

Fall 2017 Newsletter
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BORN AGAIN

“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
John 3:3

Someone may ask you, “Are you born again?” Depending upon your response, they may or may not accept you as a fellow Christian. The inability to answer this question affirmatively marks you as among the lost and some even go so far as to assert that even God cannot save you. The words “born again” have become a catchphrase used to judge one’s religious standing, reliability, honesty, or, sometimes, superiority.

“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” was Jesus’ opening statement in the conversation he had with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, one of the rulers of Israel (John 3:1-13). From these words of Jesus, some Christians understand that they are “born again” when they accept Jesus and from that time are irrevocably destined for heaven. Is that what Jesus was trying to convey to Nicodemus?

The visit of Nicodemus to our Lord was evidently early in our Lord’s ministry. We know little of the man, except that on various occasions he manifested sincerity and considerable faith in our Lord and sympathy with his cause. It was this same man who defended our Lord in a discussion amongst the Pharisees and priests. He said, “Does our Law judge any man before it hear him?” (John 7:50,51) whereupon his fellow-rulers asked, “Are you also one of his disciples?” Nicodemus was not ready to affirm discipleship then, but that his sympathy continued with the Lord is

evidenced by the fact that he was one of the prominent men who requested the privilege of burying our Lord’s body after the crucifixion (John 19:39).

We cannot reasonably find fault with Nicodemus for coming to Jesus by night. Throughout the day our Lord was continually pressed by the crowds of people who came to him to hear his teaching and for healing. A visit then would have proven less than satisfactory. Besides, Nicodemus had no right to cast the influence of his presence and office on the side of our Lord until he had in some degree satisfied himself on the subject. Nevertheless, when he presented himself to our Lord on this occasion he declared his conviction that Jesus was a teacher sent from God, and that he believed the miracles to be genuine.

BEGOTTEN AGAIN—BORN AGAIN.

Nicodemus had the Jewish hopes, and evidently was one of those in expectation of Messiah, and the Kingdom that Messiah was to establish for the blessing of Israel and the world. If there was more to their conversation, we have not been given access to it, but the Lord’s answer implies that the inquiry of Nicodemus was along the lines of the conditions for membership in the Messianic Kingdom.

Our Lord promptly put the matter in a very plain light, assuring his visitor that no one could see the Kingdom unless born again. A little later in the conversation he added that no one could enter into the Kingdom except by being born again (vs. 5). The word "born" is properly enough used in both these instances, and thus we learn that the Lord had reference to the future—reference to the resurrection birth described by the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44—born from the dead to glory, honor and immortality (Romans 2:7), and a share in the Kingdom, assured to those who have part in the first resurrection (Revelation 20:6). These all will be spirit beings, and with their Lord will constitute the spiritual Kingdom, which will be invisible to mankind in general—invisible to all its earthly subjects, as Satan, the prince of this world is invisible to mankind now (2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2).

Nicodemus discerned that there was something here far beyond anything he had contemplated. As a Jew, he had been looking for and waiting for an earthly kingdom and an earthly King, but now he was informed that only by passing through a change, a begetting and a new birth to a new nature, could he hope ever to participate in, or even to see, the Kingdom of God. No wonder he was astonished and inquired further respecting the new birth. Would it be like the first birth? Would those who would be heirs of the Kingdom be born again as they once had been born of a mother?

Our Lord answered that to be begotten of an earthly father and later to be born of an earthly mother would insure that the progeny would be earthly also—that which is begotten and born of the flesh is flesh. There is, however, a likeness between such an earthly birth and the new birth necessary to a share in the Kingdom. There must be a begetting, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).



There must also be a period of gestation for this spiritual new creature that will precede its resurrection birth. Thus, all who will share in the spiritual Kingdom as spirit beings must first be begotten of the Spirit and subsequently be developed by the Spirit, growing in all of its fruits and graces (2 Peter 1:4-11; Galatians 5:22,23), and ultimately be born of the Spirit, born from the dead a spiritual being like the Lord and a sharer in his glory, honor and immortality. That which is begotten and born of the Spirit is spirit, not flesh—"flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 15:50).

Nicodemus still marveled at such a teaching. Could it be possible that he, and all the great teachers of the Jewish nation, had such a misconception of the Kingdom! This was indeed true, and similarly we might say that a great many today have equally erroneous conceptions of the Kingdom. The difficulty today is that our Lord's words above quoted and which seem so plain, are misunderstood and supposed to refer not at all to the resurrection, but entirely to the begetting of the present time.

This is in part at least the fault of the translators of our common version Bible, who, knowing that the same Greek word is translated

both "begotten" and "born" in our English language, have not properly distinguished between these, nor given English readers the proper knowledge that there are two thoughts behind this one word—the thought of begetting and, after gestation, ultimately birth. Few Christian people have any clear conception of what begetting of the Spirit signifies, and their confusion is doubled when they are told that they are now born of the Spirit.

For us to be begotten with the holy Spirit of God, we must be fully consecrated to do the will of the Lord (Romans 12:1,2). This does not mean an impulsive answer to an altar call, but a conscious surrendering of one's heart to God (Psalm 50:5). God will then *beget* us with his holy Spirit, the earnest or pledge of our inheritance of the new nature (Ephesians 1:12-14), which will ultimately be *born* of the Spirit in the resurrection, if we continue faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10).

AN ILLUSTRATION OF A SPIRIT-BORN BEING.

Our Lord admonishes Nicodemus that he must not be too much surprised at the great mistake he and others had made in regard to the terms and conditions which would qualify them for a place in the Kingdom. They should realize the necessity of being born again—of attaining to the first resurrection if they would be members of the Kingdom class (Revelation 20:6).

Our Lord's illustration respecting such Spirit-begotten ones is very clear and explicit: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Nicodemus could understand about the blowing wind, which had power but was invisible. Our Lord explained that this was a natural example of what beings born of the Spirit are like. They are like the wind, which can go and come, but which cannot be seen. Likewise, Nicodemus, or whoever else would be an heir of the Kingdom, must experience such a great change or transformation, such a birth of the Spirit, which would make them like the angels, invisible, able to go and come without being seen of men.

Nicodemus, marveling still more at this explanation of the first resurrection and the nature of those who would have part in it, exclaimed, "How can these things be!" Is it possible! Our Lord's answer was that a ruler in Israel should have comprehended these things. Evidently, therefore, a proper study of the matter from the scriptural standpoint might have led true Israelites indeed to more or less of an appreciation of the character of the Kingdom in advance of its coming. They had the Psalms and the Prophets that described the work and sufferings of Messiah, they had the time prophecies of Daniel so "all men were in expectation" of him (Luke 3:15), but they worshipped their traditions and focused on works of the Law. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their failure to observe the weightier matters of the Law and Prophets. They might have understood better than they did, but they were content to live on too low a plane. They did not enjoy all the knowledge available to them because they were too self-satisfied with their outward "works," and they did not sufficiently hunger and thirst after the Truth (Matthew 23:23-28).

This our Lord declares is the reason why Nicodemus and his fellow officials, the Doctors of the Jewish Church, were not ready for his message, not ready to receive the Truth—"We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen, and ye receive not our witness"—our message (John 3:11).

Our Lord continues: You would like to have me explain about this spiritual Kingdom, its operations, etc., but this I cannot do; you are not in condition to receive my word. "If I told you earthly things and you believed not, how shall you believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" The person who cannot grasp with clearness and distinctness the features of God's plan which relate to the world in general, certainly need not expect that he would be in any condition to understand or appreciate the things which pertain to the spiritual conditions, which are higher and therefore more difficult of comprehension.

NATURAL VS. SPIRITUAL THINGS.

Evidently Nicodemus was inquiring particularly respecting the heavenly Kingdom to which the Lord had referred. He was desirous of measuring with his judgment the probabilities of such a Kingdom as our Lord had announced. Many of our day look at the matter similarly, and refuse to believe the things beyond the range of their natural senses—they lack the sixth sense of faith, or spiritual discernment. As our Lord explained, the difficulty lies in the fact that they have not thoroughly believed the Lord's testimony in respect to earthly things—they have not thoroughly subjected their minds to him. Only after faith and obedience respecting earthly things, and a full consecration of our hearts to the Lord, need we expect the begetting of the Spirit, which would enable us to grasp mentally by faith some of the exceeding great and precious things which God hath in reservation for them that specially love him—for the Church as the Bride, the Lamb's Wife (Revelation 19:7,8; 21:9).

Even for those who have been given this spiritual sense, there are some things not seen as yet—which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man" but are "revealed unto us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9,10, 1 John 3:2) The Lord tells us of the glory, honor, immortality and joint-heirship with Christ as Kings and Priests in his Kingdom that await us. What we see through the Spirit is almost overwhelming in its grandeur, and with the Apostle we assure ourselves that these are indeed exceeding great and precious promises, by which we may partake of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

NO MAN HATH ASCENDED.

Continuing his argument, that Nicodemus must receive by faith whatever he would know about heavenly things and that he would be entirely dependent upon Jesus' word, our Lord remarked that "no man hath ascended up to heaven," and that he, the Son of man, who alone had "come down from heaven," *was the only one able to speak with knowledge and authority respecting heavenly matters. This is still the case. There is but one testimony respecting these heavenly things—our Lord's own words while in the flesh and

his subsequent revelations through the holy Spirit to the apostles (John 16:13,14). We must accept this testimony, for there is no other.

Here we note the peculiar and unsatisfactory condition of the world in general. The heathen believe in an invisible spiritual, or heavenly realm, but without evidence except such as comes to them through human imaginings and the fallen spirits. In Christendom, many have rejected the testimony of the Bible to create their own image of heaven. Instead, they accept Satan's lie that the dead do not die and believe the rappings of fallen angels who personate the human dead. Respecting mankind, our Lord in this verse distinctly tells us that they have not ascended to heaven. Elsewhere (John 5:29), he tells us that they are in their graves—that they are dead, and will so remain until his power and authority shall call them forth again to being. The Apostle Peter's testimony respecting the Prophet David, a man approved of God (1 Kings 15:5), is along the same line. He declares, "David is not ascended into the heavens" (Acts 2:34). The Apostle Paul also knew that his reward and that of the faithful would come at the Lord's return (2 Timothy 4:8).

* [The last three words of the 13th verse are spurious. They are not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts and are therefore not included in newer Bible translations. By whatever means they found their way into some later manuscripts, they create an obvious absurdity. They would make Jesus say that he was in heaven at the time he was talking to Nicodemus.]

The question of what it means to be "born of the Spirit" requires the examination of all the scriptures that use the terms "born of God," "born again," "begotten of God," etc. In connection with these scriptures, there are seeming contradictions in the testimony of Scripture. Can the "Born Again" one sin? What does it mean "if we say we have no sin we lie?" The booklet "Born of the Spirit" examines and harmonizes all the relevant texts. Send for your copy today.

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