

Red Letters | The Sermons of Jesus (2024)

Born of Water and the Spirit

John 2.23 – 3.21

January 21, 2023

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, ²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

^{CH 3} *Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

⁴ *Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

⁹ *Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.*

¹⁶ *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. ²² After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.*

We return now to a series we began two years ago – using the weeks between Christmas and Easter to look at the major speeches of Jesus Christ in the *Four Gospels* where He states the *CRUX of His message.

We’ve looked at the most famous discourse, i.e., the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew CH 5-7). Last year (in this season) we looked at the longest speech, *The Upper Room Discourse*, His conversation with the disciples right before His arrest (John CH 13-17).

This year, we plan to look at the other major teaching sections in the *Gospel According to St. John* and we begin with a passage containing one of the best-known verses in all the Bible: John 3.16.

This dialogue also includes a phrase that's been often misunderstood...sometimes used as insider lingo for church-people; that is the phrase, "*born again*". We hope to see what Jesus Christ actually meant by this phrase and if we can untangle it from its misuse in pop-culture or as churchy jargon, I think we'll see the phrase is much richer than we thought. That insight could put your spiritual life in a wonderful new LIGHT for you (a brilliant way to begin 2024).

This famous dialogue aims to change the locus or the source of spiritual confidence i.e. what's the reason that you feel ok about yourself?... And we may find that we're looking for peace in all the wrong places! **So, let's**

look at: 1) Man on a Mission

2) Interview

3) Four Big Ideas +

Five facts about this man-on-a-mission.

The passage begins: "*There was a man of the Pharisees.*" That connects to the previous passage where, after Jesus cleanses the Temple and does "*signs*", the crowd starts talking about making Jesus king (2.23ff; also 6.15) ...but He would NOT entrust Himself to the crowds (quote), "*because He didn't need any man to testify concerning Him, for He Himself knew what was in a man.*" And then the words, "*Now, there WAS A MAN of the Pharisees...*"

The writer, John, *wants us to see* that Jesus Christ perceives the motives of men and *THIS MAN* is no exception. Jesus Christ "*knew what was in man*" THIS man, the Pharisee, Nicodemus.

He's also (#2) "*a man of the Pharisees.*" They were the religious conservatives, the orthodox, the ancestors of today's Hassidic Jews, very serious about God's Law, very knowledgeable of the Hebrew Bible, insistent that THEY were the keepers of the Tradition...they knew how God works.

We should add that while Jesus Christ didn't need approval from people (didn't need "*the testimony of men*") but the Pharisees DID... I mean they really wanted the respect of their peers. They attached a LOT of importance to appearance/conformity and being noticed and approved by their community.

AND (#3) this "*man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus*" ("*conqueror*") was a "*ruler of the Jews*" i.e., he sat on the Great Council, the *Sanhedrin*, so, a very important man, highly credentialed and respected.

Fourthly, we're told that this ruler "*came to Jesus by night*". Some say that it was just to elude the crowds who were ALWAYS around Jesus Christ by day. Maybe?

My guess is that Nicodemus came by night NOT just to avoid the crowds but to avoid the notice of the crowds. John notes of it twice (19.39). Nicodemus was nervous... His name means conqueror and it's hard living up to big name like that – apparently, he was a timid conqueror.

It does seem to fit his overall profile (in John's Gospel) and there IS a connection in the final words of this dialog where Jesus speaks about men loving the darkness.

Remember, Nicodemus lived in a climate of spiritual, religious peer-pressure (12.42) and constant suspicion and fear that a person may NOT be in step with the values/beliefs/practices of the group... Anyone could be rejected or excluded; secrecy thrives in those environments...people live in the dark.

Sadly, that's very common with religious groups and really with all groups. At the start, it's apparently all about solidarity and all about God but soon it CAN become about acceptance with the group... the emphasis moves from the vertical to the horizontal.

And the timid conqueror, lives in this setting, afraid to be seen in public with this unapproved, spiritual rookie and yet he addresses Jesus as "*Rabbi... we know (see – οἶδα) that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.*"

On one hand, Nicodemus had a lot to lose...a lot of social capital. So, he's skulking around in the dark... AND yet, he's also coming in, out of the darkness of peer-pressure, secrecy and suspicion. Nicodemus is coming INTO the Light that Jesus Christ IS.

The fifth/final fact John notes is that Nicodemus is on a mission to gather information V. 2: "*He said to Jesus...*" That's point two: The Interrogation.

Notice, as we move into this second point that there are some curiosities in this conversation. To start, Nicodemus sort of hides behind his group: "*Rabbi – WE know that You have come from God.*"

And Jesus Christ's reply almost says, "WE? Where's the WE... I only see YOU!... Truly! Truly, I say to YOU (singular – there's no WE here just you and I) and I say to YOU (singular) – O timid conqueror – forget about being accepted by your WE... forget about speaking for the in-group ... I say to YOU, *unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.*"

YOU...in your club...you THINK you know how God does things... you THINK you're the observers who set the bar and test what's true and false about God and spiritual things... YOU'RE addicted to public opinion and the validation of folks in your approval-seekers' club but YOU, Nicodemus, YOU don't know how God works... "*Truly, truly, I tell you, YOU can't even see the Kingdom unless you are born again... born from above.*"

That's how St. John's Greek captures this moment – Nicodemus says literally, "*We SEE that You are from God...*" and Jesus answers, "*Quit foolin' around, YOU can't even SEE how God rules without a new birth...*"

If you've ever wondered WHY Jesus answers this compliment with an apparently unrelated spiritual maxim – *this is IT!* Nicodemus says, "*We SEE that You're from God...*" Jesus replies, "*Quit foolin' around, YOU don't see at all – you must be born from above!*"

And Nicodemus doesn't really get it... but he sort of nervously plays along, "*How can a man be BORN when he's old...he can't enter a second time into his mother's womb... CAN HE?*"

Then Jesus explains this phrase “born again” and the Rabbi is always closing in on the man who came out of the night... *“Truly, truly unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”*

I take that to mean that being born of a woman is NOT enough... being born out of the waters of birth, born physically (from flesh) does NOT qualify you to enter God’s beautiful reign... YOU NEED A SPIRITUAL BIRTH... another, second birth... from ABOVE.”

See, if you asked Nicodemus, “Sir, does God accept you?... Sir, if God asked you, ‘Nicodemus, why should I accept you into My Presence...what qualifies YOU for heaven?’” I’m confident Nicodemus would’ve said, *“Well...I’m a Jew... I’m a descendant of Abraham (I have his DNA) I’m one of the Chosen People... my mother was Jewish!”*

“Oh, so God accepts you because of how you were born...your race, because of your Abrahamic DNA...?”

“Yeah!... I’m born from Jewish parents!”

And Jesus Christ is saying, “It’s NOT the first birth that gets you accepted by God... it’s a second birth... Your mother gave you life physically but only God, the Spirit, can give you life spiritually.” (Not RACE but... GRACE!)

Alright, one little clarification on this dialogue and then a few take-aways:

Whenever you try to decipher old literature, *you look for clues*; one such clue is “*key words*” – words, ideas and themes that are repeated or stand out...and there are at least FOUR key words here.

First, the word “born”: it’s used EIGHT times in vv. 3-8 and obviously it’s THE key word. In the Greek language that John used, it’s the word “gennao” like our word “generate”. It’s always used in the passive voice and the focus is NEVER on something WE do but instead something that gets done TO US. We don’t generate ourselves or bring about our own birth.

To tell a non-being that it has to make itself alive, to produce its own birth, misses the whole point. What did YOU do to get born physically? Nothing!

A second key word is the word “*marvel*”. Jesus tells this teacher of Israel, “DON’T *marvel* because... *THIS whole teaching is found in our Scriptures*...the teachings YOU claim to know so well... Read the prophets and they’ll tell you again and again that an outward circumcision is NOT enough; there’s another inward work... there’s a circumcision of the heart that can’t be made by human hands (Col. 2.11); GOD has to do it.”

“So...teacher of Israel... why act like you’ve never heard this...why marvel as if this is unknown.”

And yet... in another sense...this IS a marvel...it’s a mystery like the wind...we CAN’T point to where the wind begins or to where it ends... *We can’t SEE the wind at all; only the results*. The wind too isn’t something WE can generate... And In the spiritual realm, we can’t generate our inner life... it comes from above...God has to come down to us and work it IN us...and THAT (says Jesus) is what I’ve come to do!”

A THIRD key word is WATER... It's true of the whole *Gospel According to John*. Water is a THING with John. In the first chapter, John baptizes with water. Then water is turned to wine. Then THIS chapter ("born of water and the Spirit"); then Jesus asks a woman for water and promises her living water. Then, there's a man sitting by a pool of water waiting to be healed. Then Jesus walks on water (just the chapters 1-6).

How important IS water? It's necessary for life. Creation takes place with the breaking/division of waters in the upper and lower atmosphere. The second verse of the entire Bible: *"and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters"*. (Gen. 1.2) And here again, the Spirit hovers over the waters as in IN THE FIRST CREATION as a dove and NOW, in the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit rests/roosts on Jesus in a symbolic New Creation, a New Birth from above – creation, born again.

Water is the Great Solvent... it cleansed and baptized the earth in Noah's Day and here there's a New Baptism and a New Ark (1 Pet 3.18ff). Jesus initiates, through water a New Creation. He's the Ark to carry us to safety! *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!"* (2 Cor. 5.17 NIV) Jesus IS new Life, new Creation for the world -- for all who believe.

That's the FOURTH key-word: *"believe."* It's used seven times – obviously important! Somehow this whole dialogue is to compel Nicodemus to "believe." He came to Jesus convinced that HE, the all-wise Pharisee, could SEE what others couldn't (*"We SEE that You are a teacher sent from God..."*) and Jesus says, "You THINK you see...but you don't...you THINK that seeing is believing...but I say BELIEVING IS SEEING!" If you believe or trust Me...THAT'S the clear sign that the Spirit has made you alive... *and those who believe, who simply trust, they are the ones who see... those who believe start getting their questions answered* and whoever trusts Me comes from DARKNESS TO LIGHT...from blindness to sight.

Now for some conclusions: #1) Things that claim our confidence. Nicodemus had been conditioned to have confidence in the esteem of his peers. *"If people think highly of you then you must be a good person...a valuable...significant person!"*

He was a Pharisee, an expert, an inspector of all things spiritual. People looked at him and thought, *"Man, that guy has it together! Most likely to succeed on the Day of Judgment!"* He had all the symbols of success and right-ness. His community affirmed him in every way. And he's saying to Jesus (who is God in the flesh), *"We think You might fit in well with our organization!"*

And Jesus Christ says, *"Quit foolin' around* (that's what "Truly, Truly..." means!) *Quit foolin' around – you don't even know what you're saying!* You think you have life from impressing people – true life comes only from God. It's not about being the right race or having the right people affirm you – it's about new creation from God!"

It's so easy for religious groups/places of worship to *become recognition factories...*and back-slappers and approval seekers. It takes a supernatural act of God's Spirit to convince timid approval-seekers like ME... "It doesn't matter what THEY think – it doesn't even matter what I think... it only matters that you have life from God... Therefore, put your confidence in Him who is life come down from heaven to earth...trust in the gift of God: believe in the Only Begotten Son."

Last, Jesus Christ came into the world to raise the dead. Every person you've ever known (including YOU yourself) is in bad shape... we can count on that.

God told our first parents, "*In the day you turn from Me and go out on your own – YOU SHALL SURELY DIE...*(Gen 2.17) " It's NOT about trying harder...not better education... not better habits or better abs (although all those things might be nice) ... but what we really need is LIFE from God... to be made spiritually alive and responsive to God. Before that (new life) we can't see/know God's ways.

Jesus Christ is like the serpent lifted up in the wilderness with Moses (Num 21) – He came down from heaven (v.13) in order to be lifted up on a Cross, to bear our bad record, to be the symbol of my sin, to be lifted up and put on display as the Scapegoat.

Maybe YOU are in the process of stepping out of secrecy and pretending and into the Light... Well, keep stepping... and those of you who have already entered this New Creation – keep on believing (John 6.29)

Next week we hope to see how holding fast to Jesus, how believing leads to a unique way of life.

Q U O T E S

A true convert to Christianity, the moment he or she is converted receives not simply one or two but *all* holy inclinations and all gracious dispositions. These virtues may be feeble, indeed, like the abilities and powers of an infant child, but they are all truly there, and will be seen flowing out progressively in every kind of wholly feeling and behavior toward both God and man...

It is in the new birth as it is in the natural birth of the infant child. A baby has all the parts of an adult, though they are as yet in a very immature state. Not one body-part is missing but there are as many organs as in a fully grown adult. And therefore, what is accomplished in regeneration is called "the new man" not only new eyes or new ears or new hands but a new person possessing all the human capacities and parts.

- Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*
(1738, lightly modernized language)

*CRUX 1635–45; <Latin: stake, scaffold, or cross used in executions, torment; figurative senses perhaps <New Latin *crux* (*interpretum*) a vital, basic, decisive, or pivotal point; cf. crucial

