

Nick at Nite

John 3:1-21

A dog thinks: Hey, these people I live with feed me, love me, provide me with a nice warm, dry house, pet me, and take good care of me... They must be Gods!

A cat thinks: Hey, these people I live with feed me, love me, provide me with a nice warm, dry house, pet me, and take good care of me... I must be a God!

Sometimes, it's just a matter of one's frame of reference.

It may be impossible to make it through life without changing one's frame of reference at least a few times. A man, who had eight children, was reflecting on how differently each was raised. "If our firstborn coughed or sneezed, we called the doctor. When the last one swallowed a dime, I just told him it was coming out of his allowance." Jesus taught us that to really know God, we would absolutely have to undergo a shift in our frame of reference.

One night, a Pharisee came to Jesus, and the Lord blew up his previous view of coming to God. To a man working hard to merit God's favor, Jesus said, "...unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Whatever "born again" means, it clearly suggests a radical shift in our existence. We start over. We see God differently. We see ourselves differently. We see salvation differently. Let's explore together this radical idea of being "born again."

I. The Mystery of New Birth (verses 1-12)

A. An Honest Quest for God's Kingdom verses 1, 2

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Nicodemus was an important man, one of seventy members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. He was an academic. In verse 10, Jesus will acknowledge that he is called "Israel's teacher." He was a Pharisee, a member of that a sect whose members committed themselves to obeying the Law of Moses to the letter. Some Pharisees were sincerely trying to avoid this world's pollution by carefully yielding to God's Law in every conceivable life scenario, but often Pharisaism just lent itself to blatant hypocrisy. In any event, for any honest man on an honest quest, something as performance-driven as Pharisaism could only yield emptiness. That emptiness, in turn, would produce an even greater anxiety about measuring up so as to please God.

The Pharisaic obsession with law-keeping took many odd turns. Work, of course, was forbidden on the Sabbath. Tying a knot would be regarded as a kind of work, but a person couldn't even get dressed without tying a knot of some sort. So, it became necessary to distinguish legal knots from illegal knots. Certain rabbis (with too much time on their hands) concluded that a knot in a woman's girdle (the belt around her waist) or the knots in one's sandal straps were legal Sabbath Day knots. Tying a rope to a bucket to draw water required an illegal labor-related knot.

So far, so good, but what if bad planning meant a household needed to draw water on a holy day? The rabbis figured out that if a man failed to draw enough water from the well to get the family through the Sabbath, he could get around the work restriction by tying the bucket to either Mama's girdle or to his own leather sandal strap. That would keep his knot-tying labor within legal parameters. Multiply that scenario by every commandment in the law. Then, multiply that by every life scenario that might be produced in a Pharisee's imagination. Eventually, any spiritually hungry person would catch on to the meaninglessness of such an approach to God.

Nicodemus appears to be an honest, spiritually hungry person. He came to Jesus because He knew that the miracles (or "signs") Jesus worked proved that He was somehow representing God. One purpose of Jesus' miracles was to testify to the mark of God upon Jesus' ministry, and that purpose was realized for Nicodemus. He didn't demand more signs like other Pharisees did. He readily acknowledged Jesus to be a "teacher who has come from God." But, he also came "at night," which probably implies a cautiousness of the hostilities of his fellow-Sanhedrinists.

B. Scrapping Everything and Starting Over verses 3, 4

³In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

⁴"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

This rhetoric of "new birth" was not new to the Jews. They applied it to Gentiles who converted to Judaism, but Jesus could not mean that. After all, Nicodemus was already a Jew, a citizen in God's covenant nation. How can a Jew be born again? More than that, he was a law-abiding Pharisee. Nicodemus had probably done as much as any man could do to secure his place in the kingdom of God. He had lived his whole life according to this one frame of reference regarding divine merit earned by works. If Jesus wasn't talking in a metaphor, could He mean a real birth of some sort? So, confused, he asked, "Jesus, do you mean to literally go back to the womb?"

Nicodemus had one thing right. New birth is somehow a literal thing and not a mere figure of speech. It is not a shift in attitude. It requires a concession that life without a relationship with God through Jesus is really death, no matter how disciplined such a life may be. But, it especially means that a divine work of renewal by the Spirit is required. We cannot make it happen.

C. The New Birth Expounded Upon verses 5-12

⁵Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

⁹"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"

The reference to “water and spirit” points to a spiritual renewal that is closely identified with water baptism, the New Testament’s prescribed rite of entry into the Christian faith. Gentiles were baptized in water for cleansing when they converted to Judaism. To prepare for God’s kingdom, John baptized in water for repentance. Jesus now clarifies that there must be a dimension of a spiritual rebirth as well, so He establishes a water baptism that reflects that. The kingdom of Heaven is not entered by some “dunked once and done ritual.” That won’t make anybody safe from the wrath of God at the end of the age. Baptism must be yielded to in faith and it must be accompanied by a cleansing by the Holy Spirit. That renewal is the “new birth.”

A young mother stormed to the back of the bus after the driver had the audacity to imply that her baby was a little odd-looking. She sat next to a man, who didn’t know the details, but he could tell she was steamed. He asked her what the problem was.

She said, “That driver is the rudest, most insulting Cretan I have ever met.”

The man suggested, “If you’re really that upset, march back up there and give him a piece of your mind.

She said, “You’re right! That’s exactly what I’m going to do!

At that, the helpful man made added, “And I’ll be glad to hold your monkey.”

Even if in some instances a double take is required, human beings can only give birth to human babies. Only God’s Spirit can give birth to our spirits. Like the invisible wind that has undeniable effects, so it is with the Spirit. He gives new birth to people Nicodemus might never suspect ought to receive it. All those years of racking up spiritual brownie points were now irrelevant. Jesus hinted at what Nicodemus must have suspected: “You should not be surprised” ... “You are Israel’s teacher and do you not understand these things?” Nicodemus should have known that something more than just human rule-keeping was needed to enter the kingdom. The Scriptures he knew so well hinted to as much:

³¹“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers” ... ³³“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” Jeremiah 31:31-32a, 33

In verse 11, as Jesus gently scolds this Jewish sage for not understanding the Scripture a little better, He speaks in the plural: “we speak of what we know”. This may mean that a few of His disciples were present. Jesus may have been speaking on behalf of the Godhead: Father, Holy Spirit and Himself. Since most Pharisees viewed Jesus and John the Baptist as a package deal, Jesus may have been accommodating that thinking. Or, He may have been numbering Himself with the prophets of old.

In any event, Jesus added, “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things” (verse 12). Nicodemus must first grasp life’s obvious realities before he could move onto deeper spiritual truths. One such rudimentary reality is that law keeping cannot remove sin. You can tie all the right knots on the right days, and such religious minutiae will never make you clean before God. He must act in your behalf.

II. The Mediator of New Birth (verses 13-17)

A. Jesus Clearly Revealed His Life’s Purpose verses 13-15

¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus bluntly claimed to be the “Son of Man” who came from heaven. Then, He uttered strange words that would have incensed most of Nicodemus’ fellow-Pharisees. He said, “Nick, do you remember when God was so fed up with the whining Israelites that He sent venomous snakes among them? They were dropping like flies. But when they repented, God told Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole. When bitten, all they had to do was to look up at that snake and they would live. That’s why I’m here. I’ll be lifted up like that snake was. Anyone who looks to Me and believes that my death covers their sins will be forgiven and will receive eternal life.”

Two ministerial students from Samford University in Alabama, were doing summer evangelistic work in a rural area. One day they stopped in front of a farmhouse and approached the porch through a gauntlet of screaming children and barking dogs. They knocked on the screen door. The woman of the house stopped her scrubbing over a tub and washboard, brushed back her hair, wiped perspiration from her brow, and asked them what they wanted.

“We would like to tell you how to obtain eternal life,” one student answered.

The tired homemaker replied, “Thank you, but I don’t believe I could stand it.”

Jesus was not speaking simply of life that endures forever. He was offering life in God’s presence. The fact that Nicodemus didn’t run to his fellow-Pharisees then and there to accuse Jesus of blasphemy demonstrates that he was of a different fabric than most of them. Seeds of faith had been planted. Can you imagine how the memory of Jesus’ words must have stricken Nicodemus later when he would gaze upon the crucified Christ on a hill outside of Jerusalem?

B. The Best News in the World Is Summarized verses 16, 17

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Are these precious words Jesus’ own as He continues to speak of His divine mission? Or, are they the author’s explanation of what Jesus just said about being “lifted up”? Many red letter edition Bibles attribute the words to Jesus. But, the verb tense changes abruptly to past tense as though someone is speaking to the reader from a vantage point outside of the narrative. In fact, the gospel of *John* is filled with such “parenthetical side bars” that clarify different speeches and events for the reader. In any event, whether Jesus spoke those words to Nicodemus or John inserted them for us, they are of the Holy Spirit’s words, and they capture the heart of the Gospel.

God’s Son is a “gift”. Believe on Him with all the confidence and true reliance that real faith demands. He came not to condemn, but to save. Man-centered religion rivets attention to human works as though God is looking for some reason to destroy us. Christianity depicts a thoroughly just God, so driven by love that He will do whatever is needed to save us. That’s a big difference. He remains just because the penalty our sin demands is satisfied, but it is satisfied by Jesus.

III. The Means of New Birth (verses 18–21)

A. Believing in Jesus Is the Only Hope for Life verse 18

... ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.

No one ever came from the Father in the sense Jesus came. The exclusivity of Jesus to save is an unpopular theme in our culture. It is maligned as bigoted. But, this exclusivity is an essential feature of Christianity. Jesus reveals God and restores us to God because He is God.

... "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the father's side, has made him known." - John 1:18

¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." - Acts 4:12

B. Any Man's Response to Jesus Will Determine His Destiny verses 19-21

... ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

John speaks of some who "loved darkness" in verse 19. Their deeds were "evil", meaning "destructive or malignant" - truly evil in every sense of the word. Some people simply love the darkness, which makes them despise Christ, the light He sheds, and everything about Him.

Note the phrase "does evil" in verse 20. This is a milder word for evil, which means "worthless or insignificant." Some people do not love sin so much as they fear the light's disclosure, that "their deeds will be exposed." Darkness provides cover. A man might be a good man by human standards. It might be the plastic goodness of the typical Pharisee. He may be nobly religious like Nicodemus. With the façade of such piety comes a degree of respectability. To admit that it all means nothing - that it is evil in the sense of being worthless or insignificant - that the problem of sin within remains unresolved - that allegedly good works lead to death ... this can be a humiliating thing to confess. Vain religious pride has robbed many of the kingdom of God.

So, whatever became of Nicodemus? Did he become a full-fledged disciple of Jesus, one who no longer sought Him out by night? Later, after Jesus was crucified and His body was removed from a cross, Nicodemus invested a great deal of money in His burial (John 19:39). If this was one last-ditch effort at a works approach to God, it was useless. But, given the risk of such a gesture for a Sanhedrinist, it seems to evidence true repentance and devotion. We like to think that Nicodemus moved toward the light. But, such issues as that are in God's hands.

What matters today are the claims of the Gospel. Jesus is the Way to God because He is from God. To respond to the Gospel is to respond to nothing less. You should judge the claims of the Gospel before you embrace it, but know this: it is judging you. Its light is already exposing the futility of whatever human goodness is in us and is revealing our need for a complete makeover wrought by the hand of God Himself, a makeover that can only begin with a new birth.