

THE NEW BIRTH

Gary McDade

The Text

In John 3:1-2 Jesus received a visitor at night named Nicodemus who was a ruler of the Jews and a Pharisee. The miracles of Jesus had their designed effect on him, for he was convinced that Jesus enjoyed the favor of God.

The Truth

John concluded the previous chapter by informing the reader of Jesus' ability to know what was in man (John 2:25). He next made an application of that principle by relating the insightful reply of Jesus to Nicodemus' question. John wrote that "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" (John 3:3). Jesus demonstrated himself to be the Master Teacher by taking Nicodemus where he was and further revealing the truth to him. Jesus' statement to Nicodemus reflected the primary mission for which Jesus had come into the world, which was "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10b). "Verily, verily" means "Truly, truly." The repetition of the word reinforces the strength of the statement as the truth.

The Timing

Although Jesus clearly mentioned being born again, Nicodemus had a problem with the timing. Since until now he knew nothing of being born again, all he had to go on was what he knew of birth, and so he presented two interrogatory statements to Jesus. John wrote, "Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (John 3:4). Jesus was not speaking of the impossibility of a grown man experiencing physical birth again. So, he drew the picture in greater detail to allow Nicodemus to understand better that about which he was talking. John continued to write, "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" (John 3:5). Jesus said, "Except a *man* be born." He was not talking about anything associated with an infant's physical birth. He said, "Except a *man* be born." Also, the word "again"

places distance from the man's physical birth. Jesus had said, "Except a man be born *again*" in verse 3.

The Transformation

Jesus was teaching Nicodemus what he needed to do in order to "enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5c). The new birth was a spiritual transformation through the element of water and the instrument of the Spirit. Jesus explained, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 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" (John 3:6-8).

The transformation through the water and the Spirit is essential because Jesus used the word "except" which carries the force of "unless" in reference to a person entering the kingdom of God. Except or unless a person is born again he cannot see or enter into the kingdom of God. And, in verse 8 he said, "Ye *must* be born again," thereby indicating the imperative nature of the command.

The transformation is spiritual. The new birth is a spiritual birth. The contrast Jesus made was between the result of physical birth being fleshly or physical and the result of spiritual birth being of the Spirit or spiritual. The illustration Jesus gave of the wind blowing called attention to the unseen reality in nature. The spirit of man is the unseen reality in man, and that is the part of man that is born again. Also, although the wind cannot be seen it can be heard. The effect of the wind moving through other items of nature such as trees and grass is audible. Similarly, the Spirit of God is not seen, but the effect of the Spirit is brought to bear on the spirit of man through hearing the words of the Spirit. Later Jesus would say, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

The Trepidation

In verse 9, "Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?" Nicodemus seems perturbed that he cannot readily understand Jesus' teaching. Jesus' lengthy response is next.

The Testimony

Jesus implied that Nicodemus should have knowledge of spiritual things due to his position as a teacher among the Jews, “Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?” (John 3:10). Jesus came down from heaven as an expression of the love of God to save mankind, but men loved to abide in darkness rather than come unto the light of the truth of God’s word and be saved. In verses 11-21 Jesus spoke of his testimony which bore witness to his Deity. His closing admonition to Nicodemus was for him to obey the truth, “But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God” (John 3:21).

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the correlation of the new birth to baptism from comparing Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 22:16; Titus 3:5; and I Peter 3:21.
2. Spiritual life involves the elevation of facts over feelings, so has anyone ever been asked to prove his physical being by relating how he felt when he was born?
3. Discuss being born into the spiritual family of God by baptism into Christ from Ephesians 3:15; I Timothy 3:15; and Galatians 3:26-29.
4. Given that Nicodemus was a respected person morally, will morality alone save a person?
5. Given that Nicodemus was a religious person being a ruler of the Jews, will being religious alone save a person?
6. Discuss the water of the new birth as it relates to the water of baptism in Acts 8:36-39; 10:47-48; 22:16; Ephesians 5:26; Hebrews 10:22; and I Peter 3:21.