

The Night With The Teacher

John 3:1-16

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Let's read John 3:1-2 to get us started. It says, "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi...'—that was addressing Jesus as "Master" or "Teacher"—"...we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

This night scene, that we're so familiar with, takes place in AD30 in Jerusalem during the time of the Passover feast. It's a story of a night interview. I think of all the people Larry King has interviewed over the years. He once said that if he could interview Him, he would interview Jesus Christ. In our text, Nicodemus had the opportunity to be with Jesus and interview Him.

We don't know why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Some people say he was afraid; he was worried about being accused of loving Jesus. We don't know. But most likely Nicodemus wanted time alone with Jesus. They both would have been busy, so he reserved the nighttime to come to Jesus and do this interview.

We also don't know how long the interview lasted. Does it go to verse 16 or 17 or 18 or all the way to verse 21? Verse 21 is a natural break in the text, and you may have red letters all the way to verse 21. Needless to say, whether it is Jesus speaking in these later verses or whether John is writing the narrative, they are both speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So it doesn't matter if it is Jesus or John speaking, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God."

This is the night interview where Jesus teaches on the doctrine of the new birth. We learn from the actual lips of Jesus in this night interview how to enter God's kingdom. We do so by being "born again." And I want to focus on three aspects of this new birth: the necessity of the new birth, the nature of the new birth and the basis of the new birth.

First we'll look at the necessity of the new birth. The background for that is in verses 1-5. John says, "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night..."—there's our night scene—"...and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly...'—or "Verily, verily" or "Truly, truly"—"...I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'"

Now I want to set the context for you of our text. John 2:23-25 is where it starts. "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover during the feast..."—so we know the place and the time—"...many believed in His name when they saw the signs..."—or "miracles"—"...which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone

should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.” Then it continues right along with chapter 3, verse 1: “There was a man...” So Jesus knew what was in the heart of men, and then there was a man who came to Him.

The reason we prefaced our text with chapter 2 is that Jesus was in Jerusalem, it was Passover time, He had performed miracles and a lot of people were believing in Him, in verse 23. But the belief there is not genuine or authentic or real. All they saw was His miracles. They said, “Wow! He’s a miracle worker. We believe in Him.”

But in verse 24, it says that “Jesus did not commit.” The very same Greek word translated “believed” in verse 23 is translated “commit” in verse 24. It’s a play-on-words. It says that they believed in Him, but He didn’t believe in them. Why? Because their belief wasn’t real; it was superficial. “We see miracles. You feed us. You heal us. This is awesome! We’ll follow You.” But Jesus didn’t commit to them, “because He knew all men” and knew what was in the heart of man.

Then a man named Nicodemus came to Him. So this was basically saying that Jesus knew Nicodemus’ heart. He knew that Nicodemus came and just wanted to interview Him. He just wanted to examine Him. He just wanted to check Him out. He didn’t really believe in Jesus.

So Jesus went right to the heart of the issue. Jesus basically said, “Nicodemus, this is your greatest need.” So Jesus knew Nicodemus’ heart, verse 1.

And this is also everyone’s greatest need. The most important thing for you is to be born again. It doesn’t matter how rich you are, how famous you are, how much you enjoy life. If you’re not born again, you’re not saved. And if you’re not saved, you’re not going to heaven. The Bible says, “What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” So the most important doctrine in the Bible is that we are all born again. Without the rebirth, we are not the children of God.

Jesus makes it clear, in verses 3 and 5, that “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” And “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Seeing the kingdom, verse 3, and entering the kingdom, verse 5, are synonymous; they’re not two different things. Seeing the kingdom and entering the kingdom both refer to this spiritual birth, the moment we are saved and become the children of God. How can we enter God’s kingdom? By being born again.

But let me point out what is implied or indicated in the text that is also taught elsewhere in Scripture. That would be how we cannot and will not be able to enter into the kingdom. First, we can’t get there by religion. This man, Nicodemus, was a Pharisee. A Pharisee was a very religious Jew. It was a sect of the Jews. The word “Pharisee” means “set apart ones” or “separate ones.” This sect arose during the Maccabean period, and they were basically devoted to the keeping of the Law. They devoted themselves to keeping every jot and tittle and aspect of the Law.

The word "Pharisee" has almost become a synonym for "hypocrisy," because they had all this outward religiosity, but they didn't have an inward reality. They had these fancy robes, their prayer boxes, they made great prayers, but Jesus said, "You are like whitewashed tombs; which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." He said, "For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence."

My wife is gone for the weekend at the women's retreat, so before she comes home I have to at least rinse the dishes off and put them in the dishwasher. I have to clean up the kitchen before she gets home.

But you don't just wash the outside; you also wash the inside. You don't just wash the outside of a cup; you wash the inside. But the Pharisees only washed the outside. They weren't clean inside.

Yet not all Pharisees were hypocrites. I think Nicodemus had an element that was sincere; he was wanting to know. He came by night so as to be alone with Jesus to ask Him these questions.

But Jesus answers his question before he even asks his question. Jesus basically said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again. You've got to be born of water and the Spirit to enter into the kingdom of God. But you don't get there by being a Pharisee." If Nicodemus, a Pharisee, couldn't get there without being born again, you and I can't get there without being born again. So religion can't do that.

Secondly, we can't get there by respectability. In verse 1, Nicodemus is called "a ruler." Number one, he's a Pharisee and number two, he's a ruler. This term "ruler" is very specific and conveys the idea that he is a member of the Sanhedrin. That is their high court. It's the Jews' Supreme Court. So he was an aristocrat of a very high rank in society, and he was a moral man, a good person.

When you ask people if they're saved, they say, number one, "I'm religious." Number two, they say, "I'm a good person. I don't kick my dog. I don't lie. I don't steal or cheat. I pay my taxes and don't cheat on my taxes. I've been devoted to my wife. I raised my kids." You're checking the boxes.

But you must be born again. Religion can't get you to heaven. Being respectable can't get you to heaven. Read Philippians 3. Paul was a Pharisee before his conversion. He said, "I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord...and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith."

There is a third way we don't get into the kingdom of God. We can't get there by our race. So it's not by religion, respectability or by race or having the right ethnic background. Verse 1 says

that Nicodemus was a Jew. So basically, if anyone could get to heaven by being religious, by being respectable or by their race it would have been Nicodemus. But this guy, who seemed to have all the right pedigree for heaven, wouldn't get in based on these three things. I don't care who you are, how good you are, how noble you are, your race or religion, you must be born again.

You ask, "Well, what right do you have to say that?!" Jesus said it; I'm just telling you what He said. Don't shoot the messenger. Jesus said, "You must be born again."

Have you ever asked someone if they're a Christian? They may have said, "Oh, I'm a Christian, but I'm not a born-again kind." What other kind is there? If you're not born again, you're not a Christian. If you're a Christian, you're born again. If you say you're a Christian, but you're not born again, you're not really a Christian. The only people who are truly Christians, who are truly saved, who are truly children of God, are those who are born again, and as Jesus said, they have entered into the kingdom of God. This is so important.

I want you to notice how Jesus answered Nicodemus, in verses 3-4. He told Nicodemus he must be born again. Then Nicodemus asked Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Nicodemus thought it was a natural birth. "I'm an old man; I can't go back into my mother's womb and be born a second time!" Then Jesus said, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." You cannot enter the kingdom of God unless you are born of water and of the Spirit.

Now I want to touch on some questions that I want to answer. The theological term for "to be born again" is "regeneration." The Bible uses that term, in Titus 3:5: "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." The word "regenerate" means "give new life" or "to be brought back to life." So you are dead before you are converted, but when you are born again, you are given new life. Before you were born again, you were living in the flesh, in the old, sinful nature, but when you were born again, you were given a new heart and a new nature and God's Holy Spirit. What a marvelous thing that is!

What is "the kingdom of God," in verses 3 and 5? There are three senses of the kingdom of God. First, God sovereignly rules from heaven; the whole world is His kingdom. Secondly, when you're born again, you enter into the kingdom of God. The Bible says that "He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." Thirdly, Christ the King will come back in the Second Coming and will set up His kingdom on earth for 1,000 years. It's known as "the millennium." That's the kingdom of God on the earth, the theocratic reign of Christ. And we, as the church, will reign with Him, and that will flow into the eternal state.

But in this context, Jesus is using the kingdom of God as living in the spiritual realm of God's kingdom—that we're translated into His kingdom, that He is now our King, and we live by heaven's laws, obey heaven's rules and speak heaven's language. What a marvelous truth that

is!

And what does it mean to be “born of water”? This is full of controversy. Some people say it's water baptism. I disagree. There's nothing in the context which indicates that Jesus is talking about baptism. He's talking about a spiritual birth; it's not a rite or a ritual. He just told Nicodemus that he had to be born again. Nicodemus had all the rites and rituals that you could go through: for the Jews, it was circumcision and keeping the Commandments. He had all that.

The Bible is very clear that we're not saved by our works. “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” If you could get baptized and be saved, you would be able to boast and say, “I got baptized; I'm saved!” But baptism is an outward ritual of the showing of an inward work.

But water cannot wash your sin away. I don't care how you were baptized. “Well, I was baptized by immersion.” Groovy. “Well, I was sprinkled.” “I was baptized face forward.” “I was baptized face backwards.” It doesn't matter. I believe in baptism; I believe it's something we should do. But baptism still will not make you a Christian. Communion will not make you a Christian. Going to church does not make you a Christian. None of those things save you, because “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

So what does “born of water” mean? There are two meanings, and both are Biblical. Number one, I think it indicates that the Spirit of God has to wash your heart, make it clean and it's part of the new covenant. In Ezekiel 36:25-27, it says, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”

This is a description of what is called “the new covenant.” God says He's going to take out your “heart of stone” and give you a new heart. In doing that, He's going to wash you in pure water and give you a clean heart. So it could be, Jesus knowing that Nicodemus understood these verses from Ezekiel and Jeremiah 31:31-34, that this is a reference to God's new covenant where God would renew them by the work of the Spirit.

But there is another meaning—and perhaps Jesus had this in mind—that water represents a metaphor for the Scriptures, the Word of God, the Bible. For you to be born again, it takes the Spirit of God and the Word of God coming together in the heart of the repentant sinner. Then conception takes place and there is birth into God's family.

In Ephesians 5:26, Paul is talking about marriage, and he says that “He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.” He's talking about Jesus sanctifying the church by “the washing of water by the word,” and husbands are to do the same by washing their wives in the water of the Word. When the Spirit of God works through the Word of God, it has a sanctifying effect on our lives. There is a washing and a cleansing.

In John 15:3, Jesus said, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." So it's the idea of being cleansed or washed by God's Word.

Then my favorite reference is Titus 3:5. It says, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration..."—there's our term, or we could say "rebirth"—"...and renewing of the Holy Spirit." You have the words "regeneration," "washing" and "Holy Spirit." So the Word of God and the Spirit of God bring regeneration.

1 Peter 1:23 says, "...having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the Word of God which lives and abides forever."

I'll never forget when I was about 18 years old and I started reading the Bible for the first time in my life. I grew up in church in Sunday school, but I had never read the Bible. Then something drew me to read the Bible. As I began to read the Bible, my heart stirred within me. I felt conviction and I felt I needed God. The words on the page just jumped out at me. It wasn't long before I found myself on my knees repenting and asking God to forgive me and to come into my heart. I believe that I was born again by the Spirit of God using the Word of God to draw me back to God and to give me new life.

What is a Christian? A Christian is a person who has the life of God in their soul. But until that happens, you don't live in the kingdom of God. You're not saved. You're not a true Christian.

First we have a natural birth, which takes a seed and an egg coming together for conception. So we have the spiritual birth, which takes place when the Word of God and the Spirit of God come together and there is spiritual life. It is absolutely necessary.

Now we move from the necessity of the new birth, verses 1-5, to the nature of the new birth, verses 6-13. There are three facts about the nature of the new birth. First, verses 6-7, it's a spiritual birth. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Flesh does not produce the Spirit. Flesh only produces flesh. Dogs produce dogs. Cats produce cats. Cows produce cows. Horses produce horses. Flesh produces flesh. Humans produce humans.

The word "flesh" here is talking about your sinful, Adamic nature. The Bible calls it the "old man." It's not talking about your skin or your physical body. That's not sinful or evil. Rather it's talking about your sinful nature. But what it's saying—and this is profound, but it gets missed in this passage—is that flesh cannot produce spiritual birth; it only produces flesh. Man cannot produce anything spiritual. Even religious man can produce only religious works of the flesh. It does not gain him justification before God. In your flesh, your sinful nature that you inherit from Adam, you can only produce flesh. You can't produce anything spiritual.

All this talk about being spiritual, apart from Christianity or Christ, is insane. You can't be spiritual without being born again, because you're a natural man. You need to be born of the Spirit. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh."

If you take a pig and bathe it, you get it nice and shiny and clean, you put a tuxedo on it, you have a good-looking pig. The minute you let the pig go, it goes right back to the pig pen and wallows in the mud. It gets its tuxedo all dirty, because you haven't changed its nature.

A lot of people think that they're a Christian because they go to church, because they're baptized, because they live in America, because they eat apple pie with cheese on top, because they have an American flag in front of their house. But they haven't gotten a new heart, they haven't had a life-change with God.

You can wash the pig, dress the pig, fix the pig all up, but you don't have a sheep; you haven't changed its nature. So God wants to give you a new heart, make you a new person, make you a new creation. Then we become God's people through the spiritual birth.

So it's a spiritual birth; notice verse 7. "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" If you're a Christian, you have a spiritual nature. But you still have the old nature; that's why there is a battle between the two natures. The flesh is fighting against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh. That's why we are exhorted to "be filled with the Spirit." That's why we are exhorted to "walk in the Spirit." The Bible says, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."

Secondly, notice that the new birth is not only spiritual, it's a mysterious birth. This is interesting. He uses the analogy of wind, verses 8-10. Jesus said, "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." Nicodemus answered and said to Him, 'How can these things be?'" He still doesn't understand, so in verse 10, Jesus gives him a mild rebuke. "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher...'—not "a" teacher but "the" teacher—"...of Israel, and do not know these things?" Jesus is basically saying, "What's wrong with you Nicodemus? You should know these things."

The wind is pretty cool; you can't see it. You can hear the wind blowing, you can feel it, you can see its effects, but you can't take a jar, grab some wind and put the lid on it. "Check out my jar; I've got some wind in there."

"Doesn't look like anything to me."

"Well, I've got wind in my jar."

The Holy Spirit is like the wind; you can't see the Holy Spirit, but you can see His work in people's lives.

Have you ever seen someone who was really messed up but then got born again? You say, "Yeah, that was me." Then that person is almost physically unrecognizable. They have a glow about them, they have a joy, they have a different countenance, their personality was changed, their speech is changed.

I remember when I got born again, the words that came out of my mouth changed. I used to cuss and swear. I used foul words. But the minute God took my heart out and gave me a new heart, the words changed. Once I was saved and was doing some carpentry work, I was hammering a nail and hit my thumb with the hammer, I said, "Oh, thank you, Jesus!" A light bulb went off and I realized that I was born again. I didn't swear!

Someone said, "If it's in the well, it comes up in the bucket." Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." One of the indications of whether or not you've been born again is your speech, what comes out of your mouth.

Now it is possible that you could get born again and still say some words that slip out. When that happens, it means you're not filled with the Spirit, you're not walking in the Spirit, you're not yielded to the Spirit. You have the Spirit but the Spirit doesn't have you. That's why the Bible exhorts us to "Be filled with the Spirit." Let the Spirit fill you and bring forth His fruit in your life.

So the new birth is a spiritual birth, a mysterious birth and thirdly, it's a real birth, verses 11-13. "Most assuredly, I say to you, We..."—that most likely refers to Jesus and His disciples and followers—"...speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you..."—there is the contrast with "We"—"...do not receive Our witness." So Nicodemus wasn't on board. "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven..."—Jesus is talking about Himself having come from heaven—"...that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven."

Jesus knows what He's talking about; He came from God, He is God and He came from heaven. He knows what He's saying is true. "Son of Man" is a Messianic title from Daniel 9. Jesus is omnipresent. He's also in heaven as the Second Person of the Godhead.

So the new birth is spiritual, it's mysterious and it's real or genuine. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." You're a brand-new person; you've been born again. You have a new start in life.

The third aspect of the new birth in this interview is the basis of the new birth, verses 14-16. It actually goes to verse 21, but we will deal only with verses 14-16 now. Jesus is still speaking here. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up..."—so you "must" be born again, and you "must" have the Son of God lifted up—"...that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."—His only unique Son—"...that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Seeing the kingdom of God, entering the kingdom of God, not perishing, having eternal life—these are all the same thing. They are just different aspects of your conversion. The moment you are born again, you are taken out of darkness into light, out of Satan's kingdom into God's. And you have the hope of heaven. Your sins are forgiven. You've been born of the Spirit.

There are three things that are the basis for this new birth. Number one, Jesus had to die,

verse 14. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." This is a story taken from Numbers 21, in the Old Testament. When the children of Israel were sinning, God was going to judge them by sending serpents, poisonous snakes into the Israelite camp.

I don't like snakes. They are creepy. Some snake-handling preachers take Mark 16:17-18 out of context and say that if you really believe, you can hold snakes and they won't hurt you. So they're passing rattlesnakes around in the church service! Can you imagine? It's insane!

Because I had watched this video about the snakes being passed around and it was in my brain, I had a nightmare last night. I was standing on the stage with rattlesnakes. I woke up in a cold sweat. So I don't do snakes.

In Numbers 21, snakes came into the congregation, they were biting people and the people were dying. So they cried out to Moses saying, "'Pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people." So the Lord told Moses to take some brass, make a brazen snake from it and put it on a pole. It was to be elevated up high on the pole in the midst of the Israelite camp.

By the way, the symbol of modern medicine is a snake wrapped around a pole. It is taken from this story in the Bible.

And whoever is bitten by a snake, if they just look up in faith at this brazen snake on a pole, they would be healed. Sure enough, it worked; after they were bitten and they looked and believed, they were healed of their bite.

This is a picture of the Cross of Jesus Christ. Brass is the symbol of judgment. "Lifted up" is a reference to the Cross of Jesus Christ. Even as that snake was lifted up, on the Cross Satan was judged. He was defeated by the death of Christ. Jesus was lifted up, too. Whoever looks at Jesus Christ by faith will be saved. The whole Gospel of John is about believing, about putting your faith in Christ. So all it takes is looking to Jesus in faith, not working for Jesus. That's what it means to believe.

The leads us to the next point about the basis of the new birth: not only did Jesus have to die, verse 14, but the sinner has to believe, verse 15. "...that whosoever believes..."—that's the same thing as looking at that serpent—"...in Him should not perish but have eternal life." It's not "behaves" but "believes." For those who are born again, their lives will change and they'll behave. But they're not saved by their behavior; they're saved by their faith. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

Jesus had to die, the sinner has to believe and thirdly, verse 16, God has to love and by grace provide the Savior. "For God so loved." The basis of our salvation is the love of God, the grace of God and the provision of God's Son. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

So the giver is God, the motive is love, the object of His love is the world, His gift is His only begotten, unique Son and the recipient is whoever believes. That means anyone can look and be saved. When they put that brass serpent on the pole, little kids could look and be saved. Older people could look and be saved. You didn't have to be intelligent or rich to look and be saved. Just look to Jesus and you are saved. The results are "should not perish but have everlasting life."

John 3:16 is the Bible in one verse. "For God so loved the world..."—the word for "love" here in the Greek is "agape"—"...that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." That's what it means to be born again: you look to Jesus in faith, you are born of the Holy Spirit, you won't perish because you have eternal life, which is life in a new dimension, life of a new quality, spiritual life.

If you haven't been born again, that is your greatest need. All of life will change, in time and in eternity, when you are born again.