

## JESUS SAYS, "YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN"

John 3:1-21

Key Verse: 3:3

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

In chapter three, Jesus talks with a man named Nicodemus. He had what he wanted--honor, power and wealth. And yet Nicodemus came to Jesus at night for help. In this passage, Jesus teaches us that human success is temporal and to know the spiritual reality is everything. Jesus also teaches us that we must be born again when we want to know the spiritual reality. May God richly bless you when you hear a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus.

### I. Nicodemus needed to see the kingdom of God (1-9)

First, a man named Nicodemus (1-2). What kind of person was Nicodemus? Verse 1 says, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council." In the first place, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. "Pharisee" meant "separated," or "an elite." The party of the Pharisees began in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah in an attempt to renovate their country after the Jews returned from 70 years of Babylonian captivity. During those times, Ezra encouraged his people to live by the law of God, by overcoming their sinful desires. Some of them overcame the cultural diseases of Babylon until they became known as the Pharisees. When they lived by the law of God, in the matter of time, God blessed them abundantly. But to become a Pharisee was not easy. To become a Pharisee, any man from his boyhood had to go through rigorous training. These days, most eighth grade teachers are satisfied if their students can memorize the Gettysburg Address. But a young boy in training to become a Pharisee was required to memorize the five books of Moses, and then began a study of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Pharisee candidates also had to practice demanding rituals such as [fasting prayer and](#) bathing three times a day. Nicodemus pummeled himself in order to climb up to the respected position. At last he became a Pharisee.

He was also a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, which was made up of 70 members. They say that one who hoped to be a Sanhedrin member had to master the subjects of mathematics, politics, oratory, philosophy, history, medicine, and astronomy. A Sanhedrin member also had to be a rich man despite the poor and downtrodden national situation of those times. Nicodemus had made it to the top. He was now a man of standing in his country. He had no reason to come to Jesus at night secretly. But he came despite his social standing. What motivated him to come to Jesus? Look at verse 2. "He 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.'" He came to Jesus because of Jesus' power to perform the miraculous signs. He needed a kind of miraculous power to cope with himself. Nicodemus should have been happy. But he was not. He was so miserable to maintain his life that he came to Jesus for help.

Second, Nicodemus needed to see the kingdom of God (3). Nicodemus was

the envy of all his people, especially the women of Israel. However, living among the selfish people of the world, he was tired and weary. Moreover, his political life made him a first-class liar, and hypocrisy before his suffering people made him feel he was a man of controversy. What is more, after success, to him every good thing under the sun seemed meaningless, indeed meaningless. He thought that he would be happy as soon as he had obtained what he wanted. But his human dream was nothing but a piece of cloud. Nicodemus had never imagined it, but now he was covered with gray hair, and time was rushing by like a stream of water. In addition, the shadow of death was hovering over him.

These days we see that rich people and their children have a higher suicide rate than poor people. Probably, Nicodemus was one of them. Verse 2 says, "He 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.'" Until now, Nicodemus had struggled very hard to climb up the peak of success with his own will-power. But he was powerless to control his destiny, which seemed to have been falling down to a bottomless pit. After hope, despair pursued him doggedly. As his fame was great, the burden of his life was greater. Nicodemus finally realized that there was a great human limitation. Finally Nicodemus had to turn his head to Jesus for help.

What did Jesus say to Nicodemus? Look at verse 3. "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." In this verse, the word "see" has the meaning of "experience." Jesus saw that Nicodemus needed to know the spiritual reality, which transcends the limited world and its agonies. Those who see the spiritual reality can experience the joy of heaven and real peace of mind. Those who experience the spiritual reality can overcome the anxieties of the world. Those who experience the spiritual reality can rejoice in the living hope of the kingdom of God. This is the reason Jesus said to him, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (3). Nicodemus had to be born again to see the spiritual reality, that is, the kingdom of God.

Third, how to be born again (4-7). Many people say many things about the meaning of being born again. Some think to be born again is to experience a sort of emotional high. Some think to be born again requires the help of witchcraft. That is not true. The Bible teaches us that we are born again when we accept one word of God in our hearts. That is true. Martin Luther was born again when he accepted Romans 1:17b, which says, "The righteous will live by faith." Saint Augustine was born again when he received Romans 13:13,14. It says, "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Among many, Peter expressed the idea of being born again most excellently. 1 Peter 1:23 says, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." In this verse we learn that the way of being born again is to believe the promise of God's word. To be born again is to have a living hope in the kingdom of God, which was possible through Jesus' death and

resurrection (1 Pe 1:3,4). Those who are born again spiritually by believing the word of God's promise receive a new life. They can miraculously understand spiritual things. Also, they can see the kingdom of God. This is exactly what Nicodemus needed.

By the way, what was Nicodemus' response to Jesus' teaching? He asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" (4) He should have understood Jesus' spiritual teaching. Nicodemus was too proud to accept his teaching. Because of his proud mind, the word of life did not get into his heart. He heard the divine voice through Jesus but he just rejected it.

Jesus could have abandoned him because of his proud response. But Jesus did not give up on him. Jesus continued to speak in verse 5. "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (5). If he were not born again, Nicodemus would not experience the spiritual reality. What is worse, he would not enter the kingdom of God. Jesus really wanted to save Nicodemus' soul. So he taught him patiently how to be born again, saying, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (6). Jesus taught him self-evident truth in a way even a child can understand that man is both body and spirit. As he was born by flesh, so he must be born again by the Spirit. Man has both physical life and spiritual life. But Nicodemus had completely ignored spiritual reality as he lived in this hard world. So it was hard for him to accept Jesus' teaching. Anyway Nicodemus was surprised by Jesus' teaching because it was self-evident truth. He was in a dilemma to accept Jesus' word or not. At this moment, Jesus said, "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again'" (7). To Nicodemus, it was a surprising fact that he must be born again. In order to be born again he had to live a new life, giving up all his old lifestyle, as well as his attachment to this world. Nicodemus could not accept Jesus' teaching immediately. So he talked back to Jesus. "'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!'" (4) His rebellious response was intentional.

Fourth, the work of the Holy Spirit (8-9). How did Jesus help him to acknowledge the spiritual world? Jesus explained that the work of the Holy Spirit makes it possible to see the spiritual reality. Look at verse 8. "The 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." Here Jesus explained that if Nicodemus accepted his word, the Holy Spirit would work in him until he would be changed. All Nicodemus had to do was ask God's mercy and wait on the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. But again Nicodemus asked, "How?" His "how" sounds logical. Nevertheless, he did not listen to what Jesus had said concerning the way to be born again through the work of the Holy Spirit. If he had listened and depended on the work of the Holy Spirit, he would have been a changed person. If sinful human beings have \$5 in their pockets, or a dying husband, they depend on the things of the world instead of depending on God. As long as they have physical life, they think that it is not necessary to have eternal life. They don't feel that they must have a living hope in the kingdom of God by means of being born again. This was the attitude of

Nicodemus, and at the same time all fallen men's mentality.

## II. The way to the kingdom of God (10-21)

First, the Son of Man must be lifted up (10-15). Jesus did not give up despite Nicodemus' arrogance. Look at verse 10. "'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things?'" Nicodemus had a privilege and divine obligation as the teacher of Israel. He should have known about the kingdom of God and planted faith in the hearts of his suffering people. But he did not. He studied the Bible diligently and became a Pharisee. But he studied for the sake of his own success. So when Jesus taught him how to see the kingdom of God and enter the kingdom of God by being born again, he could not understand what Jesus was talking about. To him, Jesus' teaching was like reading a Confucian classic to a puppy dog. Nicodemus had a tremendous amount of common sense about the Bible. But he did not know that man is both body and spirit (11-12).

Nicodemus was spiritually blind and was groundlessly proud. But Jesus had great mercy on him. More than anything else, Nicodemus needed to accept Jesus' word and know him personally to solve his despair and the heavy burden of his sins. He needed to look up at Jesus to be saved and to have eternal life. So Jesus taught him the way of salvation. Look at verses 14,15. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." The people of Israel rebelled against God and against Moses. Because of their sin, they were plagued by poisonous snakes that were all around them, wiggling and hissing, to bite them to death. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole so that the people of Israel would look at it and be healed. When they looked up at the bronze snake, they were healed and saved (Nu 21:4-9). Jesus told this story so that somehow Nicodemus might listen to him and be saved from his agony of life as well as eternal condemnation.

Second, men invite condemnation upon themselves (16-21). In spite of Nicodemus' pride, Jesus gave him the Bible verse which has been known the best among Bible verses down through the generations. Look at verse 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" (16). We must not reject God's love. We must accept God's love in our hearts so that we can see the kingdom of God and enter the kingdom of God.

Many intellectual people ask, "How can a God of love condemn people to hell? Why does God condemn at all if God is love?" But God never condemns anyone. Read verses 17,18. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever 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." These days there are many Christians who ignore a love-relationship with Jesus. It is not a light matter. If one does not have a love-relationship with Jesus, he stands condemned. Christianity is to maintain a love-relationship with Jesus. If only we maintain a love-relationship with Jesus, nothing can matter--really nothing can matter.

What was Nicodemus' real problem? Read verses 19-21. "This is the

verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But 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." According to these verses, Nicodemus' real problem was his sin. He loved the darkness more than the light. While living in this world, he tried hard not to, but he committed sin--little by little. Now his sin had piled up higher than the Empire State Building. He loved the world so much that he hated to come into the light of Jesus. As a result, he was carrying a heavy burden of sin on his shoulders and groaning day and night. Rejecting God's invitation was not a small matter.

Today we learn that man is both body and flesh. Also, we must accept Jesus' word so that we can see the kingdom of God. We also can enter the kingdom of God.