

John 3:1-21

Night Time Lessons for Nicodemus

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night vv.1,2a...Ye must be born again – v. 7.

We're not told exactly why it was that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Perhaps he had a busy work day and couldn't get away until after work hours. That's often times the case with people. Perhaps Jesus Himself was so busy that there was no opportunity for Nicodemus to meet with Him until the night hours. Or perhaps the situation was exactly what many commentators suggest – i.e. that Nicodemus knew that Jesus had become a controversial figure and that the Pharisees were resisting Him. The further you go into Jesus earthly ministry the more that would become true and the greater would be that hostility toward Christ. Any time you read of a Pharisee approaching Christ it would usually be with the aim of trying to trick Him or ensnare Him by His words. That does not appear to be the case here with Nicodemus but he was probably already aware of a growing hostility so if he was going to approach Christ as a sincere inquirer, he'd better do it under the cloak of darkness.

After all this was the man that had been identified by John the Baptist and John the Baptist didn't exactly meet with the approval of the Pharisees either. So it may have been a risky venture for this lone Pharisee of high rank to meet with Jesus. What better way to acquaint himself with this Man who obviously had God with Him. We should perhaps note here the continuity between the beginning of chp. 3 and the end of chp. 2.

In our last study we noted from 2:23 that *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.* With that statement in mind look at the first thing Nicodemus says to Christ in 3:2 *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.* This statement makes it pretty clear, doesn't it, that Nicodemus would fit into that category of many that believed in His name on account of the miracles which He did.

And yet, as we noted in our last study, Jesus did not commit Himself to them. And we noted a phenomenon that we'll see again and again in the gospel of John and that is the phenomenon of those that believe but their belief comes short of true saving faith. There's a definite sense in which you could say that John brings that idea forward into this 3rd chapter of John.

If Nicodemus belongs to that category of believers that come short of saving faith then what's an appropriate word for such a person as that? – especially one that comes at night to inquire of the Lord? The answer is to be found in the very word that Jesus gives to Nicodemus the first time he addresses him. And what is that word? It's one that's very familiar to us all and yet has been completely abused and misused. Look at what Christ says in 3:3 *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.*

And notice the kind of emphasis that Jesus places on this truth. He precedes it with a double *verily*. And then he states it again with another double *verily* in v. 5 *Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* There's some different ideas about the meaning of being born by water and the Spirit. Some take the word *water* to be a reference to natural birth as if to say a man must be naturally and spiritually in order to see the kingdom of God. That view seems a little simplistic. Does really need to be said that a person must be born in order to be born again?

I prefer the explanation that sees two things that happen in regeneration. And let me pause here long enough to say that being born again means regeneration. In Titus 3:5 Paul mentions both of the things that are closely connected to regeneration. You could cross reference Titus 3:5 to this verse in Jn. 3:5. *Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.* Do you see the two elements to regeneration? There's *washing* which could correspond to being born of water and there's *renewal* which can correspond to being born of the Spirit. Regeneration amounts to cleansing and renewal.

What I want you to see just now in Jn. 3 is how forcefully Christ is making the point about being born again: *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God – v. 3; Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God – v. 5.* And Christ isn't through yet. In v. 7 He mentions it again and then expands the doctrine in v. 8. *Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

We don't know what Nicodemus would have expected when he approached Jesus by night. I think we can see without any fear of contradiction that whatever he was expecting he didn't expect to hear what he heard. What a lesson he was confronted with that night. Indeed, if you keep in mind that this discourse between Christ and Nicodemus runs through v. 21 then I think you could say that he learned quite a few lessons that evening. He learned about the new birth; he learned about Christ being lifted up; he learned about God's love for the world; he learned about condemnation.

I've given this message a title this morning based on these lessons that Nicodemus learned. I've entitled the message: Night Time Lessons for Nicodemus. I was going to utilize a longer title – Night Time Lessons for a Less than Courageous Pharisee, but it's probably better to stick with the shorter title – Night Time Lessons for Nicodemus. And in our study this morning I'm going to limit scope of our study to a single one of those lessons. We're going to think on the lesson that struck Nicodemus so hard. It's the lesson of regeneration. You can state it very concisely by the words of Christ at the end of v. 7:

Ye Must Be Born Again

I have 3 thoughts I'd like to leave with you springing from Christ's statement to Nicodemus. Let's note first:

I. The Universality of the Statement

When Christ said *Ye must be born again*, he was not talking to a novice. He was talking to a seasoned Pharisee and not just any Pharisee. We're told in v. 2 that Nicodemus was *a ruler of the Jews*. Here was a man, then, that would have climbed the ladder, so to speak, of the Jewish religion. He would have been very familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. And as a Pharisee he would have known to take the Old Testament literally.

And yet as seasoned a Pharisee as he was, here is Christ saying to him before he addresses any other topic or enters into any other sort of discussion that this man, this Pharisee, this ruler of the Jews must be born again. Perhaps we could draw a modern day analogy here with a man who earns his PhD in religious studies. He's gone through his undergraduate studies and earned a bachelor's degree. He then would have done work beyond that to earn some kind of Master's degree, perhaps a Master of Divinity. And then he goes further still and takes the needed classes that are required for a PhD which is followed by a dissertation that takes intense and extended effort to complete and then must be defended before a committee that's devoted to analyzing it very thoroughly.

I have the utmost respect for men that manage to complete such a course of study. Not everyone can do it. And yet if you can picture a man who has gone that route, and perhaps Nicodemus had, and then in his first interview with Christ, Christ is saying to him in effect that he has to start over – sort of like saying to that man who earned his PhD – *you have to go back to kindergarten. You do not understand the first principles of religion.*

We need not wonder why Nicodemus was so taken back by this statement by Christ. It must have smacked hard against the man's pride and his flesh. It's as if Christ is saying to him that in spite of his being a ruler and a Master in Israel, he did not know what he needed to know. Listen to what John MacArthur says about this discourse between Nicodemus and Christ:

“Some view this passage of Scripture as a statement about how easy it is to believe on Jesus Christ. That's not the point of this episode at all. It's true that here we see the simplicity of the gospel outlined clearly, but Jesus was not bringing this self-righteous Pharisee a message of easy-believism. On the contrary, our Lord challenged everything the man stood for. In the course of their dialogue, Jesus confronted Nicodemus's spurious faith, his works-based religion, his Pharisaical righteousness, and his biblical illiteracy. The Savior called for nothing short of complete regeneration. Without such a spiritual rebirth, He told Nicodemus, no man has any hope of eternal life. Nicodemus was clearly jolted by Jesus' words, and there is no evidence in this passage that his immediate response was positive¹.”

¹ The Gospel According to Jesus – John MacArthur, p. 38
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The point I want to impress upon you now is that if what Christ was saying was true for a seasoned Pharisee who was also a ruler of the Jews and a Master in Israel, then it's true for each one here. *Ye must be born again*. Perhaps no other statement in all the Bible lifts true Christianity out of the realm of the academic and places it in the realm of the experiential. Regeneration, you see, means new life. It means old things have passed away and all things have become new.

You're probably as aware as I am that this phrase *born again* has become just about the most misused phrase in the English language. Listen to this scathing remark by a well known preacher who has just cited a number of poll results taken by the Barna Group. The Barna Group, if you don't know it, is a group like the Gallup Poll group only the Barna Group focuses on religion issues.

“Now I want to say loud and clear that when the Barna Group uses the term “born again” to describe American church-goers whose lives are indistinguishable from the world, and who sin as much as the world, and sacrifice for others as little as the world, and embrace injustice as readily as the world, and covet things as greedily as the world, and enjoy God-ignoring entertainment as enthusiastically as the world – when the term “born again” is used to describe these professing Christians, the Barna Group is making a profound mistake. It is using the biblical term “born again” in a way that would make it unrecognizable by Jesus and the biblical writers.”²

The phrase has been so abused and misused that it's true meaning is lost on many that even profess to be Christians. And again I want to emphasize under this heading that the term applies to everyone, of every age, and every vocation, and every level of achievement whether that achievement be academic or just climbing the ropes to go to the head of the company. It's as true for the CEO as it is for the man who pushes the broom – *ye must be born again*.

Let's move on to consider secondly:

II. The Basic Nature of the Statement

Nicodemus, as John MacArthur points out was jolted by the statement *ye must be born again*. You have to think that he immediately saw the ramifications of such a statement. If this new birth is necessary to see the kingdom of God then it's quite apparent that Christ was saying to Nicodemus that he was lost.

Well Nicodemus wasn't going to hear such a statement without at least attempting to raise some resistance to it. And so he enters into the symbolism of Christ's language and says to Christ in v. 4 *How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?* And when Christ presses the matter on him with a second round of a *double verily* statement - *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be*

² From a sermon by John Piper – Olive Tree Bible Study
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born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Nicodemus is so taken back that the only thing he can manage to say is *How can these things be?*

And at that point Christ makes it very plain that what He's saying about regeneration was not some highfalutin, mysterious and speculative notion of theology but was in fact something very basic – so basic that Nicodemus should have known it. Verse 10: *Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?* Now it's here that our Authorized Version perhaps doesn't catch the force of Christ's statement as much as some other English versions do. Just about any modern translation you read takes note of the definite article in the statement and reads like this: *Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?* Nicodemus evidently was not simply a teacher, he was *the teacher of Israel*. When we read in our Authorized Versions that he was a *Master of Israel* it's indicating to us that Nicodemus was a teacher of high rank.

And yet he didn't know about the new birth. He didn't know the doctrine of regeneration. Christ considered it very basic but Nicodemus didn't know it. Apparently theology had fallen into hard times during the days Christ walked this earth. We can certainly relate to that. It's fallen on hard times in our day as well. The kind of evangelism that has dominated the scene in our day (Billy Graham style evangelism) I dare say takes no account of this truth. Oh, they'll use the phrase *born again* but they'll misrepresent it as if it's something within man's power to produce.

I can remember turning in a paper in one of my Bible classes in which I expressed the view that regeneration precedes faith and the paper came back with a note on the side in red ink that my statement simply was not true. Men find such a notion to be offensive and that leads to my next point of consideration in our study. We've seen how the statement applies universally and how it should be very basic to a Christian's understanding of the gospel, just like Nicodemus should have known it. Let's consider now:

III. The Offensiveness of the Statement

When Christ said to Nicodemus that he should *marvel not* at Christ's statement *ye must be born again*, the implication is that Nicodemus was indeed marveling. The word *marvel* means *to wonder at*. One version reads *Do not be amazed* another version puts it *Do not be surprised*.

And yet given the seriousness of the matter and the clear implications of the matter, it would have been hard for a man of Nicodemus's stature not to be initially offended at the notion of having to be born again. After all, Christ's statement meant that for all the learning and experience Nicodemus possessed he was still outside the realm of God's kingdom and he could not even see it apart from being born again.

He may have been tempted to think that his knowledge of the law and the time he had spent devoting himself to learning and teaching the law was all for naught. And in a sense he would have been right to harbor that notion. One of his associates who would be

converted a few years later, the Apostle Paul would write to the Galatians in Gal. 2:21 *I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness [come] by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.*

And to the Philippians this former Pharisee would write *Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: 5 Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; 6 Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. 7 But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.*

This is what Nicodemus was being confronted with – counting everything loss for Christ. And in the case of Nicodemus everything would have included all those years he devoted to studying law especially as he viewed the law as having anything at all to do with his salvation. This is not to say that his knowledge of the law couldn't be useful to him. He just had to learn that by the law is the knowledge of sin and that the law was given that sin might become exceeding sinful. He needed to learn how a right understanding of the law would drive him to Christ because he'd see how far short he came to keeping the law.

If I could cite those words from John MacArthur again when he wrote: “Our Lord challenged everything the man stood for. In the course of their dialogue, Jesus confronted Nicodemus's spurious faith, his works-based religion, his Pharisaical righteousness, and his biblical illiteracy.”

So the notion of being born again would have been offensive to Nicodemus for those reasons. But still further it would have been offensive to him because it put salvation completely beyond him. In verse 8 Christ asserts the sovereignty of God and especially the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in salvation: *The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

Can we not hear Christ saying in these words the very thing that the prophet Jonah many years earlier would say from the belly of the whale that *salvation is of the Lord*. God designed it; Christ executed it; and the Holy Spirit applies it. It's all of Him from start to finish. So far as man is concerned, he's depraved; he's totally depraved. Rom. 8:7,8: *Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.* And 1Cor. 2:14 *But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*

A man may study religion – indeed a man may devote himself to the study of God's law and yet be no closer to the kingdom of God than Nicodemus was. You begin to see, then, how Christ was not conveying to Nicodemus an easy-believism message. He was, in fact, confronting Nicodemus with his true spiritual condition. And after Nicodemus asks *how can these things be?* – we never hear another word out of him, not in this discourse

anyway. We will hear from him again. In fact before we're through we'll have good reason to believe that this seasoned Pharisee may very well have been born again.

But it would seem at least initially that he may have ducked out of this initial night time interview with Christ the same the rich young ruler did which was to go away sad. Sad because his learning counted for nothing in terms of gaining heaven. Sad that his personal righteousness did not qualify him for heaven. Sad that salvation was beyond him. And keep in mind the first point of the message this morning. What's true for Nicodemus is true for us all. Just as surely as Nicodemus needed to be born again, so do you and do I. And this leads to my final point this morning which is simply this:

IV. What is The Proper Response to Such a Message as This?

Ye must be born again! Christ doesn't present this truth to Nicodemus in such a way as to call for a decision. Are we to hear such words and then simply shrug our shoulders in indifference to them since we don't have it in us to make ourselves become born again? Christ didn't leave the matter there. It's important to note that this dialogue between Christ and Nicodemus continues down to verse 21.

There were other lessons that Nicodemus would learn from Christ during that night time interview. He would learn that Christ must be lifted up the same way Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. And I wonder this morning – how often have you read or quoted John 3:16 without even considering that these words were spoken to Nicodemus: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* Those words have become so large that we tend to forget the setting in which they were spoken.

And there's now to be found a certain irony to those words. After all didn't I say in my introduction that Nicodemus could be classified with those Jews that are mentioned in 2:23 where we're told that many believed in Jesus but Jesus did not commit Himself to them. If Nicodemus arose as one among the many who believed then why does Christ now tell him to believe?

I think Christ tells him to believe because this is where our focus must be. As Christians we should never be presumptuous with regard to our faith. That was the problem with the Jews. That was the problem with Nicodemus. I think John, in writing his gospel, would have those that profess faith in Christ avoid that kind of presumption and instead examine ourselves with regard to our faith and conduct that examination with this issue in view – Have you been born again? Has your life been transformed by Christ? Or do you find yourself to be among many that say they believe in Christ but are still conformed to the world?

We're to make our calling and election sure. And we're to tend to our faith. We're not ever to become complacent to the point of indifference about our faith. And unfortunately there are many that do treat their faith that way. Now please don't misunderstand me this morning. I know that I have to be very careful here. I'm not asking you if you're perfect

nor am I asking you if your faith is perfect. The longer I continue in my own Christian life the more thankful I become that the Lord saw fit to have Paul write those words in Romans 7 where Paul speaks of failing to do the things he ought while succeeding in doing the things that he shouldn't. The struggles against the world and the flesh and the devil will not cease as long as we're in this world.

So how do I discern my spiritual condition? And what do I do if in my own judgment I'm found wanting? If you've truly been born again then you'll take it all to Christ. You won't cave in the way Judas did to anguish and despair which led to him going and hanging himself. No, you'll take the matter to Christ. You'll go to Him in the assurance of what John tells us in 1Jn. 1:9 that *If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

So we go to Christ and we tend to our faith, recognizing as we do that it needs to and it can grow stronger. *Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God* – so we attend to God's word with the aim of strengthening our faith. And we put our salvation to work. This is what Paul means when he writes to the Philippians *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*

This is not to say we work for our salvation but that we put our salvation to work by prayer and by ministering to others. These are the marks of the man who has been born again. He goes to Christ as a matter of habit not as a one time event. Repentance becomes his practice for life and tending to his faith becomes his practice for life and worshiping Christ and being among Christ's people become the things that he's devoted to the most.

So that's the response to Christ's stated truth – *ye must be born again.* Examine your life, tend to your faith, repent of your sins and go to Christ. May God help us all so to do.