

THE BIRTH FROM ABOVE

John 3:1-13

Among those who witnessed the walk and the work of Christ during the memorable Passover week in Jerusalem was Nicodemus, one of the most interesting and fascinating personalities with whom our Lord dealt in His earthly ministry. 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 very precise in their religious worship.

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. This very position demanded and involved an irreproachable life, a splendid reputation, a good education, a great power, a wide influence, and tremendous responsibilities. To him the people looked for instruction and guidance.

Nicodemus was a man of culture, refinement, scholarship, and zeal for the law. A man of learning and intellectual acumen, he was familiar with the Old Testament and conversant with philosophy. He was a respectable and model citizen. He was the kind of a man who would pay his debts, be kind in the home, and live peaceably with his neighbors. He was one of the most religious men of his day, sincere in his convictions and in his desire to do right. Nicodemus 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. Nicodemus also knew that such conduct was just as dangerous as it was easy, so he determined to learn and to follow the truth.

Even though Nicodemus had position, prestige, prosperity, and power, there was still a real void in his heart. He was very religious, but he was not satisfied. He knew that something was lacking in his life. He was aware 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 knew that secret.

Although Nicodemus was a very learned man, there were several things that he 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.

This famous scholar 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 to listen to what He had to say, even though the rest of the Pharisees were hostile to Christ and refused to take the time and trouble to inquire into His claims. 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 the coming to Christ at night as an act of cowardice on the part of Nicodemus. 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, for he could not have had a lengthy interview during the day without being interrupted. The wonder is that Nicodemus overcame his upbringing and his prejudicial views enough to approach Christ at all. The important thing was not the motive for his coming, but the fact that he came. It was much better for him to come at night than not to 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." He and others were convinced by overwhelming evidence that He was a teacher Who had been commissioned by and sent from God. He acknowledged that the miracles of Christ constituted valid evidence of the approval of God upon His ministry. He was sure that no one could do the mighty works which Christ did unless God was with him.

Ignoring the reference of Nicodemus to His miracles, with startling abruptness our Lord talked to him about the necessity and the nature of the birth from above. He told him the astonishing fact that unless one is born anew or from above he can never see or enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus was astonished at and bewildered by Christ's statement: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." He asked, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Recognizing the intellectuality, ability, popularity, and sincerity of Nicodemus, with tender satire Christ said, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knoweth not these things?" This illustrates the fact that it is possible to know many things, and yet know very little about the things most worth knowing, the things that matter most in life and in death, in time and in eternity.

I. The Nature Of The Birth From Above.

1. From the negative viewpoint.

(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 neither produce the birth from above nor serve as a substitute for it.

(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 splendid 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. But, a mere profession and an actual possession of salvation are not the same.

(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.

People may and often do join a church without being born from above, and this is to be regretted. Unsaved people ought not to be church members, but every child of God should be a member of a New Testament church.

2. From the positive viewpoint.

"Born again" or "Born from above" is a figure taken from the natural birth, and conveys the idea of an entrance upon a new life. The birth from above 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 received the nature of God when we were born spiritually. The birth from above is wrought by the power of God. It is never a human achievement, but always a performance of God.

II. The Manner Of The Birth From Above.

How is the birth from above brought about? Since it is accomplished by the Lord, we need not be surprised that it is mystifying and awesome. He frequently does things that we do not understand and cannot explain.

The author of the birth from above is God. "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). The agent of the birth from above is the Holy Spirit. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). The instrument by which the birth from above is brought about is the Word of God. "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever" (I Peter 1:23). The channel through which it comes is faith. "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Paul said, "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

III. The Necessity Of The Birth From Above.

The necessity of this birth is found in the innate sinfulness of human nature. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

To emphasize the fact that the birth from above is not a luxury, but an absolute necessity, Christ three times in this chapter said, "Ye must be born again." These words were addressed by our Lord to Nicodemus, who was an exalted type of what education, refinement, culture, morality, sincerity, and religion can do for a person. Even though he was the highest type of a man, Nicodemus needed to be born from above. This goes to show that there cannot be any exception to the need of regeneration. It is indispensable to salvation. Without it you will never enter heaven. Have you been born from above? "Ye must be born again."

IV. The Evidences Of The Birth From Above.

How does one know that he has been born from above?

1. By the testimony of the Spirit of God.

When one has experienced the birth from above, there is an inward impression whereby the Holy Spirit witnesses to that fact. "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). A born-again person delights in fellowship with God's people. 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). Those who have experienced the birth from above make a practice of doing the things which are right in God's sight and in accordance with His will which is revealed in the Word of God. The new birth expels sin, repels Satan, and impels godly action and victorious living.

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 one is born from above, self is dethroned and Christ is enthroned as Lord and Master. Thereafter, life is under new management, and one's greatest ambition is to please Christ. Only this birth from above can bring a soul to the place where the Lord's will is its supreme delight.

5. By a changed life.

The birth from above 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 hated previously 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). After one has been born from above, he thinks, feels, decides, and acts differently. He loves what God loves and hates what He hates.

6. By a passion for the unsaved.

Every regenerated person longs for the salvation of others. He is willing and anxious to try to persuade others to receive Christ as Saviour, and thereby come to know the joys of having been born of God.

Have you been born from above? Are you a partaker of the divine nature? I am not asking if you are a church member. I am simply asking, Have you experienced the new birth? If not, you are lost. But, even if you are lost, you need not remain in that condition. If you will repent of your sins and receive Christ as your Saviour, the divine nature will be imparted to you.

If you are not a child of God, then you are a lost sinner, and you know that. Christ is the only one Who can save you. Will you accept Him now as your personal Saviour? Without any further delay, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." Won't you do that now?

"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.'"