

YOU MUST BE BORN A SECOND TIME

John 3: 1-13 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

How many of us turn on the lights in the morning when we wake up? How many of us know the science behind how electricity works? Could we pass a test explaining electricity? How many of us know what makes our cars and trucks run when we turn on the switch, or put on our brakes and push a button? Could we pass a test explaining how engines work? How many of us know the reason why we see pictures of people on our television screens? Could we pass a test explaining the science of how we get video images on a screen? But we use electricity successfully, drive our cars and trucks, and watch television without knowing how it happens. Sometimes we let the enemy of our souls convince us that we can't witness the Gospel message unless we can fully explain the mystery of the Gospel and how we are born again. Dr. John Hutton in England spoke of a long-time drunkard who was gloriously saved, born again. His buddies at work mocked him. They tried every possible way to make him feel like a fool, wanting him to join them again in their drinking habit. One of his buddies said, "Surely you don't believe Jesus turned water into wine, do you? This new convert answered him, "I don't know whether Jesus turned water into wine when He was in Palestine, but I know in my home here in England, He turned beer into furniture."

There are many lessons to learn in this meeting of Nicodemus with Jesus at night. (1) We can be very religious and not be born again. (2) We may be able to see God working in Jesus, but never have Jesus working in us. (3) We have no option to being born again, for we must be spiritually born again, or we will forever be eternally lost. (4) We know that human nature begets human nature, babies, and all of us were born as infants who were spiritually dead. Only by the Holy Spirit are we spiritually begotten of God. The Spirit of God doesn't beget God's spiritual life in us apart from Jesus. (5) We must be united to the Holy Spirit to become born of God. The Holy Spirit moves us into union with Christ through saving faith so eternal life is ours, giving us a place in God's family. All these lessons are part of understanding the miracle of the greatest experience in life, being born again. In studying this text, four questions emerge that need answers. Let's learn the answers to all four questions, as the last three of the four were answered by Jesus.

WHO WAS NICODEMUS WHO CAME TO JESUS BY NIGHT? (I.) Notice with me. We read, in John 3:1a "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." The last three questions give Jesus' answer, and build on the foundation of finding out who Nicodemus really was. Nicodemus' name was a Greek name, though he was a Jew. His name means "victor over the people." Nicodemus asked Jesus how a man could be born again when he is old, implying that Nicodemus considered himself to be an older man. John 3:1 tells us he belonged to the religious party known as Pharisees, known for such great men as Gamaliel, Josephus, and Saul; who became the apostle Paul. The Pharisees lived to conform to the law of Moses and the man-made traditions of their famous rabbis. Their lives were all about image and externalized religion which was their goal of human existence. They lived lives of "holier than thou," that Jesus said would never gain eternal salvation by works. Jesus said in Matthew 5:20, "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. The Pharisees never numbered more than 6,000 men who called themselves **chaburah**, meaning the brotherhood. They entered the brotherhood by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the law and scribal law. That meant to

them, the first five books of the Bible, the Torah meaning instruction, which they said was the beginning and the ending of the Word of God. To add one word or take one word away was a deadly sin. Thus, the Pharisees said, “The law is complete; it contains everything necessary for living a good life. Therefore, in the law there must be a rule and a regulation to govern every possible incident in every possible moment of life for every possible man.” So, the Pharisees fleshed out the meaning of the Torah—the first five books of Moses, in minute definitions in codified scribal law. They made their scribal laws into one book -- the Mishnah, meaning “the repeated study.” They wrote a commentary on their Mishnah called the Talmud, which means study. Thus, the Pharisees studied the Torah (meaning instruction) the five books of Moses, and they studied their Mishnah, “their repeated study” of Moses’ instructions and then they studied their Talmud, the study of Moses instructions and their Mishnah. The legalistic, scrupulous way the Mishnah and Talmud were written by the scribes and Pharisees knew no bounds.

The best example of what the Pharisees wrote to be seen of men is found in their Sabbath laws. For a woman to pull out a gray hair on the Sabbath was working, violating the Sabbath. You could swallow vinegar on the Sabbath, as a remedy for a sore throat, but to gargle was called working, and was prohibited. If a hen laid an egg on the Sabbath, that egg could only be eaten provided you intended later in the week to kill the hen to eat it. Suppose a man wished to let down a bucket into a well to draw water on the Sabbath. He could not tie a rope to the bucket, for such a knot was illegal on the Sabbath, but he could tie the bucket to a woman’s girdle and let the bucket down, because a knot in a woman’s girdle was legal. So, who was Nicodemus? He was a “salvation by works” teacher of the law—Jesus tells us he was **the** teacher—the top teacher of Israel in John 3:10, who was limited to walking no farther than one thousand yards on the Sabbath. Nicodemus was a ruler—the Greek word is **archon** meaning, he was one of the 70 members of the Sanhedrin, which was the supreme court of the Jews who had as their leader the high priest making 71 total members. Nicodemus was rich. You remember that after Jesus was crucified, he and Joseph of Arimathea, who had become secret disciples of Jesus, brought 75 pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes, that at today’s cost, would be close to a quarter million dollars-worth of spices. Now we turn from the general question about Nicodemus to three questions by Nicodemus.

WHAT MUST I DO TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN? (II.) Nicodemus began his talk with Jesus by night with a courteous, some would say, flattering address. He hailed Jesus as a Rabbi, teacher come from God. Notice John 3:1b-2. “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 signs that You do unless God is with him.” Though Nicodemus was a works-based Pharisee, his heart seemed open to know the truth. He wanted to know who this man was who was performing miraculous signs and to find out what message Jesus had for him.

We learned last week about Jesus’ all-knowingness, His omniscience, so we know Jesus knew what Nicodemus was thinking and what question was on his mind. Nicodemus was waiting for Messiah to come to establish His kingdom on earth. He had seen some of Jesus’ signs and miracles, and seen His authority unleashed in cleansing the temple. Was this the One to bring in the kingdom of God? Jesus knew Nicodemus would be startled by His answer, but Jesus declined to carry on any courteous exchanges that would get nowhere. Jesus plunged into the very heart of Nicodemus, which was a sinful heart like mine and yours. We were all born wrong, born in sin, and there is no basis in our first

birth to negotiate a plan of salvation for us or anyone. The dilemma of Nicodemus is your dilemma and mine. Like the rich man in Matthew 19:16, who said, “Rabbi, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” Nicodemus was ready to say or do anything in his power to meet Jesus’ criteria for him to be saved by good works. Jesus’ answer in John 3:3 proves that Jesus knew the question of Nicodemus before he asked it. Jesus simply passed up any courteous replies, and His words cut to the chase. Nicodemus was never given the chance to translate into words the question deep inside his inner soul. Jesus knew the question so he said, “Truly, truly, or verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Jesus was saying, “If you think you can make it by being a Pharisee, you’re just fooling yourself. You’ve got to be born again.” Jesus in his answer swept away all Nicodemus stood for. Jesus said, in essence, “You must be remade spiritually by the power of God.

Now, if Nicodemus had read his Torah, he would have remembered Genesis 6: 5 as we read, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Jesus was telling Nicodemus what he was never taught. “No human being is naturally fit to see the kingdom of God, much less to enter it.” No doubt Nicodemus would have known of Job’s words in Job 14: 4, saying, “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one.” Surely Nicodemus knew David said in the Psalms in Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Surely Nicodemus remembered that Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 13:23, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?” Jesus was ringing a death knell in Nicodemus’ ears about his idea of works-righteousness. Jesus was telling him that there is not one thing that any of us can do of ourselves that would make us fit to see or enter the kingdom of God. Jesus calls for a radical change that no one can achieve by outward behavior. Jesus was saying that not even being born a Jew gives any help, priority, or advantage in the matter of seeing or entering the kingdom of God. 3rdly, Nicodemus’ 3rd question:

HOW CAN A MAN BE BORN WHEN HE IS OLD? (III.) Listen to Nicodemus in John 3:4. “Nicodemus said to Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus could only hear in Jesus’ words a woodenly literal meaning that was absurd. Giving birth to six-to-eight-pound babies is one of the hardest labors in the world. But Nicodemus went ahead and said the absurd, “Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Now Jesus complicated what was already absurd to Nicodemus by saying in John 3:5-7, “Truly, truly, 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 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.” In the heart of Nicodemus was a great unsatisfied longing and yearning. The idea Jesus was speaking of must have sounded necessary and wonderful, but it sounded impossible in his experience.

It was as if Jesus was saying to him, a grown man now old he had to enter into his mother’s womb and be born all over again. It was not the desirability of this born again experience that Nicodemus questioned, but the possibility of it. In this works—righteousness man was an eternal problem. It was and still is for millions, the problem of a person who wants to be changed, but who realizes he cannot change himself. When Jesus said “water,” He wasn’t talking about Christian baptism, which is a picture of death, not life, a picture of dying to sin, being buried in baptism. Could Jesus have been speaking of John’s baptism, a baptism of repentance, and repentance is part of the Gospel

message Jesus preached. That sign of repentance is valuable indeed, as a pictorial representation, but the sign must be accompanied by the thing signified—speaking of the cleansing of the Holy Spirit. It is possible Jesus could have meant a baptism of repentance was not all Nicodemus needed, and that Spirit baptism inside us must follow, being cleansed inside of our sin and iniquity. The Holy Spirit alone produces a sanctified human nature. The Holy Spirit must plant in believing hearts God’s life from above.

Yet, the obvious meaning of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus seems to be that Jesus was not speaking of any kind of baptism at all when He spoke of being born of water. Rather, the most simple, natural, and meaningful meaning of what Jesus said was that since He was speaking of a spiritual birth, two births were necessary. First, He was speaking of our physical birth of water. To be “born of water,” is to be born physically, in our first birth. D.A. Carson on page 191 of his commentary states, “To support this view, water has been understood to refer to the amniotic fluid that breaks from the womb shortly before childbirth.” This is a picture of our physical birth. Being born again of the Spirit, being born the second time is what Nicodemus was missing, and what each of us are missing prior to our born-again experience when Jesus saved us and regenerated us.

When we were born physically, we had two parents, a dad, and a mom. When we are born again, Jesus says it is by the Spirit of God and by the Word of God. Warren Wiersbe well said it, “The Spirit of God takes the Word of God when the sinner believes, and the Spirit imparts the life of God to us when we believe in God’s Word.” Jesus said in John 3:6, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. James explained in James 1:18, “Of His own will, He brought us forth by the Word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creation. Peter added in I Peter 1:23, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God.”

Jesus added an impacting word to Nicodemus in John 3:7, saying, “Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.” Jesus didn’t tell Nicodemus in his works-righteousness to hurry and do something when He said, “You must be born again.” Jesus wasn’t assigning Nicodemus with a moral duty. He wasn’t saying, “By all means see to it that you are born again.” No, Jesus was making a divine decree. Jesus was saying, “Something from the Holy Spirit must happen to you. The Holy Spirit must sovereignly blow on you and plant in your heart divine life from above.” To explain Himself, Jesus used the illustration of the wind, v.8—saying, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So, it is with everyone who is born again. Nobody including Nicodemus can direct the wind. Wind acts with complete independence. Wind can be felt, but apart from dust or dirt, wind cannot be seen. The place wind ultimately is going is uncertain, incomprehensible, mysterious, and unknown. Nicodemus was brought up by his training, to do it himself and to save himself by perfect obedience to the law. Jesus said, “It will never happen by your complete obedience to the law of Moses, and the scribal law of the Pharisees. Jesus’ words are so important today. (Think of Ephesians 2: 8-9) Fourthly, lastly,

HOW CAN THESE THINGS BE? (IV.) We read in John 3:9, “Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you **the** teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Nicodemus was slow in even starting to unlearn spiritual truth because of his works-righteousness training. To hear that salvation by grace through faith, by being born again, was a gift of God’s sovereign grace was strange

to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was pondering now, as Jesus gripped his attention completely. Nicodemus was understanding that though no man can see the work of the Holy Spirit, yet the effects of being born again are very visible in human life. John W. Peterson puts Jesus' words to Nicodemus into a glorious song. "O what a wonderful, wonderful-day, Day I will never forget After I'd wandered in darkness away Jesus my Savior I met; O what a tender compassionate friend He met the need of my heart Shadows dispelling with joy I am telling He made all the darkness depart, Chorus: Heaven came down and glory filled my soul When at the cross the Savior made me whole My sins were washed away And my night was turned to day Heaven came down and glory filled my soul. (2) Born of the Spirit with life from above Into God's family divine, Justified fully through Calvary's love. O what a standing is mine And the transaction so quickly was made When as a sinner I came Took of the offer of grace He did proffer; He saved me O praise His dear name. Now I've a hope that will surely endure After the passing of time. I have a future in heaven for sure There in those mansions sublime And it's because of that wonderful day When at the cross I believed; Riches eternal and blessings supernal from His precious hand I received.

Many of us have been raised in church, just like Nicodemus was raised with a view to working our way to heaven, so that our good outweighs our bad. False doctrine can inoculate us so we fail to catch the real way to be saved. When Nicodemus asked Jesus how in the world salvation could happen—"How can these things be?"-- Jesus answered him, (John 3: 10 "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" Jesus was speaking elementary truths of about being born again, being regenerated, and being saved. Jesus might well say this to thousands of pastors and professors in seminaries today. Jesus might say, "Do you mean you are a church elder, a church deacon, or deaconess, a seminary professor, an ordained minister, a Sunday School teacher, an evangelist, or a Christian bookseller and author, and yet you don't know these elementary things about being saved? Why will Jesus say at the Judgment, in Matthew 7:21-23, that many will start saying, "Lord, Lord, look at what we have done for you. Did we not prophesy in Your Name, and cast out demons in Your Name, and do many mighty works in Your Name?" And then Jesus said, "I will declare to them, "I never knew you, depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity and lawlessness."

Jesus stopped His dialogue with Nicodemus and began a discourse. He confronted Nicodemus with his unbelief, saying in Jn. 3:11, "Truly, truly, I say to you, we (both John the Baptist and I) we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony." Nicodemus, by his unwillingness to think outside his physical, external box, proved to Jesus that he and the Pharisees were not receiving His testimony. The word you in verse 11 is plural. Jesus was saying, "You (all) won't receive what John the Baptist said and taught, and now you won't believe Me." Jesus added in verses 12-13, "If I have told you earthly things (about physical birth that is not the same as spiritual birth, and about how the Spirit is like the wind, and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Then Jesus must have stunned Nicodemus. He in essence said, "To have first-hand information about heavenly matters and salvation, one must have been there when such eternal plans were made in God's throne room. In verse 13, Jesus said, "No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." Now Nicodemus must have sat there in awe, listening as Jesus called Himself the Son of Man, (thus Messiah) as the prophet Daniel called Him in Daniel 7:13, he who comes on the clouds of heaven. Jesus' discourse wasn't over, but Nicodemus was all ears. Faith was knocking at his door. Faith comes by hearing...Amen.