual, which involves GOD and His family. But the important thing to note here is the fact of generation, a communication of nature initiated by the father and culminating in the child.

*5. An adverb modifying the verb "**be born**" and expressed in the translations by the word "**again**" pointed to the source of this birth.*

So intent was Nicodemus upon the subject of birth that this modification of the idea completely escaped him in its full import. He took it to mean scarcely more than the repetition of birth on the physical level. This explains his response as recorded in verse 4, "**How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?**" The precise significance of the word "**again**" (Greek *anōthen*) contains the point CHRIST was making. This word appears a second time in verse seven where it is rendered "**again**": and yet a third time in verse 31 where it is rendered "**from above**." In all it appears 13 times in the New Testament. In every occurrence it follows very closely upon its etymological meaning, such as *from above, from Heaven, from the beginning*. Only twice (John 3:3, 7) does this word seem to suggest the idea of again or anew. But even here it is believed that the word does not lose its basic meaning, namely, that of from above. And this writer believes that the point JESUS was making centers in this explanation of the word. CHRIST was trying to drive home to this master teacher in Israel a fact that had utterly escaped him and all his people, that the Kingdom of GOD is not to be experienced merely on the grounds of certain earthly qualifications. There must also be a birth of supernatural origin.

6. This implies what CHRIST immediately asserted, namely, that there is an absolute need for the New Birth.

For "**Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**" By the word "**see**" the Lord JESUS was not implying a mere exercise of the optical nerve in sight. As in our own language, so also in the idiom of that day, the word "**see**" had come to represent the whole range of experience. Probably the reason for this is the fact that the sense of sight is the most vivid of

all the senses, and therefore easily came to represent the entire field. Usage in the New Testament confirms this.

- **"To see my day"** (John 8:56),
- **"see death"** (Luke 2:26),
- **"see corruption"** (Acts 2:27),
- **"see good days"** (I Peter 3:10)

all witness to this usage.

In the largest way possible, JESUS is trying to make this Israelite realize that the Kingdom of GOD represents an area of experience for which men must be supernaturally prepared. This preparation consists of a birth from above consisting of a communication of divine nature that alone will enable men to experience this kingdom. If a man does not experience this birth, **"he cannot see"** the realities of this kingdom. Emphatically CHRIST declared, *"he is not able"* as a continuing thing to experience these realities, for he lacks the senses and sensibilities which GOD alone can impart for this function.

7. At last the grand goal for which this New Birth is insisted upon concludes the amazing utterance of this teacher from GOD.

It is **"the kingdom of God."** This is the consuming passion of the infinite GOD.

- It was the all consuming passion of the Lord JESUS CHRIST.
- It has been the unceasing prayer of the saints now for two millenniums of time, **"Thy kingdom come"** (Matthew 6:10).
- It is to be the grand climax of the Mediatorial ministry of CHRIST, **"The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever"** (Revelation 11:15). It will be the worship theme of the redeemed, **"We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned"** (Revelation 11:17).

This kingdom is not to be confused with the universal kingdom of GOD that has been in operation from the beginning and will ever continue in sovereign control (Psalm 103:19). This is the Mediatorial kingdom promised and predicted in the Old Testament, and will ultimately be established in the earth. CHRIST will be its sovereign, and redeemed men will be its subjects. This kingdom will thus consist of three things:

- the rulership of GOD mediated through His appointed King, the Lord JESUS CHRIST;
- the realm of GOD's rule, the earth restored to its Edenic splendor; and
- the function of this rule exercised among those who are redeemed.

It is this kingdom toward which the prophets of the Old Testament pointed the nation of Israel. It is in this kingdom that all the political and social wrongs of the world will be righted. But this kingdom is not open to men without discrimination. It is promised to a redeemed society of this kingdom Nicodemus knew much, but he did not understand that only those who had experienced New Birth could enter and enjoy its blessedness (John 3:3, 5).

During the period of the church an aristocracy is being prepared for this kingdom. They will rule and reign with CHRIST as His bride. In a limited sense this group of people is now participating in the various aspects of this kingdom. The reign of GOD is shared in its providential sense, though more immediately in the rule of the Spirit within. The realm of GOD is experienced in that believers have been translated into the Kingdom of the Son of his love (Colossians 1:13), and are sharing in some of the benefits of that realm. But the fulness of that kingdom cannot be realized until CHRIST returns to the earth. Until then, the most pertinent, the most personal, and the most pressing need is New Birth, the necessary preparation for entrance into and experience in that kingdom.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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