

Born Again from above

John 3:1-17

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Nicodemus silently creeps through the dark streets of Jerusalem, keeping to the shadows, vigilant, lest anyone sees him. He's on a mission. The teacher, Jesus, is in Jerusalem. Wonderful things are said of Him. He has amazed the people with miraculous signs. Astounded them with the authority of His teaching. He's stirred Nicodemus' curiosity and enlivened his hope. "Surely," he thinks to himself, "this man is from God. I've got to meet him."

But how? Official opposition to this Rabbi from Galilee is well-known. Very powerful people among the Pharisees and Sadducees on the ruling council, the Sanhedrin, have made it clear Jesus of Nazareth is an unwanted presence in Jerusalem. Association with Jesus would be risky! Ridicule, or even expulsion, is sure to greet the Jew seen socializing with Him. But Nicodemus must know more about this man and His teaching. Therefore, he decides to approach Jesus by night, under cover of darkness.

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." We don't know what question he was going to ask. Jesus interrupts his flattery by saying, *"Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* So we might presume that Nicodemus was going to ask, what so many asked Jesus ... "What must I do to see the kingdom of God?"

"How do I get to heaven? What do I have to do?" It's a common question. Hopefully, a question you've wrestled with yourself. It's a question people have always asked. The Apostle Paul addresses this question throughout his letters to the early Christians. To the Romans. The Galatians. The Ephesians. The Philippians. The Colossians. The book of Hebrews is all about this question. "How do I get to heaven? What do I have to do?"

Nicodemus, one of the top religious leaders of his day, was a good Pharisee. And like all Pharisees, "relied upon himself." (Lk 18:10) He practiced righteousness outwardly, and believed that his own achievements were in themselves sufficient. He did not come as a bankrupt, having nothing, but as the rich who would know how his wealth might be increased. We may believe that he was upright and that he was more than willing to undertake whatever was required of him." (Jon Ylvisaker, *The Gospels*) How else are you going to get into heaven?

And Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* A pointed conversation follows about second birth, water, Spirit, and the wind, a conversation meant to reveal, and lead Nicodemus to salvation. But Nicodemus struggles with the images Jesus speaks, and asks, *"How can this be?"*

Jesus answers, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit [Many believe this to be reference to being baptized in Jesus's name – being familiar especially with John the Baptist and a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And it's not just about water, but water and the Spirit. The Spirit's work connected with the physical element of water – born from above], he cannot enter the kingdom of God."*

"How do I get to heaven? What do I have to do?" Unless *God* does something, it doesn't matter *what* you do. None of us is getting in. Born again. Born of water and the Spirit. Born from above. Jesus illustrates. *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

Recently, we were reminded what that was like, as the wind blew with all its fury. Blowing around all over the place. At times, it was hard to tell where it was coming from and where it was going. Its origin and its destination were beyond our comprehension. We weren't in control of it, as an outside force was acting upon us.

That's what being born again spiritually is like. We don't make it happen. There's nothing we can do to get ourselves into heaven. We're not in control. Salvation is from above. From outside ourselves. We must be acted upon by Another. From One who is above. It's not something we do, but something done to us. Like natural birth, this spiritual birth, this birth from above, is a gift. A gift given by God for us to receive. *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.* (John 6:63)

How do we enter the Kingdom of God? How do we get in? To enter the kingdom of God, you must be born again. Born anew. Born from above. How are you going to do that? Consider your first birth, your physical birth. What

did you have to do with that? You didn't do anything. If anything, you resisted being born with every fiber of your being. And when you were finally born, what did you do? You screamed at what happened to you. In a similar way, you don't do anything to be born again spiritually from above. It happens to you. You were born of the flesh. Now, to enter the Kingdom of God, you must be born of the Spirit. Born from above. A new creation.

Nicodemus says to Jesus, "How can these things be?" We could imagine astonishment written all over Nicodemus' face. It all sounded so very strange to this old Pharisee, who all his life, his focus was on works – works – works, and was admired by the bulk of the nation for this very fact, to hear from Jesus: birth – birth – birth by the Spirit, an entirely new nature and creation. (Lenski)

Even though he's a "teacher of Israel," a credentialed rabbi, he fails to grasp this most basic truth, that the kingdom of God is something *received* from above, not *earned* from below.

And Jesus says, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" There are two perspectives to this life and to this world. One from below and one from above. There are also two religions in this world. The religion from below and the religion from above. The perspective "from below" is our perspective, the world as we see and experience it. (William Cwirla)

The religion "from below" is a religion of the law. A religion of principles. Of methods. Of exercises. Of things you do to get to God. To gain God's favor. To gain access to the world beyond. You've got to do something. Meditate. Look inward. Be nice. Help others. Go on a pilgrimage. Pledge to try harder. To do better. To do your best. The religion "from below" is all about doing something. It's all we know. What else is there?

And so, Nicodemus is thinking about what *man* does, or can do. Jesus is talking about what *God* does. What God promises. Nicodemus was thinking of how man can get to God. Jesus is talking about God coming to man. Nicodemus is thinking works. Jesus is talking grace. Gift. (James Douthwaite)

And so Nicodemus is, understandably, confused. This is a whole new way of thinking. And it's why today, we're so often confused as well. For still today, when it comes to religion and spirituality, we first think it's about what we do, or can do, or have to do.

But that's not the case at all. As Jesus said, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:44) Whether it's things physical (in creation) or things spiritual, the beginning is always God's doing. It's all about God descending to us. It's all about God's promises. And so, in the beginning, after Adam and Eve fell into sin and were afraid of God, God did what? He **came** to them. He **called out** to them. He made a **promise** to them, of a Savior would **come** to them.

And then, this coming, and calling, and promise, were repeated through the Old Testament. As we heard earlier, how God came to a man named Abram (or Abraham) who did not know Him but worshiped false gods. And God called him, and made a promise to him, of a land and of a Savior. And then down through the generations, to Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Joshua and David and Solomon, God kept coming and calling and promising. Not that they *do*, but that they *believe*. There *is* doing. But first, comes *believing*.

"And", Jesus says, "one of the best examples of God's coming and calling and promising, Nicodemus, which surely you, a teacher of Israel, remember, is the bronze serpent on a pole in the wilderness."

Snakes were loose in the camp of Israel. Slithering all over the place. Hiding in dark corners, slipping in under tents and into sleeping bags. Venomous and deadly. People were dying, all over the camp of Israel. The Lord sent those snakes. They were His judgment over the grumbling of a faithless, ungrateful people. Ungrateful for the manna that fell from heaven every day but Saturday. And for the fresh water, that streamed from the stricken rock. They despised the Lord's food. They despised the Lord. They despised their freedom, and longed for Egypt. So God sent snakes.

Stricken, smitten, afflicted, dying, the people came crawling to Moses, finally, with their confession. "We have sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you." That's always a good start. Confession. Tell the truth. Admit it and stop trying to cover it up or justify yourself.

They pleaded to Moses to intercede. "Pray the Lord to take the snakes away from us." Notice how the Lord answers their pray. He doesn't take away the snakes, as they had asked. Instead, what does He do? He provides a cure. "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." (Numbers 21:8)

Suppose you were an Israelite, and your best friend or relative is lying on the ground, writhing in agony, bitten by one of those fire snakes sent by God. What would you do, knowing what you know? You would direct his eyes to the bronze serpent and the pole and say, "*Behold the serpent of the Lord. Look on it and live.*" "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

"One of the best examples, Nicodemus, of God coming and calling and promising, is the bronze serpent. What did the people do then, Nicodemus? All *they* were doing was getting bit by serpents. All *they* were doing was dying. But what happened, Nicodemus? God **came** to them and **called** them to faith and **promised** them healing and life. Wasn't that wonderful, Nicodemus?" (Douthwaite)

"Well that's what's happening *now*, Nicodemus! Because *just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*, so now a man is going to be lifted up - *the Son of Man - that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

This is the fulfillment of all that coming and calling and promising of God. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" So that man who will be lifted up for the life of the world, Nicodemus, that Son of Man, is the Son of God. God coming and calling and fulfilling His promise. Look to Him and not to yourself for your life.

For that is the temptation we have and the problem we face. To look to ourselves and not to God for our life. And that's easy to do, especially during Lent, when many of us focus on spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines can be great, if put in their proper place. The danger is in thinking that what we do is what's most important.

Sin has curved us in on ourselves and away from God. Satan doesn't mind you having religion or spirituality, *as long as* you're trying to do it yourself, with your own strength, and relying on what you can do, instead of what God had done for you in Christ. As Israel looked to the snake on the pole and lived, so look to the man on the cross and live eternally.

How can this be? How is this possible? It's all God's doing. God coming. God calling. God promising. God so loving, and thus, giving. Giving faith. Giving forgiveness. Giving new life. That we be born again from above. And continually fed from above.

How does this happen? How are we born again? Born from above? "*for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God.*" (1 Peter 1:23-25)

Rev. Patrick Thurmer puts it this way, "*When I hear God's Word proclaimed ... both the law which shows me my need and drives me to despair and the gospel which meets my need and gives me life, I find myself believing it. It isn't a decision on my part, it simply happens. In other words, I didn't believe, then I found myself believing after the hearing of the message of Christ. ... I'm told that there is an old word or expression in Norwegian that means just that: "I heard myself saved".*

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Just as God did not send the snakes in the wilderness to condemn His people but to save them, so Jesus didn't come to condemn, but to save. For we from below, because of our sin, we of this world, are already condemned, no matter what we do. If God did *nothing*, that would be the result.

But God didn't do nothing. He sent His Son. Jesus came to save and to give life. He came into the world and was lifted up on the tree of the cross for one purpose only ... that we might live. To give life from above. And believing this good news, believing in Jesus, you are born again. Born from above.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ... He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:9-13)

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Born again from above. Children of Abraham. Children of God. Eternal life is not a graduation, but a gift. To you. *From Him* above, who came down below.