

Nicodemus witnessed the miracles that Jesus performed during the first Passover of His ministry and recognized the hand of God. Nicodemus was a member of Israel's elite ruling council, the Sanhedrin. As we read his opening statement, keep in mind that he and the council haven't yet heard of the feeding of the 5000, or raising people from the dead. They might have heard of the water to wine miracle and heard or saw some of Jesus' first miracles during that Passover, but most of His miracles were yet to come. (John 2:23)

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." There were only 71 members of the Sanhedrin (the ruling council). They were selected by the existing group and chosen from among the greatest religious leaders in the country. The group was comprised of both Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus was a complete outsider. He wasn't a graduate of their elite schools and hadn't begun in the typical way. For a member of the Sanhedrin to associate with Jesus would add to Jesus' credibility. Maybe Nicodemus came at night because he wasn't quite sure if he wanted to do that. If Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah, it could be not only a problem with his other members on the council, but with Rome as well. (John 11:48)

Nicodemus may not have wanted others to know that he was attracted to Jesus' teaching and convinced of His spiritual authority by the miracles. Nicodemus had a heart after God. He saw in Jesus something that he desired in His own life, not the power, but the relationship with God. It's a longing that God by grace has placed in our hearts.

The Jewish person saw miracles as more than just an unexplainable event. The idea of miracles was connected with signs. (Deuteronomy 13:1) Their history of miracles was that of a confirmation of the authenticity of the prophet, as long as the prophet's words did not ask them to go against the words of God. When Nicodemus said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him," he spoke in the plural. "We" could mean a group within the Sanhedrin or the whole Sanhedrin. They recognized His teaching to be in line with the Scriptures and that His miraculous signs were done by God. Nicodemus is really saying in our language, "We know you are a God ordained prophet/messenger."

Jesus is so unique in the way He answers people. Let me again suggest that this is because the Father had Jesus' ear. (Isaiah 50:5) If we were to guess at how Jesus would respond to that word of acceptance, we might suggest that He say, "Yes, Nicodemus, and God has revealed this to you. Leave everything and follow me, for I am the Son of God." Instead Jesus gave an unexpected response.

³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." He didn't bother with greetings and introduction but went straight to Nicodemus' longing heart. The Jewish people longed for a kingdom that

Commented [notes1]: 23 Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name.
John 2:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."
John 11:48 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder,
Deut 13:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 5 The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.
Isaiah 50:5 (NIV)

God would establish in which the descendent of David would reign forever. No longer would they be oppressed by foreign powers, (Isaiah 9:7) But that kind of a kingdom would have to wait for the yet to come Millennial Kingdom. An even greater longing in many hearts was to see the many questions of faith and the law answered by a supreme authority who could speak for God as Moses did, but that was just a part of the kingdom Jesus was talking about. His kingdom extends to every heart that submits to His Kingship and offers so much more than just answers.

Commented [notes5]: 7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. Isaiah 9:7 (NIV)

Submission isn't something that makes our heart beat faster, but it should. When the King reigns in our hearts, we are free from the bondage of our old nature. (John 8:36) We can then do the good things that God has prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10) Our actions take on eternal significance. Every born again soul has found that submission to the King is so much greater than submission to our old nature. John describes it as moving from death to life, from darkness to light. (John 1:4)

Commented [notes6]: 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:36 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Eph 2:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: In him was life, and that life was the light of men. John 1:4 (NIV)

Jesus just told Nicodemus, "No one will ever see God's kingdom unless they are born again." The Jewish idea was that every descendent of Abraham would naturally be a part of that kingdom. That is how it was under King David. Nicodemus must have thought, "What is this Teacher saying? Does He mean I won't live to see it unless something changes in me or is it visible only to those who have this experience? And what does He mean by that anyway?"

⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" For a man who studies Scripture that is full of spiritual allegory, he sure is taking Jesus in a literal sense. Still, he is not arguing but trying to understand. Sometimes the Lord speaks like this to our heart and we don't even bother to ask if we understand correctly or not. We can read Scripture and know the Lord is speaking to us and yet interpret as we would and not as He intends. (John 21:22-23) We need to keep on listening.

Commented [notes9]: 22 Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." 23 Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" John 21:22-23 (NIV)

⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. I believe that Jesus is using a pattern seen throughout the Old Testament. When you watch for it, you'll see over and over that writers say something and then say it again with slightly different wording to bring out the meaning and clarify their point, i.e.: (Psalm 18:4-5) Now, instead of the word "see", Jesus uses the word "enter", and instead of "born again", He uses born of water and the Spirit." He is repeating His expression to clarify to Nicodemus what He means, saying the same thing with different words.

Commented [notes10]: 4 The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. 5 The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me. Psalms 18:4-5 (NIV)

There has been a great deal of debate about whether this term "born of water" means baptism of repentance, or born physically. I have always been of the opinion that this is speaking of physical birth and that the next verse is a repetition of this verse as is common in Old Testament literature. Most commentators, however, disagree. They point to John the Baptist mentioned later in this chapter, whose baptism in water was a baptism of repentance (Luke 3:3), and the connection of water and the Spirit in chapter 7 (John 7:38-39). Certainly both are true. You must be born physically, and that interpretation would fit with John the Beloved's

Commented [notes11]: 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke 3:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." 39 By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. John 7:38-39 (NIV)

inclusiveness in his gospel. You must also repent before you can be born of the Spirit. An unrepentant heart can never be born of the Spirit. (Acts 20:21)

Commented [notes13]: 21 I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. Acts 20:21 (NIV)

If you are reading or hearing this sermon, then you are a person who was born of water (physically). You may have even expressed to God your sorrow for your sin, but that does not necessarily mean you were born of the Spirit. This is so important that Jesus will say it for the third time in another way. ⁶ *Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.* People give birth to little people, but only the Spirit of God can give birth to your spirit. (John 6:63)

Commented [notes14]: 63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. John 6:63 (NIV)

Nicodemus' head must have been spinning. "You mean I'm not a special class of people that are automatically headed for the kingdom of God? I must be born of the Spirit? What is this prophet trying to tell me? He talks like a prophet. I've got to find out how this spiritual birth is possible." Nicodemus was a truly hungry soul that knew there was more and wanted more.

Jesus went on to say, ⁷ *You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'* The first "you" is singular, you – Nicodemus. The second is plural. You all must, everyone must, be born of the Spirit if you want to enter God's kingdom. Jesus said Nicodemus shouldn't be surprised because the prophets spoke of our stony hearts being transformed into hearts of flesh. (Ezekiel 11:19) They spoke of the Spirit or wind of God bringing dead bones to life. (Ezekiel 37:5) Man lives by bread but also by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Commented [notes15]: 19 I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Ezek 11:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 5 This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. Ezek 37:5 (NIV)

⁸ *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.* "Was Jesus reminding Nicodemus of the prophets who were never the same after the Spirit of God came upon them? Their lives were no longer at their own direction, but wherever the Spirit of God directed them. Like the wind, you could hear and see the results but you don't know where it came from or where it was going. Wind and spirit are the same word in the Greek text here. Wind was the perfect illustration for the life that is born from above. Nicodemus knew the letter of the Law but what he was missing was the Spirit. We need both. Without the Spirit, the Scriptures can be spun to justify most anything, but the Spirit guides into all truth.

Commented [notes17]: 3 He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Deut 8:3 (NIV)

Jesus was demonstrating what He was teaching. Nicodemus started by saying that they know Jesus is from God. Jesus responded at the leading of the unpredictable Spirit of God to tell Him about the second birth. Nicodemus is hungry to know about Jesus' relationship with the Father, but Jesus at the leading of the Spirit is explaining how he can have his own personal relationship with the Father.

⁹ *"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.* He was asking how he could have this happen in his own life. He wanted to know the way to be born from above. Here is a man who was at the top of his world, even his religious world, but knew there was more, much more. When he saw Jesus, he knew this man must know how to fill the emptiness. Jesus set about immediately explaining it to him. Now understanding his own need to be born from above, he asks how it is possible.

¹⁰ *"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"*

This passage is literally, "You are **the** teacher of Israel..." Nicodemus must have been a very respected Pharisee. Jesus is emphasizing the fact that it doesn't matter what religious degrees you have, or what the world thinks of you spiritual knowledge, without the Spirit of God, you can't even understand the most basic of all teachings. (Philippians 3:8) Didn't God have to breathe into Adam before he came to life? (Genesis 2:7) Spiritual life requires the breath of God. (John 20:22)

I'm always excited to hear about pastors being born again. They remind me of Nicodemus. Though some have entered that field of ministry as a mere profession, many enter it because they are searching like Nicodemus, hungry for truth and searching for answers. They may have even had a spiritual experience, but didn't really come to the point of surrendering their life to the Lord. If anyone continues to seek, they will find, but when they find Him, will they submit to Him? (Matthew 16:24)

Today the phrase "born again" is mocked, and sometimes with good justification from the hypocrisy of those who use the label. A publisher of pornography claims to be born again, as do many others whose lives contradict their words. I tried to use born again Christians to build my home and was literally robbed by two of them. No wonder the world doesn't think highly of those who make the claim! Should pretenders be examples to discount that which they are pretending to be? If I steal a car that has an atheist bumper sticker and cut you off in traffic, should that give atheists a bad name? How often have you heard the Crusades or the Inquisition used as a justification for rejecting Christianity? Since when is killing people loving your neighbor?

The world will always reinterpret words to their own taste, and there will always be hypocrites, but never shy from the term "born again" merely because some abuse it. It is Jesus' own language describing what must take place if we are to enter the kingdom of God. In fact, if it comes up in conversation, you can use it to introduce others to Jesus' use of the term in this chapter. Who couldn't relate to Nicodemus' hunger to know what he was missing and what Jesus taught? Let's redeem the phrase by our life and language! Amen?

Nicodemus was Israel's teacher, and he didn't understand. We might be a Sunday School teacher, even a pastor, a psychic reader, or have religion degree and yet like Nicodemus not understand these things.

¹¹ *I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.* The "we" here is not Jesus and the disciples, but Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It is the language of Genesis one. "Let us make man in our own image." It is the language of the "diversity in unity in the community of the Trinity". (borrowed from Ravi Zaccarias) When two testify to the same thing, the Law says the testimony should be accepted. (John 8:17) Jesus is saying that He and the Spirit are bringing testimony, but they won't accept it, contrary to their own Law that they enforce on others.

Commented [notes18]: 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ
Phil 3:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 7 the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.
Gen 2:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."
John 20:22 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."
Matt 16:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: 17 In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid.
John 8:17 (NIV)

Here again we see Jesus led by that wind of the Spirit. He is using the Scripture at the direction of the Holy Spirit. It looks to me like Nicodemus is receptive. He is saying all the right things. There is not a word of argument. But Jesus is starting to tighten the screws. The Spirit of God always leads to a point of challenge. Whether it is confronting the woman at the well about her life style (John 4:18), the rich young ruler about his wealth (Mark 10:21), or the Laodiceans about their lukewarmness (Revelation 3:16), the Spirit of God will eventually challenge us to not be satisfied with things in our life that keep us from God. For Nicodemus it was all that knowledge of what men had said and his ability to remember it. It is an uncomfortable place to go in a conversation, but the love of God for others will take us there at the right time.

It sounds as if pride caused doubt to enter into Nicodemus' thoughts. The only hint of it is Jesus' answer points to it. We can imagine ourselves in Nicodemus' position, standing there with our special clothing that set us apart, our education that was respected by others, our effort to keep the law unsurpassed, our position on the ruling council, and here is this peasant carpenter lecturing us on how to know God. It would be hard to take. Still, he can't get around the fact that Jesus prays and God answers miraculously.

Jesus is answering what is in the heart of Nicodemus. Remember the last chapter ended by telling us that Jesus knows what is in the heart of man. (John 2:25) Jesus was telling him that He wasn't making this up. He knows this is true. He has seen with His own eyes these realities and the Holy Spirit testifies with Him to the truth of these things, but the religious leaders of the Jews will not accept Jesus' and the Holy Spirit's testimony. That is a scathing accusation and a warning of things to come.

¹² *I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?* Jesus had used the creation to try to get him to understand his need. He talked of physical birth and the wind. If he can't see the spiritual realities those physical things represent, how can Jesus just speak the truth of the Spirit and expect it to be received? (Romans 1:20)

¹³ *No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man.* Now Jesus makes a radical claim that will eventually make or break Nicodemus. He declares Himself to be the Son of God. He has the authority to speak for God because He was eternally with God. No rabbi or mystic can trump the words of Jesus because they didn't come from heaven. (John 6:46) Jesus is declaring the incarnation. He came from heaven to take the body of a man to show us the heart of God like no one else ever could. No one else has truly claimed to come from heaven.

Next week we will cover the rest of this conversation in which Jesus specifically answers Nicodemus' question of how a person can be born from above. As we go through the gospel John wrote, I hope you are seeing how John brings out these sayings of Jesus that can only be from a madman or God incarnate.

Are you standing in Nicodemus' sandals this morning? Do you recognize that Jesus has to be someone very special because of what He did and said? Do you long to

Commented [notes23]: 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." John 4:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: 21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Mark 10:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: 16 So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. Rev 3:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes26]: 25 He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. John 2:25 (NIV)

Commented [notes27]: 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. Romans 1:20 (NIV)

Commented [notes28]: 46 No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. John 6:46 (NIV)

experience something of Jesus' relationship with the Father, being led by the Spirit of God? Jesus tells us, "You must be born again." Do you long to enter the reign of God over your own life, the kingdom of God? Be born from above. Invite Him into your life and let Him transform it with His presence. (Revelation 21:5)

Commented [notes29]: 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."
Rev 21:5 (NIV)