

OUT OF THE NIGHT

John 3:1-13

These verses of scripture contain the record of an interesting conversation between a prominent sinner and the only Saviour. This sinner is described at length in the first verse, which reads as follows, "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews."

The Pharisees composed the most popular and patriotic party. They were noted for their orthodox creed and punctilious observance of the Jewish ritual. They were proud, exclusive, bigoted, boastful of their good deeds, strict adherents to traditional beliefs and precise in their religious worship.

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. That implies that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the highest position within the gift of his nation. He stood high in the councils of the Sanhedrin. His position demanded and involved an irreproachable life, a splendid reputation, a good education, a great power, a wide influence and vast responsibilities. To him the people looked for instruction and guidance.

Nicodemus was a man of culture, refinement, scholarship and zeal for the law. He was one of the most religious men of his day, honest in his convictions and sincere in his desire to do right. He was a man who was willing to learn. He had an inquiring mind and a passion for the truth. Consequently, he refused to let prejudice blind him. He knew that it was easy for one to close his mind to the truth that he did not care to accept, to shut his eyes to that which he did not wish to see, and to stop his ears to the message that he did not want to hear. He also knew that such conduct was just as dangerous as it was easy, so he determined to know and to follow the truth.

Nicodemus was definitely religious, but he was not satisfied with his religion. His religion had not met his deepest needs. He knew that he had not learned the real secret of the best way of life, but he was convinced, on the basis of what he had seen and heard, that Jesus Christ knew that secret.

Anxious to hear what Christ Jesus had to say about the way of salvation and life, Nicodemus resolved to seek an interview with Him. Under the cover of darkness, he made his silent and unperceived way through the alleys of Jerusalem, out the gate which was kept open all night during the week of the Passover, down the zig-zag path and across the bed of the Kedron, then up the slope to the Mount of Olives, among the tents and stone houses, to find the humble abode in which the Lord Jesus was lodging for the night, which was probably a tent.

Why did Nicodemus come to Christ at night? He chose to wait until the crowds had dispersed and then make his way through the quiet streets alone, to the place where Christ Jesus had gone to rest for the night. Moreover, night was the best time to come. It gave him an opportunity for a long, private and uninterrupted conversation with Christ. His timidity may have been a part of the reason for his coming at night. That he was cautious and timid is evidenced not only by this incident, but also by his next appearance on the stage.

Easily accessible and happily approachable, Christ readily received Nicodemus. Modestly, and as if speaking for others as much as for himself, Nicodemus said, "We know that from God Thou art come as a teacher," meaning that He was commissioned by and sent from God. His opinion was based on his knowledge of the miracles which our Lord had performed, the purpose of which was to arrest the attention of the people and to attest a divine mission. However Christ did not discuss His miracles with Nicodemus. Instead, He ignored his reference to them and with startling abruptness talked to him about the new birth. He told him the astonishing fact that "unless one is born anew" he can never receive the benefits of the kingdom of God.

What a blow to Nicodemus, the honorable, cultured, refined and educated Pharisee! It was deeply humbling and puzzling as well. His merely being a Jew did not give him a place in the kingdom; his being a Pharisee, esteemed holier than other people, availed nothing; and his membership and fame in the Sanhedrin did not admit him into God's kingdom. It is to the credit of Nicodemus that he acknowledged himself an inquirer for the truth and an unsatisfied seeker after light. The most becoming and honorable place for anybody, however rich or learned, is that of an humble and earnest inquirer at the feet of Christ.

The matchless Preacher told Nicodemus that, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Thus He made it plain to him that he needed a Saviour instead of a teacher. The saved need a teacher, but the unsaved need a Saviour. In complete amazement Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" With tender satire, as Christ recognized his intellectuality, ability, popularity and sincerity, He said, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" Although Nicodemus felt the personal force of what the Lord Jesus said, he was not offended. Christ used him, as a splendid example of the natural man at his best, to emphasize the one great need of every person, which is the new birth. He did not say, "It would be a fine thing for you to be born again." Neither did He say, "You ought to be born again." He said, "Ye must be born again."

What is this new birth without which Christ says no man can see or enter the kingdom of God? It is a thing to be experienced rather than defined. It is the greatest miracle that God ever wrought. It is wrought only through and by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is an absolute necessity. As proof that there is and can be no exception, Christ told Nicodemus, who was an exalted type of what education, morality, sincerity and religion can do for one, that he needed to be born again. The new birth is not optional. It is imperative. "Ye must be born again." Eternal life is contingent upon it. If you expect to be saved and to live in heaven, then you must be born again.

I. The Nature Of The New Birth.

1. Negatively.

(1) It is not the natural birth.

Christ clearly distinguished the two births when He said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (verse 6). Just as we are born into this world by a physical birth, so we are born into the kingdom of God by a spiritual birth.

(2) It is not the education of the natural man.

Education dispels ignorance and eliminates coarse tastes and crude practices, but it can never produce or serve as a substitute for the new birth.

(3) It is not the reformation of the outward man.

Reformation is the work of man, but regeneration is the work of God. The new birth is an act of God instead of a reforming process on the part of man.

(4) It is not living a moral life.

Decency, respectability, morality, honesty, generosity and upright citizenship are good and laudable, but they can never effect the new birth. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit; Which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour" (Titus 3:5-6).

(5) It is not a profession of religion.

Every person is religious and worships somebody or something.

(6) It is not having a change of feeling.

Feelings are often changed by the weather, the condition of the health and by the circumstances of life. One may have a change of feeling without

regeneration, but one cannot experience the new birth without a change of feeling.

(7) It is not joining a church.

The unsaved should not be church members, but every saved person should be a member of a New Testament church.

2. Positively.

The new birth is the impartation of the divine nature to human beings. It is the infusion of the divine life into the human soul. As in the first, or physical, birth we become partakers of human nature, so in the second, or spiritual, birth we become partakers of the divine nature. We received the nature of our parents when we were born physically, and we receive the nature of God when we are born spiritually.

Our Saviour described the new birth as a passing out of death into life. He said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24). When one repents of his sins and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, he receives salvation. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12).

The new birth is a performance of God. It is also a permanent change. A person is not born from above today and then unborn next week. Christ has never saved a soul and later permitted that soul to be lost. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

II. The Evidences Of The New Birth.

How can one know that he has experienced the new birth?

1. By the testimony of the Spirit of God.

"The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirits, that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16). "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself" (I John 5:10).

2. By his love for God's children.

"We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death" (I John 3:14). It is just as natural for born-again souls to love those who are in God's family as it is for us to love those who are related to us by ties of blood.

3. By his victory over sin.

"For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world, even our faith" (I John 5:4).

4. By a desire to please the Lord.

"And hereby we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments" (I John 2:3). When the new birth is experienced, self is dethroned and Christ is enthroned as Lord. Thereafter, life is under new management and its greatest ambition is to please Him. It is the new birth alone which brings a soul to the place where the Lord's will is its supreme delight.

5. By a changed life.

The new birth transforms our thoughts, tastes, affections, interests, ambitions, motives, purposes, enjoyments, habits, judgments, fears, outlooks, conduct and hopes. The things we formerly enjoyed we now dislike and the things we formerly hated we now love. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (II Corinthians 5:17). When

one is born again, he thinks, feels, decides and acts differently. He loves what God loves and hates what God hates.

6. By a passion for the unsaved.

A regenerated person is willing and anxious to do what he can to influence others to accept Christ and thereby come to know the joys of the new birth.

Nicodemus came to Christ in the night and went away in the light. He was never the same after that interview with Christ that night. He went forth to live as a follower of his Lord. We have only two subsequent glimpses of him. The first one was some year and a half later, when his colleagues of the Sanhedrin sent officers to arrest Christ Jesus and bring Him before their organization for trial and they returned without Him.

With the feeling against Christ at fever heat, Nicodemus was unwilling to remain silent, although he was not courageous enough to avow his faith in Him. He resolved to stand up for the legal rights of Christ. So he ventured to raise a point of law saying, "Does our law condemn the man except it first hear from him and get knowledge of what he is doing?" Passing by the matter of common justice, which Nicodemus had mentioned, they made a personal thrust at him and sneered at him as a mere ignorant Galilean. Nicodemus had cleared his own conscience, but he had also made himself a marked man. Though he might keep silent in the Sanhedrin thereafter, he would be under suspicion.

Our next glimpse of Nicodemus was after Christ died on the cross. Joseph of Arimathaea had obtained permission from Pilate to remove our Lord's body from the cross, whereupon Nicodemus assisted him in preparing the body for burial. These two men of scholarship and wealth openly avowed their love for Christ in the hour of His deepest shame. One wonders, however, if Nicodemus did not have many a pang in his heart that he had waited so long to take an open stand for Christ at whatever cost.

You can avoid any regrets along this line by receiving Christ as your personal Saviour now, then by enthroning Him as the Lord of your life and living in conformity to His blessed will.

"Oh sinner, this message of Jesus believe,
Just open your heart and salvation receive;
If ever you meet Him in heaven's domain,
'Ye must be born again.'"