

New Birth

HN/SS 9/05/04am

Reading: Ezekiel 36, John 3:1-21

Study: John 3:1-11

Psalms: 57:1-5, 14, 51:1-9, 51:10-17

While studying in the US a friend of mine and his wife had a baby. They came back to India but when that child turned 18 he applied for and received an American passport. He was a citizen of the US because he was born there. Now there are other ways to become a US citizen but there are some countries where this is the only way you can be a true citizen – you must be born there.

But you say if one is already born, as is obviously the case, how can they possibly be born in that country. It is impossible for a person to become a citizen of that country. That was exactly what Nicodemus said – *how can a man be born when he is old?*

The Man – Nicodemus

Who was Nicodemus and why did he come to Jesus – why did he come at night?

He was Pharisee – a Separatist. Pharisees sought to obey the Law of Moses in every detail, even in the mass of detail that they added. While right in many points of doctrine they saw obedience to the law as the way to get eternal life. They focused on outward compliance and so came into conflict with Jesus who looked to the heart. Jesus *knew what was in man* (2:25).

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, on the Sanhedrin. He was a 'heavy'. Verse 4 indicates he may have been old. He was a teacher of the law – he knew the law inside out. The Prophets were a bit more a challenge for him to understand. They spoke of a coming one, an anointed one, the Messiah. Messianic expectation was high at this time. Phillip said we have found the Messiah (1:41).

Did Nicodemus come seeking an answer to that same question – are you the Messiah? We don't know because Jesus cut him short with an answer to the deeper question on the heart of this man. He answered the question 'how do I enter the Kingdom of God' or more simply 'how can I be saved'? Some have compared this ruler with the rich young ruler (Luke 18) who asked Jesus the question *what must I do to inherit eternal life*. They think of Nicodemus as the rich old ruler!

Nicodemus approached Jesus at night. Why at night we are not told but it is a tag that stuck to him (7:50, 19:39). Maybe it was for fear of the other Jews although opposition was not great at this stage. Maybe it was just a more convenient time to sit and talk together. His approach was courteous with nothing to indicate sarcasm in his words.

Nicodemus was of course a proud Jew. He came to hear what Jesus had to say and make his own assessment of who Jesus was. He had seen the signs Jesus did – note the plural – and was willing at this point in time to see him as a *teacher come from God*. He wanted to learn, to know more about Jesus but was certainly not ready to jettison his Pharisaism and the doctrine of works he held to.

I am reminded of a fellow giving a talk some years ago. He was a preacher of some sort. He said he was slowly putting all the pieces of the puzzle together – he was getting there doing a fine job he thought. I thought you had better hurry up old fellow or you will die first!

This is the situation in our proud and pluralistic age is it not? Every man can mix up his own concoction of what he calls religion. A bit of this and a bit of that. 'I believe this they will tell you'. On what basis you ask – how do you know it is true? Oh religion is a personal thing they will answer – I don't talk about it.

Jesus did not allow Nicodemus to continue on the path of assessing who Jesus was. Jesus confronted him with truth – are you in the Kingdom of God or not. Do you know the way to enter the Kingdom of God – there is only one way to do so.

The Place – Kingdom of God

Amen, amen (Truly, truly) I say to you unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God.

Jesus did not perform signs (or miracles) just for curiosity. Jesus was not an entertainer come to do a bit of magic, perform a bit of the supernatural. He had not come just to make people feel better. He came to save people from sin and from death. He came *saying the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel* (Mark 1:15).

The signs pointed people to Jesus himself and his Kingdom – note the only signs given thus far in ch.2. *He was speaking of the temple of his body.* Jesus came down from heaven; he left his heavenly abode, to dwell among men. He told Pilate *my kingdom is not of this world.* Having completed the task the Father sent him to do he was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. He lives and rules in the Kingdom of God.

We cannot see the Kingdom of God with our natural eyes. Many think if we cannot see it or touch it does not exist. That is the tragic state of ignorance of many people today. But for Jesus and for the believer it is a place that is very real. It is a kingdom that is eternal; it will not pass away like the kingdoms of this world.

Nicodemus as a Pharisee believed in the resurrection. He believed in life after death, unlike the Sadducees, the other main sect of Judaism. Not believing in something does not make it go away. The child covers his eyes and thinks you have gone away. Many people place the same dangerous game with death.

Heaven and hell are real places to Jesus. He deserves to be listened to since he has actually seen them (3:13). What did he describe in the story of the rich man a Lazarus? Two places – everlasting life and everlasting fire.

This Kingdom of God is where Jesus rules. It is a spiritual kingdom. It has been inaugurated in Jesus and will be consummated at the end of the age. We can see his kingdom now. We can enter his kingdom now. How?

The Way – Born again

Nicodemus believed in the resurrection. He looked to the Kingdom of God. But the question was how to enter to Kingdom of God – at least that was the question Jesus saw on his heart. It is the question on many hearts. Is it the question on your heart today?

Nicodemus thought I must obey the law to the last letter; that is the way to enter. But could he be

assured of entering in this way? No. Somewhere along the way he might have slipped up – what a terrible thought after all that effort that he might have failed at some point.

Many people today live in the same way. They think that good works is what they must do in order to get into the Kingdom of God or heaven. Many set the bar much lower than Nicodemus of course. The law for them is being better than the fellow across the street.

Why is it such a shock to people to learn that God has declared how they are to enter the Kingdom of God? It is after all **His** kingdom. Nicodemus could not understand what Jesus was talking about. And the rich young ruler got a shock didn't he. He had kept all the commandments. He asked Jesus the *good teacher*, if there was anything else. Yes said Jesus, *go sell all you have...then come follow me*. Jesus way or his way, which would it be?

You must be *born again* or *born from above* said Jesus (3:3). Nicodemus understood it as born again. But born from above, as in born of the spirit, is also valid translation. Then Jesus answered again *unless one is born of water and the spirit* (3:5). This means the same thing. Both refer to entering the Kingdom of God by a new birth.

What did Jesus mean? Nicodemus was supposed to have understood (3:10). Jesus was not trying to confuse him. He could hardly have understood 'born of water' as water baptism as so many try to say, for Jews did not get baptised. For the Jew water was for cleansing or ceremonial washing. In Ezekiel 36 Nicodemus would have read of the Lord *cleansing the people from filthiness* and also of His giving them *a new heart and a new spirit*. God by his Spirit would cleanse them and give a new heart (see Jeremiah 31 also).

You must be born again said Jesus. You must be born from above. The Holy Spirit must give you a new heart. You must become *a new creation in Christ Jesus*. This is **regeneration**. It is a wonderful, powerful and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, like the wind that blows. That is how we enter the Kingdom of God. Born again of the Holy Spirit.

What then must we do to be saved? Jesus told Nicodemus how a man enters the Kingdom of God – it is the work of the Holy Spirit, who cleanses our heart by the blood of Jesus. But in this same chapter goes on to say *whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and live, live eternally in His kingdom – that is the message of the gospel. Do you believe? Are you in the Kingdom of God? Are you a *new creation* in Christ Jesus? Are you living as a citizen of heaven, eagerly awaiting the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20) or are you still a citizen of this world?

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