

Scripture

John 3:1-17

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Born of the Spirit

Have you ever read something and have no idea what you are reading? I know I’ve had a few experiences like that in my life – particularly when reading heavy theology late at night.

I get to the end of a paragraph and realize that I have no idea what the author was trying to convey, so I go back and read it again, usually with the same result – a blank or muddled mind. As I try to step through it and figure it out I think ‘I know what each of those words mean individually, but I have no clue what they mean together in this particular order.’

Nicodemus was having one of those moments with Jesus on the night that he went to visit him.

This is our first introduction to Nicodemus in John's gospel. Nicodemus was a good guy; we like Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus when the other religious leaders would not. He confessed to Jesus 'I know that you are of God, because no-one could do the things you do without God.'

Later on we read of Nicodemus defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the religious ruling council, and Nicodemus appeared once more in the same gospel together with Joseph, as the two of them took Jesus' corpse from the cross and laid it to rest in the tomb.

Nicodemus was a friend to Jesus. He wanted to learn from him, which is why he sought him out in the middle of the night.

When Nicodemus arrived, Jesus wasted no time in idle chit-chat. Straight away Jesus said 'No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born anew – born from above.'

This completely threw Nicodemus; he had no response. Like me during my late night reading, Nicodemus thought to himself 'I know the words, but what on earth does Jesus mean? This makes no sense.'

And Nicodemus was completely right. By worldly standards what Jesus said is incomprehensible.

St Paul wrote 'The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,' that is, those of the world.

And by all accounts, Nicodemus, despite his desire to learn from Jesus, was still at this point a very worldly man. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. As such Nicodemus would have been politically savvy.

He was wealthy; he had the means to come up with one hundred pounds of embalming ointments and an unusual one-piece burial linen for Jesus that was worth fighting and gambling over. Certainly Nicodemus was wise in the ways of the marketplace.

And finally, Nicodemus was a Rabbi. As such he would have received much of his social standing by publicly debating the finer points of the law and the prophets – in fact we see him doing just that in chapter 6 of John's gospel.

So we see that Nicodemus is indeed wise in the ways of the world, and he tries to use this wisdom to figure out what Jesus said to him about being born anew. And his worldly wisdom completely fails him.

‘How?’ He asked. ‘How can one be born again – surely we don’t go back into the womb? What does this mean?’

Jesus chided him a little bit, saying ‘How can you call yourself a teacher,’ remember Rabbi means teacher, ‘how can you call yourself a teacher and not understand these things?’

This question seems like an inconsequential aside - Jesus putting Nicodemus gently into his place – but what if we were to put ourselves in Nicodemus’ sandals? Would we do any better?

Most of us are fairly wise in the ways of the world; we’re living reasonably comfortably, staying out of trouble, coming to church regularly. Can we answer the question?

Jesus made a distinction between being born of water and being born of the Spirit. What does it mean to be born of the Spirit?

This isn’t an idle theological question. Jesus said that our place in the kingdom of God depends on being born in the Spirit.

If we can’t answer this question, then we have cause for concern. The kingdom of God isn’t just some abstract notion of heaven or an afterlife. Jesus said the kingdom of God is among us; it’s like yeast spread throughout our culture – present, growing, changing the very nature of our society.

In fact, God has chosen to grow his kingdom through his church, through Spirit filled believers. That’s us. Therefore, spiritual birth is much greater than determining individual salvation. Our spiritual birth affects our families, our neighbourhoods, and creation itself.

So, with Nicodemus we ask ‘What, Jesus, are you talking about? How can one be born a second time? What is this Spiritual birth that you speak of?’

St Paul spent quite a bit of time writing about the effects of being born of the spirit. He wrote that after being born of the Spirit we will:

- Walk according to the Spirit (8:2-4).
- Set our minds on the things of the Spirit (8:5-8).
- Put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit (8:13).
- Be led by the Spirit (8:14).
- Know the Fatherhood of God by the Spirit (8:15-17).
- Hope in the Spirit (8:23-25).
- Pray in the Spirit (8:26-27).
- Serve in the Spirit (Rom 7:6; 15:16).
- Love by the Spirit (Rom 15:30; Gal 5:22-23; Col 1:8).

That list is an entire summer’s worth of sermons – let’s just look at the first point.

If we are filled with the Spirit then we will walk according to the Spirit. To walk in the Spirit is to be "in step" with the Spirit. To walk alongside someone suggests much more than a common destination. When we walk alongside each other we 'do life' together.

We eat together, move together, laugh together, and cry together. Walking in or with the Spirit involves embracing the mind and heart of Christ, and following his lead.

When we are not in step with the Spirit we are controlled by the flesh – that is churchspeak for saying that without God we live only to satisfy our own desires - good food, good drink, nice car, some friends and family. But, as we well know, living a life of self-satisfaction is far from satisfying. Whatever our desire or our escape – tv., exercise, drugs or drink, love from others – it doesn't matter if your desire is for a good thing or a bad thing – ultimately we become desensitized. We need more and more of that thing to satiate ourselves and the deeper we go the further satisfaction recedes. We never achieve the satisfaction that we so desperately pursue.

This is why Paul writes 'To set the mind on the flesh is death,' because this path can only lead to emptiness and void. We're quite simply chasing ever diminishing returns.

But, Paul writes, to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. This is the result of being born of the Spirit as Jesus said we must do.

When we are born of the Spirit we participate in building God's kingdom, which is eternal and has lasting value. It's a life worth living, not for the end result, though that is beyond our wildest imaginings, but it's a life that, in the present, is joy filled and empowered.

Life in the Spirit is living in God's delight; it is a freedom and a hope that makes you feel as though you could burst.

Most people don't remain in this ecstatic state constantly. We have mountaintop experiences in which that presence of God's Spirit is undeniable. Then we come back into the valley for a time. We hold the memory of that experience as we anticipate another dose of Spirit. We tend to move back and forth between the two kingdoms.

As we mature as Christians and learn to more ably keep step with the Spirit we have more experiences with the Spirit. We still return to this present kingdom, but somehow the valleys are less dark, less deep, we spend less time in them.

By being born of the Spirit and learning to follow the Spirit we actually realize God's kingdom on earth. Everywhere we step, we claim that space for the heavenly kingdom. This is why being born of the Spirit is not about life after death – eternal life is a gift for the present – not just for the future.

Now, I can go on and on about the benefits of life in the Spirit. But we're mostly a bunch of Nicodemus'. First we need the practical answer of how. How do we become born of the Spirit? We're not going back into the womb, so how does this work?

The answer can be found right in the beginning of the Bible, in the creation stories. You see, in the beginning was God. That was it – God. And then, God began creating, and to do so God had to make a space where God wasn't.

If all that was in the beginning was God, God had to clear some room within himself so that something else could exist. Creation was a self-limiting act of God.

So, for us to commune with God and to reveal the image of God that is imprinted upon us we need to make a space where we are not. We have to self-limit and make room for the other.

This means that we have to intentionally set aside our desires and our plans - our schedules, our to-do lists, our countless committee meetings – and just be.

We make physical spaces like this sanctuary, or your prayer space at home, that are specifically set aside from the rest of the world as spaces for us to enter into and stop thinking about ourselves every second of every day.

We set aside times in which our focus is God, when we make ourselves receptive to his presence.

When we engage in such disciplines we don't invoke the spirit – we allow ourselves to become aware of the spirit that is already present. The Spirit has never left; Jesus promised 'I will be with you, to the very end of the age.'

Making space for God is simply the conscious decision to stop allowing ourselves to become distracted. Distraction is the ailment of our age – internet, cellphones, tablets, tv. So many devices of so little consequence.

We can be filled by the spirit simply by making room for the spirit. Like a father giving good gifts to his children, God wants to bless you with a spiritual birth. We only have to clear some space and time to receive it.

I'd like to set some time aside right now for us to quiet ourselves and hear what God has to say. For the next two minutes let everything go but the present. Don't worry about what you have planned after the service, or what you did before. Just be.

Try to clear your mind of distractions, but don't worry about trying to control your thoughts. If a thought comes in, let it leave with as little effort as it appeared. Gently persist in making space and God will have a word for you.

We will do this for two minutes, starting now.

Closing Prayer

May this place and time of worship,
be a true spiritual home for the seeker,
this group of praying people be
a friend for the lonely, a guide for the confused.

May those who pray here be strengthened by the Holy Spirit
to serve all who enter this place and to receive them as Christ, Himself.

In the silence of this room may all the suffering,
violence and confusion of the world
encounter the power that will console, renew and uplift the human spirit.

May the beauty of Divine Life fill this group and the hearts of all who pray here with joyful
hope.

May all who come here weighed down by the problems of humanity, leave, giving thanks for
the wonder of human life.

We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.
Amen.