

John 3:1-9

There is a phenomenon in Christianity today that has resulted from an eagerness to bring converts into the faith. A real misunderstanding of what it means to be saved permeates throughout modern Christianity. There are some who claim to be saved, when in fact they are not. The zeal to “grow” the church numerically has produced an obsession with some Christian leaders to the extent of making it easy for people to become a Christian. This has resulted in a Christianity that is entirely centered on conversions instead of Christ. This Christianity is selfish instead of sacrificial.

The Lord’s ministry provides a stark contrast to the contemporary evangelical confusion. Jesus was not interested in shallow responses or quick pseudo-conversions, as John tells us in vv.24-25 of chapter 2. The Lord Jesus refused to compromise the truth or give anyone false hope. Instead of making it easy for people to believe, Jesus turned away more prospects than He received.

A few examples of this in the ministry of the Lord are important to note: 1) The rich young ruler (***cf. Matthew 19:16-26***). 2) Those who are self-deceived through religious works (***cf. Matthew 7:21-23***). 3) Those who are unwilling to surrender to Jesus’ demands of an uncompromising commitment (***cf. Luke 9:23; 57-62; John 6:41-66***). Jesus’ evangelistic ministry clearly put an emphasis on abandoning self and submitting to Him. He taught this both publicly and privately.

John 3:1-10 records a private conversation Jesus had with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Throughout their conversation, Jesus refused to soften the truth simply to gain the approval of this highly influential religious leader. Instead, Jesus spoke with clarity and precision; He confronted the misconceptions of years of religious activity and told Nicodemus what he needed to hear.

The conversation with Nicodemus can be divided into two different headings: *Nicodemus’ questions (John 3:1-9) and Jesus’ answers (John 3:10-21)*. We learn, *The New Birth Revealed (John 3:1-9)* and *The New Birth Received (John 3:10-21)*

Nicodemus’ questions reveal a complete misunderstanding of true righteousness.
(John 3:1-9)

The Holy Spirit allows us to hear this important conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, and we learn the true meaning of salvation. From how this exchange originates and where it happens, there is no better setting for us to hear the dialogue about salvation than between the God-man Jesus Christ and a highly respected Jewish religious leader. Nicodemus did not approach Jesus from a prejudice perspective, but one of respect and authentic inquiry.

As we learned at the end of chapter 2, Jesus did not have faith in superficial belief because He knows exactly what is in the heart of a person. Nicodemus was one of those people who were persuaded to believe in Jesus simply because of the signs Jesus performed. In other words, Jesus had no faith in his faith.

Nicodemus was a prominent teacher in Israel. He was a Pharisee. As such, he was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the religious ruling body in Israel. The Sanhedrin was composed of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, priests, and Levites. It was formed on the model of the 70 elders whom Moses

appointed over the people. The Pharisees were the men who worked mostly among the people and were highly respected for their adherence to the Law of Moses, although they themselves did not keep the Law. They had great influence over the people. The Sadducees were a larger group within the Sanhedrin and were more concerned with the letter of the Law than the practical living out of the Law. The main point of contention between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was one of a resurrection of the dead and the afterlife. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead while the Sadducees did not. The Sadducees disappeared after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

The fact that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin may explain why he came to Jesus at night. He may not have wanted his meeting with Jesus to be perceived as approval of Jesus by the whole Sanhedrin, or he simply would have had an uninterrupted conversation with Jesus in the evening. The important point is not when he came to Jesus, but that he came at all.

Like the people in chapter 2:23, Nicodemus was impressed with and believed the undeniable power manifested in Jesus' miracles was divine. Nicodemus was in Jerusalem during the week of Passover watching Jesus and **"...observing His signs which He was doing."** (v.23c). We know this from what he says to Jesus in (v.2), **"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."** Nicodemus would also have been fully aware of John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus. These things would have caused Nicodemus to conclude that possibly Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus was not interested in discussing signs and wonders that only resulted in superficial faith. Instead, Jesus goes straight to the issue of spiritual transformation of the human heart. Jesus answered the unasked question, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."** (v.3) **"Truly, truly..."** solemnly affirms the veracity and significance of what follows. Here, Jesus uses this phrase to introduce the vitally important truth that there is no entrance into God's kingdom **"...unless one is born again..."** The new birth, or regeneration, is the act of God by which He imparts eternal life to those who are **"...dead in...trespasses and sins..."** (**Ephesians 2:1**) thus making them His children (**Ephesians 2:1**, **2 Corinthians 5:17**; **Titus 3:5**; **James 1:18**; **1 Peter 1:3, 23**; **1 John 2:29**; **3:9**; **4:7**; **5:1, 4, 18**).

Jesus is not speaking of God's kingdom in a broad sense but rather in the specific sense of salvation. Jesus is speaking about the spiritual realm where those who have been born again by divine power though faith now live under the rule of God mediated through His Son, Jesus Christ.

R.C.H. Lenski comments: **"Jesus' word regarding the new birth shatters once for all every supposed excellence of man's attainment, all merit of human deeds, all prerogatives of natural birth or station. Spiritual birth is something one undergoes not something he produces. As our efforts had nothing to do with our natural conception and birth, so, in an analogous way but on a far higher plane, regeneration is not a work of ours. What a blow for Nicodemus! His being a Jew gave him no part in the kingdom; his being a Pharisee, esteemed holier than the other people, availed him nothing; his membership in the Sanhedrin and his fame as one of its scribes went for naught. This Rabbi from Galilee calmly tells him that he is not yet in the kingdom! All on which he had built his hopes throughout a long arduous life here sank into ruin and became a little worthless heap of ashes. (Commentary on the New Testament — The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel; R.C.H. Lenski)**

Nicodemus asks questions that reveal his total misunderstanding of what Jesus is saying, (v.4)“...**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?**” Surely this educated man would not be so foolish as to take Jesus’ words in a literal sense. Of all people, he understands hyperbole and metaphors to make a point of truth. His questions convey his confusion, as he openly wondered at the impossibility of Christ’s statements. Jesus was asking for something that was not humanly possible; He was making entrance into the kingdom contingent on something that could not be obtained through human effort. But if that were true, what did it mean for Nicodemus’s works-based system? If spiritual rebirth, like physical rebirth, was impossible from a human standpoint, then where did that leave this self-righteous Pharisee? Jesus confronted Nicodemus with the most difficult challenge He could make.

Jesus answered with something that Nicodemus should have understood, (vv.5-6). **Water** and **Spirit** often refer symbolically in the Old Testament to spiritual renewal and cleansing. Jesus was referring to a passage found in Ezekiel that describes Israel’s restoration to the Lord by the new covenant (**Ezekiel 36:24-27**). Against this Old Testament backdrop, Jesus’ point was unmistakable. Without the spiritual washing of the soul, a cleansing only accomplished by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, no one can enter God’s kingdom.

In (v. 6) Jesus went on to emphasize this fact by His pointing out that even if physical rebirth were possible, it would only produce **flesh**. One would still be left with the sin problem. But the Holy Spirit does the work of the new birth. It is entirely His work, and it is unaided by any human effort.

Jesus’ words to Nicodemus in (v.7) are simply saying, “*Nicodemus, get over yourself at being so wrong about how one is accepted into God’s kingdom.*” Only by being **born again** by the Spirit of God will one gain entrance, not by works of righteousness produced by human effort.

The Lord then illustrates His point with a familiar example from nature in (v.8). The wind cannot be controlled; it blows where it wishes. And though its general direction can be known, where it comes from or where it is going cannot be precisely determined. Nevertheless, the wind’s effects can be observed. The same is true of the work of the **Spirit**. His sovereign work of regeneration in the human heart can neither be controlled nor predicted. Yet, its effects can be seen in the transformed lives of those who are “...**born of the Spirit.**”

People today are still asking the same question as Nicodemus, “...**How can these things be?**” The sovereign work of salvation still eludes so many people because they still think being saved is something they can accomplish by their religious works. Most people cannot humble themselves before God and accept salvation on His terms.

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