



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

## **Jesus Teaches About Salvation**

**Lesson Subject:** To convince unbelievers of their need for Jesus, and to stimulate believers to share His claims.

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**Topic:** Jesus: Teachings of; Nicodemus.

Jesus was a wonderful teacher. He had an insight into divine things. His words had a wonderful clarity in them. He had a deep and sincere desire to help people know God. He spoke with divine wisdom. It would have been such an opportunity to have heard Him teach. Even His enemies testified, “. . . Never man spake like this man,” John 7:46.

Jesus taught on many wonderful subjects, but no subject with which He dealt is more wonderful than His message of salvation. That subject lies at the heart of the Christian gospel.

This study of Jesus' teaching on salvation is based upon three great truths. (1) Man is dead in sin; only by being born again in salvation can he possibly know God and go to heaven. (2) Each man who believes in Jesus is raised from spiritual death to spiritual life. (3) The miracle of regeneration is performed by the Holy Spirit. The believer is not only “born again,” he is “born of the Spirit.” Understand those three principles, and you will understand the Christian gospel.

This study is concerned about Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. It aims (1) to convince unbelievers of their need for Jesus, and (2) to stimulate believers to share His claims. Keep your heart open that Jesus may minister to it through this study.

## **I. HONEST INQUIRER**

Meet Mr. Nicodemus. He was a Jew, devout in the religion of his

fathers. He was “a ruler of the Jews” which may have meant that he was a member of the great Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. He was a member of a denomination in the Jewish religion which was called Pharisees. Such a man of authority, learning, and religious concern was surely held in high esteem by all his peers.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus believed many of the doctrines which you believe. He believed in the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, the existence of good and bad angelic spirits, reward in future life for virtuous living in this life, and punishment in future life for evil living in this life. He believed that the Old Testament Scriptures are the written Word of God.

There was one problem with Nicodemus' religion, however. Pharisees in general equated righteousness with obedience to law. They put less emphasis upon one's inward spirit than upon the external act. Their religion tended to become increasingly external and ritualistic, lacking in real spiritual content.

Something stirred Nicodemus, however, that made him dissatisfied with his religious experience. Perhaps that was the reason that he sought out Jesus for a conversation. The Scripture recounts that he “came to Jesus by night.” Why he came by night is not suggested. It might have been that he was concerned about what his fellow Pharisees would say, if they knew of his conversation with the itinerant artisan, turned preacher. For a learned Doctor of the Law to seek counsel from an untrained preacher might have caused embarrassment. It is possible, on the other hand, that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because that was the most convenient time to come. As a ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus was probably busy during the day. Since Jesus was a popular teacher, it might have been difficult to hold extended conversations with Him during the day. There is no way to be sure why the conversation was held at night, but give Nicodemus the benefit of the doubt. After all, he did seek Jesus. Afterwards he gave indication that he, too, was a disciple of the Lord.

Nicodemus admitted that all honest men 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,”** John 3:2. Such an admission by Nicodemus opened the door for him to receive spiritual counsel from Jesus whom he admitted to be “a teacher come from God.” It is no wonder that he was led into the full light of the gospel. An open heart is the first prerequisite to being saved.

Did Nicodemus really become a disciple of Jesus? Did he really become a Christian? The Sacred Record does not clearly declare that he did.

There are, however, but two other instances in which he appears in the Gospel account, and both times he shows agreement with Jesus. (1) When the chief priests and Pharisees were discussing what to do about Jesus' ministry, how to stop His teaching and counteract His influence, Nicodemus came to His defense and brought the scorn of his fellows upon him, John 7:50-52. (2) When Jesus had been crucified, it was Nicodemus who joined Joseph of Arimathaea in His burial. Joseph asked for permission to take His body from the cross for burial, and Nicodemus provided a mixture of myrrh and aloes to use in preparing His body for burial, John 19:38-42. Those two instances suggest that Nicodemus had followed the teaching of Jesus and had been truly "born again."

Thank God for all those who will not stop short of knowing Jesus personally, who will not be swayed by popular opinion but who follow to taste and see that the Lord is good.

## II. AMAZING ANNOUNCEMENT

Nicodemus thought to compliment Jesus, saying, "**We know that thou art a teacher come from God . . .**" John 3:2. The Lord almost interrupted him. That "ruler of the Jews" was expressing his conviction and paying honor to Jesus, but Jesus knew what was in his heart (John 2:24-25). The Master Teacher came immediately to the heart of the matter.

Nicodemus had not come for social fellowship with Jesus. He came because he had an empty heart. The rituals and regulations of his religion had not given him peace. Believing that Jesus was "a teacher come from God," he came to receive help. Jesus knew that. Without delay, He spoke to Nicodemus the words which were the key to his spiritual problem. ". . . **Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . Marvel not that I say unto thee, Ye must be born again,**" John 3:3, 7.

How surprised Nicodemus must have been to hear those words. He had not been "born again." He did not even know what the expression meant. It seemed an impossible thing which Jesus demanded. How could an adult man "enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born," verse 4? Yet Jesus said that unless a man was "born again" (that is, born anew; born a second time) he could neither "see" nor "enter" the kingdom of God.

In saying that "a man" must be "born again" in order either to "see" or "enter" the kingdom of God, Jesus was saying that "all men" must be "born again." Nicodemus would have admitted that publicans and harlots (poor outcasts from respectable society) needed a major revolution in order to be

in the kingdom of God, but Jesus included all men, even Nicodemus himself, under the requirement of a second birth.

Nicodemus had been taught from infancy, as all sons born into a devout Jewish family were taught, that his birth into the Hebrew nation automatically put him into God's kingdom. The “teacher come from God” said that was not the case at all. Jesus said one could neither “see” nor “enter” God's kingdom without a second birth. The turmoil and frustration in Nicodemus suddenly magnified. Nicodemus' heart testified that he was not really in the kingdom of God in spite of his religious rituals and sincere efforts. He knew something was lacking in his relationship with God.

### III. CLEAR EXPLANATION

Nicodemus' convicted heart expressed its confusion in words of protest. **“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. Of course, he could not. What did Jesus mean? The demand to be “born again” (the second time) was contrary to all the laws of nature. Jesus was expecting the impossible.

It is evident that Nicodemus was thinking of the physical birth. Jesus was not speaking of a second physical birth. He explained, **“... Except a man be born of water and of 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, Y e must be born again,”** John 3:5,7.

What did Jesus mean by saying one must “be born of water”? Several interpretations have been offered. (1) Many believe it refers to baptism in water. Jesus would have been saying that unless a man was baptized and born of the Spirit, he could neither see nor enter the kingdom of God. That would make baptism to have a meaning which the rest of the New Testament denies. That is obviously not the right answer. (2) Others hold that “born of water” refers to “the washing of water by the word,” Ephesians 5:26, but that is a figurative use of water. It is doubtful that Jesus would have used such an obscure figure at that state of Nicodemus' spiritual enlightenment. There must be a better explanation than either of those. (3) It seems most probable that Jesus used “born of water” to refer to the physical birth and “born of the Spirit” to refer to the spiritual birth. That must be what He meant.

Jesus' expression “born of water” refers to the physical birth for obvious reasons. (1) Nicodemus was already thinking about the physical birth: “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?” It was natural that Jesus would refer

to it, too. (2) Before birth, an infant is protected by water surrounding his body; water is related to the act of physical birth. For that reason, physical birth could be called being “born of water.” (3) Baptism in water had not been brought into the conversation; there was no reason for Jesus to introduce it so suddenly. The reference was not to water baptism. (4) Jesus was using a literary form which was common to the Jews. It is called parallelism. The idea is to express the same thought twice, using different words the second time. Take a piece of paper and write out these words of Jesus: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit.” Just below that statement write: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Observe how the two statements match. “Born of water” corresponds to “born of flesh,” and “born of the Spirit” corresponds to “born of the Spirit.” That is parallelism, a literary form common in Jewish writing and speech. Jesus was using that literary form to show Nicodemus that it was one thing to be born of the flesh and quite another thing to be born of the Spirit. Nicodemus thought it was quite enough that he had been born into the nation of God's “chosen people.” He thought that mere physical birth put him into the kingdom of God. Jesus said, “No.” Physical birth is quite apart from spiritual birth. Physical birth put Nicodemus into the Jewish nation, but only spiritual birth could put him into the kingdom of God. Physical birth puts no man into a spiritual kingdom.

Jesus said each person who enters the kingdom of God must be “born of the Spirit.” (Observe the capital “S” on Spirit. Reference is to the Holy Spirit of God who works the miracle of regeneration in those who trust Jesus.) One is “born from above” when he is saved. That miracle of grace is called “the renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5) because it is a recreating work performed by the Holy Spirit.

The second birth is God's work. Those who are born again are born **“... not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God,”** John 1:13.

How does the new birth come? **“Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God . . .”** I John 5:1. It is mysterious, but it is real.

#### IV. VIVID ILLUSTRATION

Nicodemus had great difficulty understanding how a person could be born again. Even with Jesus' explanation that it was a regenerative work performed by the Holy Spirit of God, his mind was still unclear. “How can these things be?” he enquired. Jesus explained it further by giving one of the most vivid illustrations possible. He recounted a story recorded in Numbers

21:4-9.

Israel was traveling through the wilderness between Egypt and Palestine. Moses was leading them in their great exodus from Egyptian bondage. They began to complain because the way was difficult. As a discipline, God permitted serpents with a very poisonous bite to come among them. They were called “fiery serpents” because of their reddish color, because of the burning sensation caused by their bite, or because of the high temperature brought on by the poison. To be bitten was sure death to any man. The people cried to Moses, Moses cried to God, and God gave a remedy.

The likeness of one of the fiery serpents was fashioned from brass. It was put upon a pole so that anyone in the camp could see it. It came to pass that any person bitten by the deadly serpent could look to that serpent of brass, and he would not die but live. Just to look up, believing that God had provided deliverance was enough.

Jesus said that is how one is “born again.” The Son of God has been “lifted up” on a cross in crucifixion. All who are dead in trespasses and sins can find deliverance in Him. How? It is by looking to Him in faith just as the Hebrews looked to the serpent of brass. “Look and live!” That is the message. That is how one is born again.

Faith is the key. Deliverance comes when one believes that God has provided a remedy for death. The Hebrews look to the serpent of brass with faith in God to preserve them. We look to the cross of Jesus with faith in God to save us. In each instance deliverance was and is effective for immediate and permanent healing.

We say that the way to be saved is to believe in Jesus, but what is one to believe? (1) Believe that Jesus can forgive sin because He had died for sinners and lives again. (2) Believe that Jesus will forgive because He is gracious and loving. (3) Believe that Jesus does now forgive because you ask Him to do so. In response to faith, the Holy Spirit regenerates (gives new life) to the repenting sinner. Thus the sinner is born again and becomes a saint in God's family.

Jesus laid down a divine imperative: “**Ye must be born again.**” No one will go to heaven without the new birth. “**For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,**” Romans 3:23 The new birth involves a death to sin and a resurrection to the new life of Jesus Christ provided by the Holy Spirit. The invitation is extended to “whosoever will.” Will you?

Each person who comes in faith to Jesus Christ will be received. He who is received will be made anew just as if he were a new person. Being made anew, he will live the resurrection life of Jesus Christ as he walks with

the Lord.

Make sure that you are saved; then be a witness to lead others to Jesus. God says of you and each person whom you meet, “**You, too, must be born again!**” That is what Jesus teaches about salvation.

### Questions

1. Who was Nicodemus?
2. Why did he come to Jesus?
3. What is meant by being “born again?”
4. What is it to be “born of water?”
5. What is it to be “born of the Spirit?”
6. How does Numbers 21:4-9 explain John 3:7?
7. What were the circumstances when you were “born again?”