

NICODEMUS

John 3:1-13

When Christ came from Galilee to Jerusalem to attend the first Passover during His public ministry, He entered the Temple area and found the money-changers and grafters there. In bold and striking fashion He used a scourge to cleanse the precincts of the Temple of the traffickers who defiled it. This action stirred the citizenry of Jerusalem to its depths. During the days which followed He performed works of healing and taught the people. There was born in the hearts of many the conviction that at last their long-expected Deliverer had come. Probably the most of those whom He impressed deeply belonged to the ranks of the humble. His action moved the rulers to wrath. Encased in prejudice, their chief desire was to get Him out of their way.

Among those who witnessed the walk and the work of our Lord during that memorable Passover week was Nicodemus, one of the most interesting and fascinating personalities with whom Christ dealt during His earthly ministry. It is only in the third, seventh and nineteenth chapters of the Gospel of John that we find any reference to Nicodemus in the New Testament.

Of this outstanding man we read: "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." The Pharisees composed the most patriotic, popular and powerful party. They were noted for their orthodox creed and their punctilious observance of the Jewish ritual. The Pharisees were proud, self-righteous, exclusive, boastful of their good deeds, strict adherents to traditional beliefs and precise in their religious worship.

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jewish nation during a tumultuous and dangerous time. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the highest position within the gift of his nation. He stood very high in the councils of the Sanhedrin. His position demanded and involved an irreproachable life, a splendid reputation, a good education, 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, sincere in his convictions and desirous of doing right. He was willing to learn. He had an inquiring mind and a passion for the truth. Consequently, he refused to let prejudice blind him completely. 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.

Even though Nicodemus had position, prestige, power and prosperity, there was still a real void in his heart. He was very religious, but he was not satisfied with his religion. 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 Christ Jesus knew that secret.

Nicodemus was a learned man, but there were several things he still did not know. Fortunate was he in realizing that he did not know everything, as is true of every other person who comes to this factual realization. Nicodemus had heard the claims that Christ was making for Himself; also, the claims that his colleagues in the Sanhedrin were making about the Christ. He was perplexed because some were worshipping Christ, whereas, the intimate associates of Nicodemus were condemning Him. Unwilling to be swayed by either group, Nicodemus thought that he had a personal responsibility to investigate the person and work of Christ for himself. Hungry for the truth, and anxious to hear what Christ had to say about the way of salvation and life, this aristocratic and open-minded scholar decided to seek an interview with the Lord Jesus. He believed that a man in his position was responsible for getting accurate, firsthand information

in the most precise fashion possible and in such a way that it would not jeopardize the public peace and order.

Nicodemus was fair enough to want to examine all the facts before passing judgment upon Christ. Resolved to obtain the truth, he decided to see Christ in person and listen to what He had to say, even though the rest of the Pharisees were hostile to Christ without taking the trouble to inquire into His claims. As long as he was undecided in his own mind, Nicodemus dared not visit Christ openly. One memorable night, under the cover of darkness Nicodemus made his silent and unperceived way through the streets of Jerusalem, out the gate which was kept open all night during the week of the Passover, down the zigzag 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.

Some have branded Nicodemus' coming to Christ at night as an act of cowardice. Others have interpreted it as an act of caution and prudence by which he was able to avert misunderstanding and bitter criticism from influential friends. It is certainly reasonable to assume that he came in the night for privacy. Inasmuch as Christ was surrounded by the multitude throughout the day, Nicodemus knew that our Lord could not have been approached and consulted at length by one who desired to be alone with Him without being interrupted by the crowd. The important thing was not the motive for his coming, but the fact that Nicodemus came. It was much better for him to come as he did than not to have come at all.

Nicodemus readily discovered that Christ was easily accessible and happily approachable. Modestly, and as if speaking for his associates, who had reached the same conclusion, as much as for himself, he said, "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God." That was a significant statement in view of the fact that a lawyer is usually careful how he uses the word "know." He will say, "We have reason to believe"; or, "There are good grounds for surmising"; or, "It is permissible to imagine"; but he will not use the word "know" unless there is abundant and convincing proof. However, Nicodemus, with his legally trained mind, told Christ that he and many others were convinced by overwhelming evidence that He was a teacher come from God, meaning commissioned by and sent from God. He recognized and acknowledged that the miracles of Christ constituted valid evidence of the approval of God upon His ministry. He was quite sure that no one could do the mighty works which Christ did unless God was with him.

Our Lord ignored the reference of Nicodemus to His miracles and with startling abruptness talked to him about the necessity and nature of the birth from above. 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! It was deeply humbling to the honorable, cultured, refined and educated Pharisee. 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 appropriate and honorable place for anybody, however rich or learned, is that of an humble and earnest inquirer at the feet of Christ.

The statement of the matchless Preacher, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," made it plain to Nicodemus 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 a man be born when he is old?" With tender satire, as Christ recognized his intellectuality, ability, popularity and sincerity, He said, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knoweth 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.

Christ not only spoke to Nicodemus about the necessity of the birth from above, but also the nature of it. We shall now look at its nature from two viewpoints:

1. The Negative.

(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. The Positive.

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).

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. However, Nicodemus made a serious mistake in not coming out openly and boldly and committing himself without reserve to the cause of Christ. He stood in his own light, deprived himself of much joy, obstructed his own progress, hindered his growth in grace and in knowledge, limited the value of his testimony and usefulness, and curtailed his influence for good. He should have been an open and avowed disciple of Christ. So ought all who have reached his state of mind and heart.

We have only two subsequent glimpses of Nicodemus. 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.'"