

“You Must Be Born Again”

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Nicodemus was a high official in Jewish society, well respected and admired. “There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these things that You do unless God is with him.’” John 3:1, 2. His very name spoke authority and leadership. “Nicodemus”. “Nic” comes from the Greek root for “victory.” The popular brand name “Nike” is derived from that same root, as is the name “Nicholas.” “Demus” has its origin in the Greek word for “people.” Our words “democrat” and “democracy” come from that background. Nicodemus was rightly named then, since he was indeed a “ruler of the Jews.” Later in John’s Gospel, deputies are sent to arrest Jesus but return to the authorities empty-handed. Nicodemus is there described as being “one of them,” no doubt referring to Nicodemus as being a member of the Sanhedrin. John 7:50.

He had heard of Jesus. Almost everyone had heard of Jesus. The towns buzzed with the news of this Teacher and Healer Who had brought sight to the blind, cleansing to the lepers and strength to the lame. Who had not heard of the water made into juice at the Cana wedding miracle? It would have been remarkable if someone had not heard of the Nazarene. But who was He? Some said that He might even be the Messiah of prophecy.

Nicodemus had to know more. He wanted to talk with Jesus personally. But that was risky. If his colleagues found out that he had made such a contact, that might be scandalous. Already deep prejudice had arisen among the “Jews” about Him. Their consciences had smarted when He had overturned the money tables in the temple at the time of the Passover, saying, “Take these things away! Do not make My Father’s house a house of merchandise.” John 2:16. What did He mean by speaking those words, “My Father’s house”? Who was He claiming to be? Nicodemus wanted to know, but was too shy to seek an interview in open daylight.

He addressed Jesus in terms of courtesy and respect. “Rabbi,” he said, “we know that You are a teacher come from God.” Nicodemus probably imagined that since he was throwing the lofty title “Rabbi” onto the shoulders of One Who had never attended the rabbinical schools, who had no degrees after His name, that this would demonstrate extraordinary admiration. How did Jesus respond?

With a directness that spoke authority and solemnity, “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” John 3:3. This

was unexpected! This was not what he anticipated! What did He mean by those words? What did it mean to be “born again”? Laying aside his attempts to flatter Jesus with titles, Nicodemus ventured to argue the possibility of what Jesus stated. “Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’” John 3:4.

There was a glimmer of faith in the heart of Nicodemus. That is what brought him to the side of Jesus that night. And yet it was only a glimmer. There was still much to be learned, accepted and applied. His faith was imperfect in that he stumbled on the premise of God’s promise. “How can?” were the first words of his reply. It was the same weakness of faith that caused Abraham to fall on his face in laughter when God spoke to him about a new birth; the same weakness of faith that caused Sarah to snicker at the prospect of new life. It was impossible! It was unscientific! It didn’t make sense!

And yet, something had pulled Nicodemus into this interview. He could feel the point of the arrow of truth as it penetrated his heart. He knew there was a lack in his regimented, formalized religion. He had all the externals; all the trimmings. Yet there was still something missing in Nicodemus’ life. This Galilean Teacher seemed to have something that Nicodemus did not. Though He was without formal education, though He had no official title as did Nicodemus, though he did not flaunt the luxurious robes that covered the priests, scribes and members of the Council, there was something in Jesus’ life that was missing in his. He spoke with an authority that was absent from the rabbinical instructions. And the miracles! They were undeniable. It was a mystery! What did He know that Nicodemus did not? What did He have that Nicodemus did not?

Nicodemus stumbled into the trap of literalism. His mind was stuck in the gear of taking what Jesus said and attempting to understand the words in a strictly literalistic way. This was a problem, because Jesus often used illustrations from the physical world and applied them to spiritual realities. This is because there is nothing really like what happens when a person is made new by God. There are only similarities, and every illustration has its limits. Comparisons are helpful, but only if you get past the barrier of literalism.

For example, Jesus had said that John the Baptist “was Elijah;” not in a literal way, of course. There were similarities that invited comparison. Jesus had said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” John 2:19. Even His own disciples had trouble with this statement. Only after His resurrection would they understand the truth of what He had said. The Jews were mired in the mud of literalism, saying, “‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body.” John 2:19, 20. Later, Jesus would speak to a woman at Jacob’s well of the “water of life,” a phrase not at first understood by her.

So when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about being born again, Nicodemus reverted to a mind set embedded in a literalistic framework. “Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” he questioned.

Jesus responded, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.” The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” John 3:8.

Everyone of us was born “of the flesh.” Don’t underestimate the miracle of the first birth! That also is a demonstration of God’s power. Every time a new-born draws breath and makes his or her entry into this world, it is a demonstration of the power of God. Don’t let frequency and familiarity dim the light of the miraculous. A new creature, a new unique, independent human being has entered upon the stage of humanity. What parent knows, when the infant is held for the first time, whether the baby will become a mechanic, a doctor, a home-maker, a minister, a receptionist or president? Who knows the hidden potential cradled in their arms? Who can calculate the attainments and achievements to be crafted by those tiny fingers? What a miracle!

And yet, as stupendous as that is, it the beginning of a journey that will end in sorrow and death. Disappointment and tears will be the companions on a migration to the cemetery. What begins in a cradle will end in a casket. All because of a life-changing event that happened 6,000 years when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and ate of the fruit from the forbidden tree. Their natures were changed. Before, they had delighted to obey. It had been their leaning, their propensity to love. Now, because the virus of sin had been allowed entrance, self rose to prominence. Now their hearts were at war with God. The falling leaves from the stately trees were a token of their fallen natures. Oh, how mighty a fire a small spark had started!

Fred Gough, an 83-year old British infantry veteran went to the doctor with an ache in his knee a couple of months ago. The X-rays revealed the source of his problem: it was a World War II German bullet! Gough said, “I didn’t know it was there. All I can remember is getting this thump in my thigh, but it didn’t knock me off my feet or anything.” All humanity has been limping from the bullet of sin, embedded long ago in our natures. Ever since the transgression in Eden, Adam and Eve would pass to their children, including you and me, a character that was defective. It would be one founded on the principles of sin and selfishness, not love and righteousness. “Me first” would be the “operating system” of every descendant of Adam and Eve.

What did God do? He proposed a bold and daring plan; a plan of restoration. It would be a radical, “unthinkable” plan that would require great sacrifice on His part, because transgression could not be swept aside. He Himself would pay the penalty for sin. His plan would anticipate the forgiveness of every sin ever committed as well as the recreation of Godlikeness in the hearts of those who would be willing to receive the impress of His Spirit.

It would be done individually. Every son and daughter of Adam would be given the choice, the opportunity to be “born again.” Adam’s own creation could serve as a model for this new life experience. Just as God’s hand formed the body of Adam and breathed His breath into his nostrils, in a similar way He will take the clay, the dust of our mortal beings and through His Spirit bring

new life. Mysterious? Yes. Hard to understand for the one trapped in literalism, with vision open only to the visible world? Yes. But, possible? Yes! A necessity? Yes, if you wish to be a part of God's kingdom and enjoy life beyond this short tenure. The words of Christ to Nicodemus and to us are, "You must be born again."

Everyone desiring a home in the heavenly kingdom must request and undergo this spiritual change. Don't expect to completely understand it; don't expect to be able to completely explain it. It is as the wind, which you can't see, yet you know it is there. The billowing curtain in front of the open window proves its existence. You know it is there and its force is being applied, yet you can't see it. So is the change that comes into the life of one upon whose heart the Spirit has begun His work. Thinking begins to change. Actions begin to change. Habits begin to change. There is a different life principle in action. Different goals and different priorities emerge and take the place of the old ways.

Nicodemus needed this change. You and I need this change. Unless we submit to His gracious Spirit and surrender our wills to Him, this change will not occur, and our entrance into the kingdom will be forfeited. Hearts made new by the Holy Spirit will characterize the inhabitants of that city. Did you pray to be converted today? Did you ask for the Gift of the Holy Spirit today?

Nicodemus was still hampered by his inability to grasp these principles. "Nicodemus answered and said to Him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?'" John 3:9, 10. The message that Jesus gave was not invented that evening. It was part of the stream of light that emanated from the Garden of Eden. The lessons of spiritual regeneration were taught by the Lord Himself when He told the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman."

The lesson of new life was proclaimed by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel who declared the truths of the New Covenant, saying, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses." Ezekiel 36:26-29.

The lesson of new life was comprehended by David who wrote, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with Your generous Spirit." Psalm 51:10-12.

No, this was not new theology that Jesus was springing on Nicodemus. It was old truth which had been hidden by tradition and misconception. Too many practiced a religion concentrating on the superficial. They had worn the scripture boxes on their foreheads, but the principles of love and justice were not present in their minds. They had paraded Bible verses on their forearms, but too often their hands had practiced iniquity.

What Jesus was saying to Nicodemus was no different than what Moses preached in his last sermon. "The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." Deuteronomy 30:6. In giving the token of circumcision as a sign of the covenant, it wasn't the outward cutting of the flesh that God was interested in; it was what that symbolized. Dependence on Him and submittal to His ways.

Sad to say, it has always been easier to comply with the outward form than submit to an internal change. A religion that focuses on forms and rituals and sidesteps true heart conversion will always be popular. It is, in fact, the basis of most of the religions practiced by the world. It is not, however, the religion of Jesus. He said, "You must be born again." Spinning prayer wheels or counting beads is not what is needed. External ceremonies without heart transformation is worthless; like sending your vehicle through the car wash when it needs a new engine.

What is needed is a true reformation; a change in the thinking and living process. This is what Jesus offers to us; a new heart. When Nicodemus feigned ignorance on these matters, Jesus gently chided him with the words, "Are you the teacher in Israel, and do not know these things?" Notice the application and force of the definite article: "Are you the teacher in Israel, and do not know these things?" Merely because tradition has been heaped on spiritual truth is no excuse for one with access to God's Holy Word. Anyone who came to God and earnestly sought after truth, Old Testament or New, was rewarded with sufficient information to experience God's plan in their life. Nicodemus, as a Bible instructor, as the teacher in Israel, should have known about these things. Was not Saul in the Old Testament "turned into another man"? I Samuel 10:6.

Jesus went on to say, "Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:11-15.

Jesus referred to an incident that happened in Old Testament times, when a plague came upon Israel. During their wilderness wanderings, "the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way." Numbers 21:4. Despite the watch care and providence of God displayed in the water provided from the rock and the manna which sustained them, they spoke out against God and Moses saying, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness. For there is no food and water (what??) and our soul loathes this worthless bread." Numbers 21:5. How shortsighted! How tragic! God had more than provided for them, giving them a diet particularly engineered to their circumstance. If they had been happy to rely on what He had given them, disease would not have been known among them.

Because of their persistent grumbling, the protection of the Lord was removed and poisonous snakes attacked many of the Israelites. Moses was instructed to do something that must have seemed very strange. He was told to construct a brazen serpent and elevate it on a pole. Miraculously, victims of the snake bites who looked in faith on the serpent were healed. Numbers 21:9.

It didn't make sense. You couldn't explain it with reason, but everyone "when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived." This was the message Jesus was trying to get across to Nicodemus. If people, bitten by the stinging virus of sin, would look to Him, new life would be theirs. You wouldn't be able to explain it, anymore than the Israelites healed of their snake bites could give a rational explanation of how it happened. You can't actually "see" the power of God as it comes into your life any more than you can see the wind, but the effect of it is just as real.

This is made available when Jesus is "lifted up." Jesus said later in John's Gospel, "'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to Myself.' This He said, signifying by what death He would die." John 12:32. There is some evidence to suggest that this phrase "lifted up" was a Hebrew idiom which was understood by all His hearers as referring to death by crucifixion. John's note, "This He said, signifying by what death He would die" agrees with that sentiment.

Notice that the word "*peoples*" ("*men*" KJV) is printed in italics, meaning that it does not exist in the original but was supplied by the translators. Jesus said, "If I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all to Myself." Some Bible commentators go as far as to suggest that all nations are thereby intended, not merely the Jews. We would go a step further and suggest that not only all nations of this earth, but all created intelligences throughout God's great universe were "drawn" by the sacrifice of Jesus. Unfallen angels and inhabitants of sinless worlds were "drawn" by the exhibition of the selfless character of the Creator God when He suffered for the sins of a lost race. The cross was not just about saving this world; it was about preserving the integrity of God's throne throughout all of His vast kingdom.

There is healing that takes place when we gaze on the spectacle of the King on the cross. When we allow the Spirit to teach us of our need and His solution, within the context of Christ's great sacrifice, changes in our thinking begin to take place. Faith begins to grow. The new birth experience begins to take shape. We can know that the Spirit is at work in our lives when these changes are evidenced. When you realize that you are different than you were before, that you don't desire what you used to desire, be assured that God is working His miracle of transformation in your life. Praise Him for it. Thank Him for it. Ask Him to continue His work, until the likeness of His Son is reflected perfectly in your life. You can't do it; only He can. But you must give Him permission to do it. In this way, the new birth experience will be yours. We can be "confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." Philippians 1:6.

Nicodemus, for fear of what people might think, came to Jesus "by night." Jesus might have reprimanded him sternly with words like, "If are ashamed to come to me in the open, why should

I spend time with you?" But He didn't. The wick of Nicodemus' spiritual candle was a "smoking flax" (Isaiah 42:3), an ember barely alive, but Jesus didn't quench it. He protected and encouraged it. The light would at last burn brightly.

This story has a happy ending. The once faint-hearted and faltering Nicodemus became a faithful and stalwart disciple, courageous enough to stand up to the Council and defend His Lord. After Jesus' death the Record says, "And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds." John 19:39.

Have you experienced this new birth? Are you born again? Ask the Lord right now to come into your life and make you new. He will!