

Encounters with Jesus

Week 2 - Nicodemus and the New Birth

Context:

Containing the most well known verse of Scripture, chapter three of John's gospel describes a surprising episode. After turning water to wine at the wedding at Cana and entering the Temple to cast out those who had turned his Father's house into a common marketplace, Jesus is sought out by Nicodemus, a pharisee and one of the chief leaders in Israel. Coming to Jesus under the dark of night, Nicodemus hopes to learn more about who Jesus is after recognizing the signs that Jesus had performed. Jesus' answers had the power to transform Nicodemus just as Jesus has the power to transform you today.

1. The Need: You *Must* Be Born Again

- a. Nicodemus has an agenda:
 - (1) Nicodemus comes to Jesus in secret and at night (not publicly)
 - (2) Darkness vs. light a regular theme in John's gospel — more often those who believe they can see are actually the ones who are blind
 - (3) He seeks to flatter Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God..."

- b. Jesus confronts Nicodemus:
 - (1) As if ignoring his comment, Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless one is "born again" they will never see "the kingdom of God" (3:3)
 - (2) This is the true issue, nothing else that Nicodemus might have wished to discussed: "How can one see the kingdom of God?"
 - (3) **Jesus' answer is offensive** — it is impossible for any one to be born again on their own power

- c. Nicodemus is an exemplary Jewish man:
 - (1) A pharisee: zealous to follow the Law
 - (2) A ruler and teacher: a leader among leaders
 - (3) Older in age: experienced, known for wisdom

2. What is the new birth?

Remember how John introduced his Gospel:

John 1:12-13 - But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right **to become children of God**, ¹who were **born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**

- a. Nicodemus had every reason to trust his own righteousness and knowledge, *but entrance into God's Kingdom requires the Holy Spirit to make us new*
 - (1) How can one be born again? - water and Spirit
 - (2) Only the Spirit can cause new life: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit... The wind blows where it wishes[.] So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."
 - (3) **New creation:** Just as the Spirit hovered over the waters when the world was created (Gen. 1), so too does the Spirit give new birth to those who believe
 - (4) New birth is analogous to the old birth: **totally dependent on another**

- b. New birth is adoption into God's Family
 - (1) Romans 8:15 - you have received the **Spirit of adoption** as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"
- c. Jesus did not come simply to teach, but to save
 - (1) vv. 14-15 - "[A]s Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, **so must the Son of Man be lifted up**, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."
 - (2) Those who are "born again" are those who "believe in him" — Jesus the crucified (lifted up) messiah (ref. Numbers 2 - Moses lifts the bronze serpent)
- d. To be saved is **to look out and up**
 - 1) **We are always tempted to look inward and to ourselves:**
 - can be self-righteous - I am better than them, I am more righteous, I can save myself, etc.),
 - delusional (thinking we are as powerful as God, I am the master of my fate, the "universe" does what I want it to do)
 - or despair (I can never be forgiven, God could never love me, there can never be hope for me)
 - 2) **Jesus calls us to trust in him and what he is done:** just as the serpent was lifted up so that those who saw it were saved, so too has Jesus — God incarnate — been lifted up on the cross in order that we would be saved

How are You Born Again? — Through the pain, labor, and sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, we are born again. By his resurrection, we are born again to a new, resurrected life.

3. Conclusion: What happened to Nicodemus?

John 19:38-42 - Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. **Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night**, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid [and] they laid Jesus there.

- a. How could this be?
 - a. Nicodemus had become a new man
 - b. Because Jesus had died, now Nicodemus could become alive
 - c. Jesus became unrighteous so that Nicodemus could become righteous

2 Cor. 5:21 - "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

(Discussion questions on next page)

Discussion Questions

1. What struck you about how Nicodemus approached Jesus? What was Nicodemus risking?
2. What do you believe Nicodemus' agenda was? How does Jesus' answer get to the heart of the true issue for Nicodemus and all of us?
3. In John's gospel, light and darkness are key themes that help us to notice that many who should be able to see clearly are actually "blind" — in darkness.

In what way does Jesus challenge Nicodemus to consider that he might actually be "blind" even though he believes he can see? What are some common ways each of us are tempted in our sin to believe we can see and that we are of the light, when actually we are blind or in darkness?

4. Pastor Rob spoke at length about how to be born again is to look up and to look out.

What are some common ways that you are tempted to look to ourselves instead of looking at Jesus? How can self-centered focus lead to either self-righteousness or self-loathing?

5. In this last year, we have all faced a great deal of struggle and difficulty. How have you experienced God's grace in the moments when you looked away from yourself and trust in Jesus?