

GOD'S INVITATION:

How to Become a Christian

“What it Takes to Get it Right”

The First Movement – The Necessity of the New Birth – John 3:1-7

Perhaps we've listened to a piece of music that would be symphonic in nature and discover that the miracle of music is that men can express themselves beautifully. Listening to “Handel's Messiah” around Christmastime one of the things that happens is we feel Handel's inspiration at the moment that the “Hallelujah Chorus” comes.

Reading John 3: 1-21 it feels like we had a piece of music before us. There are some key people in this musical score, but one person that is really important in the passage and the guy we'll identify with the most is the man who's coming to have an encounter with Jesus Christ.

This man is Nicodemus. Nicodemus is probably 60-70 years of age and is an extremely religious individual. He's lived all of his life in the hopes of gaining eternal life. He's a wealthy individual, extremely successful, has power, has fame, has popularity. He has everything that a man wants but there's still something missing.

The reason we know something is missing is because in

chapter 2 of John, just before this encounter takes place, Jesus knows what's in the heart of men. Knowing what was in the heart of men before Nicodemus ever came to Him, He knew that this guy was not just coming to have a visit but he was coming because he had a need. So Jesus takes some time to chat with him for a little while.

Let's look at the first seven verses together. We'll discuss the significance of what's being said and what's happening.

v. 1 But there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus his name, an official of the Jews.

“But there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus his name, an official of the Jews.”

Now when we come to verse 1 right away there's two things that we need to have defined:

1. What is a Pharisee?
2. What position as “an official of the Jews” did he hold?

Well first of all, a Pharisee was an individual who belonged to a very strict religious brotherhood. There were never more than 6,000 of these men and they took an oath when they came into the brotherhood that they'd spend all of their lives keeping the meticulous Old Testament Law with all of its traditions.

With all of its traditions the Old Testament Law, by New Testament times, had become almost ridiculous. In fact, although it said in the Old Testament Law that they were not to tie a knot on the Sabbath day, a knot had to be defined. And if they could tie a knot with one hand or they could tie the knot in the slit of a shift or in their sandals or in some other way, those would keep them from being guilty. But if they had to tie the knot of a camel driver or a sailor, then they would be guilty.

The guys in this kind of a religious brotherhood, these were the things that either gained favor with God or were the things that kept them from having any kind of relationship with God at all. It made them extremely guilty and feeling distant with God because they had failed to keep some part of the Law.

Now what is referred to by the word “official of the Jews”? There are only 70 of these guys. These were the Supreme Court of the religion of the day. And he served on what was called the Jewish Sanhedrin—and that’s the reference here to being “an official of the Jews.”

So as we look at the conclusion of verse 1, what can we draw as an assumption from this man that’s been introduced to us?

First of all, we can draw the assumption that strict religious observance, keeping of meticulous legal laws, having popularity and power in their religious order—all of these things can be had and still there can be something missing or

else he would not feel the need for an encounter at this point.

v. 2 This one came to Him at night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we are knowing that from God you have come, a teacher; for no one is able to do these signs which you are doing, except God be with him.”

Nicodemus, we notice in verse 2, is one who “came to Him at night” and said:

“Rabbi, we are knowing that from God you have come, a teacher; for no one is able to do these signs which you are doing, except God be with him.”

“This one came to Him at night”—some people say that he came at night because he was afraid. He was afraid to admit that he had a need and he didn’t want anybody in the city to know that he was coming to talk to Jesus Christ.

There are several reasons for not agreeing with this position, but one primary reason is that whenever Jesus Christ was awake He was ministering somewhere. He was involved in the lives of people all day and He made His personal appointments and encounters with individuals for the evening time.

Probably He and Nicodemus arranged to have dinner together and to have a real good long dialogue on spiritual things. And then he says this:

“Teacher (or Rabbi), we are impressed by what You’re teaching. We’re impressed by what You have to say. We are impressed by what You’re doing. We’ve seen Your miracles and there’s no way to explain You apart from the fact that You’ve come from God. Now what are you trying to bring to us? What message do You have for us?”

Now notice something. Verse 3, verse 5 and verse 7 speak the very same message and he just says it three times. Now whenever anything is repeated three times, we can count on it being significant and pretty important. Let’s look at the dialogue that takes place in verses 4 through 7.

Beginning with verse 3:

v. 3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I am saying to you, except a man be born again, he is not able to see the Kingdom of God.”

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I am saying to you, except a man be born again, he is not able to see the Kingdom of God.’”

“Now Nicodemus, you’ve been impressed by My outward miracles, but there’s an inward miracle that all of these outward miracles point to. Why change water into wine? Why take a little lad’s lunch and feed five thousand people? Why raise a dead man back to life again? Nicodemus, all of these things are only done to show you that this is what happens when a man has an encounter with God through Jesus Christ.

“This is just a picture. Nicodemus, the greatest miracle of all is when God can take a creature of His hand and change him into a child of His heart. Nicodemus, the greatness of My power in your life will become a reality when you experience what I’m talking about right now.”

“Nicodemus, you might have known all of the answers. Nicodemus, you might have grown up very religious and certainly you have, but at this point if you have not had the experience of the New Birth that I’m speaking about, you won’t make it as far as eternity’s concerned.”

v. 4 Nicodemus is saying to him, “How is a man able to be born, being an old man? He is not able a second time to enter the womb of his mother and be born, is he?”

“Nicodemus is saying to him, ‘How is a man able to be born, being an old man? He is not able a second time to enter the womb of his mother and be born, is he?’”

Now what’s Nicodemus’ problem? It’s strictly on a physical—strictly on things which he knows. He does not yet catch the fact that Christ is talking about spiritual things and not physical.

Nicodemus is probably saying, “Well this is really a new twist. You know I thought all of my life that if I did the very best that I could, God helps those who help themselves. And I lived

the very best life that I can and I'm very moral and I'm upright and I'm a good man and I do this and I do that, certainly this ought to cause God to look favorably upon my record. And I would in the end gain eternal life as a result of that."

And so Nicodemus is just saying, "Look, you're talking about this being born again but, how do you do it? My life hasn't been what it should have been, but how in the world can a guy go back to his mother and start all over again? It seems so impossible."

v. 5 "Most assuredly, I am saying unto you, except a man be born of water and spirit, he is not able to enter into the Kingdom of God."

"Most assuredly, I am saying unto you,"—here's the second probe—"except a man be born of water and spirit, he is not able to enter into the Kingdom of God."

Now what's the Lord doing with Nicodemus at this point? He's trying to bring a man out of his physical senses into a spiritual awareness.

He said, first of all, He introduced the subject—We must be born again. Now Nicodemus has a problem. He sees the thing only strictly on the physical basis.

So Jesus immediately, in verse 5, uses two things that happen in a physical birth to begin to bridge the gap to show what

happens in a spiritual birth.

If you've ever had the privilege of watching a physical birth, two things stand out:

1. There's a whole lot of water and
2. There's a critical moment when a little life hangs in the balance. We see the miracle of the spirit of the breath of life come into that little piece of humanity and there is great joy and enthusiasm when that takes place.

Now in that same sense, if we are to encounter a relationship with God, there's going to be the function of some "water and spirit" to do it.

Where does the "water" come in? Where does the "spirit"?

There can be a lot of division, thought and point on this. We can take the biblical explanation for this and the "water" spoken of is the water of the Word of God.

Ephesians 5 says that He might "sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." (ref. Ephesians 5:26)

Psalm 119:9, 11

Wherewith all shall a young man cleanse his way?
By taking heed there according to Thy word.

Thy word have I hid in my heart
that I might not sin against you.

The “water” of the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God causes us to realize we have a need and then we make the decision to reach out in faith to satisfy that need and we experience the New Birth. That’s all there is to it. Oftentimes we get bogged down at this particular point.

Whenever there’s something where there’s difficulty in interpretation, in understanding something, it is going to be great when we arrive in glory and we see rather than let these things be divisive factors.

If God’s Word speaks a message to us today, and the Spirit of God points up a need in our life, then the Spirit of God has done us a favor because He’s only prompting us to make a decision on the basis of the evidence so that we’ll be fit for eternity.

As the Word does its work:

1 Peter 1:23

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible seed, by the word of God which lives and abides forever.

v. 6 That which has been born of the flesh is flesh, and that which has been born of the Spirit is spirit.

“That which has been born of the flesh is flesh, and that which has been born of the Spirit is spirit.”

He just builds on it. “Nicodemus, you’ve got a problem. You can only see it in terms of physical.

“that which is born of the water and spirit.”

Now, that which is “born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”—just two realms.

In other words, “Nicodemus, you were born into this world physically, now I’m talking to you about a spiritual birth.”

This will cause us to realize that there are two realms—the PHYSICAL and the SPIRITUAL. In the physical we cannot gain acceptance in the presence of God no matter what we do. That nature within us—we can baptize it and simonize it and homogenize it and do whatever we want to it—but it will never gain acceptance in the presence of God until we experience a New Birth—a relationship with God—by reaching out to the gift of His Son.

There are two realms—the “flesh” and the “spirit.” At the conclusion of this first movement of the symphony, He hits us with the divine imperative. Notice the significance of this in verse 7.

v. 7 Do not begin to wonder that I said to you, you must be born again.”

“Do not begin to wonder that I say unto you, you must be born again.”

Notice the little word “must”?

This tells us that here is the one requirement for a right relationship to God. And we just don't slip into this. We don't just slide into it. There has to come a point in our life when we experience what is herein recorded. This is the one imperative from the hand of God. If we're not experiencing or have not experienced the New Birth, then we are not prepared for eternity.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said it this way:

“Not all the outward forms on earth, Nor rites that God has given, Nor will of man, nor blood, nor birth, Can raise a soul to heaven.”

(source unknown)

The sovereign will of God alone
Creates us heirs of grace
Born in the image of his Son,
A new, peculiar race
(source unknown)

Now clearing everything else out of the way, we can say at

this point the Bible reader cannot be content with their Bible reading alone. The pray-er cannot be content with their prayers alone. The church member cannot be content with their church membership alone. And anything else of religious observance that we want to imagine only makes a contribution to our life after we've experienced the New Birth.

Now this is a hard saying for Nicodemus. And we're saying, "Okay, what is the New Birth?"

To define the New Birth we'd have to say it's sort of like a passport. One question that'll be asked as we take our last breath here and as we step into eternity is, "Do you have your passport? Have you experienced the New Birth?"

The New Birth means three things:

1. It means to start all over brand new with God.

The Bible says in several places:

"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." (ref. Matthew 11:28)

"Come now and let us reason together" saith the Lord. "For your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." (ref. Isaiah 1:18)

"Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear My voice and open the door." (ref. Revelation 3:20)

“He that hath the Son hath life and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.” (ref. 1 John 5:12)

The Word is filled with references of invitation for us to come and to begin this relationship. Just like a little baby starts brand new so we in our relationship to God start all over.

Now it is true that in the ocean we can find all sorts of life. We can find tiny creatures that swim on the surface of the water and we can find huge monstrosities that are in the depths of the water. All of these creatures have one thing in common. They’re all aquatic and they can only exist in the ocean.

Now it is true in our world we have a lot of wonderful men. We have some highly moral, fantastic, loving gentlemen who are in places of great leadership and power—men that we would stake our reputation upon.

And then there are some other guys that we meet that we question, who are on the defensive with sometimes because we’re afraid of what they’re thinking. They’re talking one way and they’re living another and it kind of scares us.

And then there are some people that have already declared how they really feel. And without apology they’re sort of crummy. The guys that make it difficult to associate with because they’re so selfish, so egotistical, so difficult to relate to.

But they all have one thing in common. They are spiritually dead. And until they experience the New Birth, which is a drastic change, they're not ready for eternity. And the only way these aquatic creatures could ever live on land is by a drastic change that would have to take place.

2. The New Birth means to step out of the realm of independence into the realm of dependence.

For a successful person, this is the hardest thing in the world to swallow our pride and admit we have a need. That's exactly what God asks us to do to experience the New Birth.

It's so threatening. To Nicodemus—religious, wealthy, successful—this was going to be the biggest hurdle that he had to face.

Many men fail at this point. They just do not want to be put into the position where there's something that they cannot handle by their own intelligence and their own ability.

To Nicodemus that's extremely difficult. The Christian life, to become dynamic and real and alive, must find it's lodging through Jesus Christ, in a person who is submissive to His plan and purpose for their life. They have to come to the place where they say, "I can't but You can and it's Your ballgame and I'm available for You to play it through me."

3. Thirdly, the New Birth is something we can't do anything about.

Did we do anything about our physical birth? We made the right move and our mother and the doctor brought us into the world.

At the moment we realize we have a need to experience the New Birth, God waits to perform it in our life as we reach out to Him.

Ephesians 2:8, 9

...It's a gracious gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast.

“Nicodemus, you must—not if you find it convenient or you could find some other way—you must be born again.”

Dr. Barnhouse, that great old Presbyterian preacher of a number of years ago went to be with the Lord in 1964, used to preach at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He tells about how one time he was called early in the morning by a couple that were struggling over these spiritual things. Their lives had been built pretty much on the premise that we stack up as many brownie points as we can and God's going to just, by the very nature of His love, going to have to accept us when we get here.

Finally he was so frustrated in his conversation with them because they constantly went back to the money they'd given, they constantly went back to the good things they'd done in

their lives. Finally Dr. Barnhouse said: “What would you do if at 3:00 tomorrow morning I went over to your house and I threw a ladder up in front of it and I crawled up to the second story and I broke one of the windows and crawled in?”

The guy said, “As soon as I got the realization that you were there I’d probably shoot you.”

“Well what right do you have to shoot me as your friend coming to your house?”

The guy began to realize that guy had a right to say how someone could enter his house. God has a right to tell us how we’re going to experience eternity with Him.

The only problem is, we find guys that are making little wooden ladders out of works and throwing them up against brick walls and painting a window on the top and hoping when they get there by some miracle it’ll break and they can crawl in and get in their own way.

Jesus Christ said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. And if I come to your house and it says go around to the side door, friend, if I expect to get into your house I’m going to go around to the side door and make the approach according to your instructions.”

If we have that right, God has His right to tell us how we’re going to spend eternity with Him. And if we drop dead this afternoon and left this physical life, the only answer that will

serve any actual satisfaction to the Father that we have a right to spend eternity with Him is that we've experienced the New Birth—if we read this passage correctly. We let it speak for itself.

The Bible says “there is a way which seems right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” (ref. Proverbs 14:12)

We're willing to stake our eternity on what He says. And although our nature says that we ought to do the best we can and He'll reward us with eternal life, His Word does not say that.

Who are we going to believe? Our inherent nature and desire? Or are we going to believe His Word? We stake our eternity on His Word and we're not going to miss. We're going to land on those crystal streets of gold in eternity.

Our Father, thank You for these individuals. Thank You that each of them desire naturally in their hearts to want to have a right relationship with You. And we do pray that as we study together we will be making a significant contribution in that direction. You have chosen that we would share something from Your Word and so pray that they'll take it and test it, prove it, try it and see what happens when they experience what takes place in this passage. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

How to Become a Christian

“What it Takes to Get it Right”

The First Movement – The Necessity of the New Birth – John 3:1-7

NOTES

v. 1 But there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus his name, an official of the Jews.

v. 2 This one came to Him at night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we are knowing that from God you have come, a teacher; for no one is able to do these signs which you are doing, except God be with him.”

v. 3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I am saying to you, except a man be born again, he is not able to see the Kingdom of God.”

v. 4 Nicodemus is saying to him, “How is a man able to be born, being an old man? He is not able a second time to enter the womb of his mother and be born, is he?”

v. 5 “Most assuredly, I am saying unto you, except a man be born of water and spirit, he is not able to enter into the Kingdom of God.

v. 6 That which has been born of the flesh is flesh, and that which has been born of the Spirit is spirit.

v. 7 Do not begin to wonder that I said to you, you must be born again.”