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“Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again,” John 3:7.

Jesus Speaks on the New Birth

Lesson Aim: To persuade men to receive and rejoice in salvation.

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Topic: Christ: Teachings of; Salvation.

INTRODUCTION

The enemies of Jesus once testified, “. . . **Never man spake like this man,**” John 7:46. They were correct in their conclusion. No man has spoken with His wisdom; no other has His insight into divine things; no other's words have the authority of His words; none other understands the human predicament as He understands; no one else speaks with the desire to help as does He.

At no point did Jesus speak more beautifully than concerning that spiritual experience which He called being “born again.” To one man Jesus spoke of what it really means to be converted. This concept of the new birth is the keystone to all Christian experience. This is one of the most important lessons you will ever study. Please pursue it thoughtfully.

There are three presuppositions which underlie Jesus' teaching on the new birth. First, it presupposes the terrible situation in which every man participates as a consequence of sin. Man is dead in sin and only spiritual birth offers any hope for him. Second, it presupposes that there is a sufficient remedy for man's malady. No man is so dead in sin that he cannot be resurrected to spiritual life in Christ Jesus. Third, it presupposes that the miracle of regeneration is performed by the Holy Spirit. One is not only “born again,” he is “born of the Spirit.” Comprehend these three truths and you have the heart of the Gospel.

This study aims “to persuade men to receive and rejoice in salvation.” Make sure you both receive and rejoice in Jesus in whom alone is salvation.

EXPOSITION

I. THE OCCASION

1. A man named Nicodemus, verse 1. Meet Nicodemus. He was a devout Jew, probably a member of their great Sanhedrin, a member of the Pharisee denomination in ancient Judaism. Nicodemus came to talk with Jesus about spiritual things and this brought forth the subject of the new birth.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus believed many doctrines which you believe. Pharisees believed in immortality of the soul, resurrection of the body, existence of spirits, reward in future life for virtuous living here and punishment in future life for evil living here; that the wicked would be kept eternally in a prison under the earth and the righteous would share eternally in glory with God.

But the Pharisees equated righteousness with obedience to law. The inward spirit was less important to them than the outward act; hence, their religion became external, lacking real spiritual content. The sect did include some men of pure character and deep devotion. There is no explanation given in John 3 to the statement that Nicodemus was “a ruler of the Jews.” It is evident, however, that his “rule” would have been in religious law. John 7:50-52 seems to indicate that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, supreme court of Judaism. If so, he would have been a man of learning, authority, and held in high esteem by the people.

Nicodemus appears two times in the Gospel records after the account in John 3. In John 7:45-53 he is said to have been “one of them” when the chief priests and Pharisees were discussing what to do about Jesus. He came to Jesus' defense saying, **“Doth our law judge any man before it hear him, and know what he doeth?”** With this statement he brought the ridicule of his fellows upon himself.

Nicodemus appears also in John 19 38-42. When Joseph of Arimathaea claimed the body of Jesus after His crucifixion, Nicodemus provided a mixture of myrrh and aloes to use in preparing Him for burial. It seems very possible, therefore, that Nicodemus became a disciple of Jesus by being “born again.” 2. A visitor at night, verse 2. Why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night is not stated. Some indicate that he came in such a private hour because of fear of what his contemporaries would say. Others suggest that he was embarrassed to be seen in conversation with Jesus since he was a learned ruler and Jesus was an artisan turned teacher. Still others suggest

convenience caused him to come at night. There is no way to be specific. It is enough that he came, that he was taught what it means to be born again, and that he afterward gave indication that he, too, was a disciple of Jesus.

3. A confession of conviction, verse 2. Nicodemus admitted what any honest man who knew Jesus had to admit, **“We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”** This was exactly the evidence Jesus had called men to observe and to arrive at that conclusion concerning Him. He said, **“But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you,”** Luke 11:20. And again He challenged, **“... Believe me for the very works' sake,”** John 14:11. Nicodemus saw, believed, and confessed, **“Thou art. . . come from God. . .”** Having come thus far (acknowledging that Jesus was a teacher come from God) he was ready to be led into the full light of regeneration truth.

II. THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Jesus almost interrupted Nicodemus. While that “ruler of the Jews” was confessing his conviction and paying honor to Jesus, he was cut short. It is just like Jesus to get right to the heart of a matter.

Nicodemus had not come because he had desired social fellowship with Jesus. He came because of an empty heart. He came because he honestly believed Jesus was “a teacher come from God.” He had a heart-deep problem which he wished this “teacher come from God” to deal with. So without further ado, Jesus struck at the heart of Nicodemus' problem. **“... Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,”** verses 3, 5.

How amazed Nicodemus must have been upon hearing these words. He had not been “born again.” He did not even know how you could do it. In fact, it seemed like an impossibility for a man to “enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born,” verse 4. But here was Jesus saying that unless a man was “born again” he would neither “see” nor “enter” the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus had not been “born again” but he had been taught since infancy that because of his birth into the Hebrew nation he was already in the Kingdom. And this “teacher come from God” said it was not so. Suddenly the turmoil which had been beneath the surface in the heart of Nicodemus boiled up to the surface. For in saying “a man” must be “born again,” Jesus was saying “all men” must be “born again.” Not just publicans

and harlots (those poor outcasts of respectable society) but even Nicodemus (“a man of the Pharisees, a ruler of the Jews”) must be born again, too, else he could never “see” nor “enter” the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus understood Jesus' imperative. His heart testified that “a man” meant “every man,” including himself.

III. THE EXPLANATION

“. . . How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?” verse 4. Nicodemus' convicted heart expressed itself in words of protest. When Jesus spoke of being “born again,” Nicodemus understood Him as meaning born “a second time.” He replied, “Such a thing is not possible. It is contrary to all the laws of nature.”

It is evident that Nicodemus was thinking of the physical birth. So Jesus began at that point and showed him the distinction between the physical birth and the spiritual birth: **“. . . Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 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,”** John 3:5-7.

To be “born of water” refers to the physical birth. Some suggest it means conversion in which one is cleansed “with the washing of water by the word,” Ephesians 5:26. But it is very unlikely that Nicodemus would have understood such terminology at that state of his enlightenment in spiritual things. Others consider “born of water” to be baptism in water. This would make Jesus say that unless one was baptized and born of the Holy Spirit he could neither see nor enter the Kingdom. The rest of the New Testament teachings show this to be an incorrect interpretation. To be “born of water” refers to physical birth. (1) Nicodemus was already thinking about the physical birth: “How can one be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?” (2) Water is related to the birth of an infant so that physical birth could be called “born of water.” (3) There was no reason for Nicodemus to think of baptism for the subject had not been mentioned up to this point. Why would Jesus suddenly introduce it? (4) Jesus evidently used parallelism, a method of speaking common among the Jews. Write out “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit.” Then write, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” right under it. It is evident “born of water” corresponds to “born of flesh” while “born of the Spirit” corresponds to “born of the Spirit.” (5) Observe the use of “Spirit” and “spirit.” As the

“Holy Spirit” is related to the birth of man, so the water is related to birth of the body.

Nicodemus thought it was enough that He was born as a Jew into the Jewish nation. This put him into the Kingdom of God. “Not so,” said Jesus. “It is one thing to be born of the flesh but an entirely different thing to be born of the Spirit.” Yes, to be “born of water” means to be born of the flesh. That alone is not sufficient to secure one's citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said every man must be “born of the Spirit.” He must be “born from above” which takes place within the person who receives the Lord Jesus as personal Saviour. It is called “the renewing of Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5) because it is a renewing (regenerating, recreating) which the Holy Spirit performs. In this act the Spirit is totally sovereign, verse 8.

When one is saved he is “born again,” John 3:3, 5, 7; I Peter 1:23. He is “born of God,” John 1:13; I John 5:1. It is mysterious, but it is real.

IV. THE ILLUSTRATION

Read the story recorded in Numbers 21:4-9. Fiery serpents bit the Israelites as Moses led them through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan. The people died because of the poisonous bite of the serpents. Moses cried to God and God gave him a remedy for the fatally bitten Hebrews.

A form was fashioned of brass so that it resembled one of the fiery serpents. It was put upon a pole so that anyone in the camp could have sight of it. When anyone was bitten, he could look up to that serpent of brass and be healed of the deadly bite. He did not do rituals, he just looked and believed. Thus he was healed.

Jesus said this is how one is “born again.” He was lifted up on a cross just as the serpent was lifted up on a pole. Anyone under the penalty of death by sin can find deliverance in Him as one under penalty of death by the serpent's bite could find life in looking. “Look and live!” That is the message. In each instance, faith is the key. Deliverance was provided in each instance by one lifted up, for those who had no other hope, and was effective for immediate and permanent healing.

This is how a person is saved today. He must believe that Jesus can forgive because He died for sinners. He must believe that Jesus will forgive because He is gracious and loving. He must believe that Jesus does now forgive me, personally, because I ask Him to do so. Thus does one “look up” to Jesus in faith. In response to faith the Holy Spirit regenerates (gives new life) to the spirit of the believer. Thus the sinner is born a saint into the

family of God.

CONCLUSION

Jesus said, **“Ye must be born again.”** The imperative applies to you and to every person you know. **“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,”** Romans 3:23. No person can enter the Kingdom of God until sin-guilt is gone. Only by dying to sin and being raised to new life by the Holy Spirit can any of us share with Jesus the inheritance gained through citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Are you trusting Jesus as your personal Saviour? Do you have friends of loved ones who are not? Will you give your most prayerful and unceasing efforts to lead those lost ones to Jesus?

Any person who comes to Him in faith will be received. Those who are received will be made anew just as if they were each newly born to live the life which is Jesus Christ. Oh, be saved and then be a witness to lead others to Jesus!

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus?
2. What did Jesus discuss with him?
3. What does it mean to be “born again”?
4. What is it to be “born of the Spirit”?
5. What is it to be “born of water”?
6. How is John 3:3-7 related to I John 5:1?
7. How is Numbers 21:4-9 related to John 3:14-18?
8. Are you born again?
9. How would you tell another to go about being saved?
10. Will you witness to someone this week to lead him to Jesus?