

## Learn From Jesus

### The New Birth

John was a smart young man. He went to Oxford University, did a bachelor degree, then a masters, and at the age of 25 was ordained a Church of England priest. At age 32, he went to America to evangelise the Indians. But on the way over, there was a massive storm. Everyone on board was terrified, except for a group of Moravian Christians who calmly sang and prayed. Watching them, John realised he was missing something important in his relationship with God. At age 34, he finally had a radical encounter with God, and he was born again. This transformed his life and ministry. Today, John Wesley is remembered as the founder of the Methodist Church, a campaigner against slavery and it is believed that the revivals that took place through his ministry, saved England from the same blood-soaked revolution that France experienced.

In this second message in the series *Learn From Jesus*, we're looking at the topic of The New Birth.

#### **John 3:1-17**

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, 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, 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. 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 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?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. 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, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be 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, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

### **1. Who was Nicodemus?**

We know a lot about Nicodemus from this passage.

First, we know he was a Pharisee so: a) he started at synagogue school aged five, reading the Scriptures (LXX); b) by age ten he was studying the Mishnah, the teachings of the Rabbis on topics of the Old Testament and their legal case studies.

That means he was studying law at age ten!

Also, as a Pharisee he was one of the two main groups of Jewish leaders.

One of these was the Sadducees who were the upper class, very influenced by Greek ideas, and didn't believe in life after death.

Then there were the Pharisees: middle class, resisted Greek ideas, and believed strongly in Scripture.

The Sadducees weren't popular with the people, so they needed the support of the Pharisees to be able to rule.

We also know from v4, that Nicodemus was an older man.

Also, in v10 Jesus called him "the" teacher of Israel, indicating that he was a very much respected teacher.

All Pharisees were required to learn a trade.

So put all this together and we've got an older man, highly trained and experienced in Jewish Law / Scripture, middle class, a tradesman, one of the rulers, and a recognised and influential teacher.

That's Nicodemus, and that's the man who comes to Jesus by night.

Why did he come at night?

John didn't have to include that information.

I can only think of one reasonable explanation: he was scared.

Already Jesus had a big reputation; already Jesus was popular with the masses because of His miracles; already He was stirring up opposition from the authorities.

So although Nicodemus is curious, he doesn't want to be seen publicly meeting with Jesus.

Nicodemus has to acknowledge Jesus' miracles, but doesn't really know who He is (Son of God, Messiah, Saviour).

At this point, he sees Jesus as just a teacher.

So he comes to Jesus respectfully, and calls Him Rabbi, acknowledging Him as a colleague, an equal.

## **2. Jesus responds**

So Nicodemus opens the conversation with, "Rabbi, we know you're from God and yadi yadi yada."

I get the impression that he had something more to say, but Jesus has something vitally important to share with him and interrupts.

So Jesus cuts right to heart of Nicodemus' statement and says, "Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

If I were Jesus, I would have thought, "This guy seems to have something going for him. I reckon he's pretty good."

But Jesus saw right through him: He knew that the Jews commonly believed that all Jews would go to heaven unless they deliberately renounced their faith or committed extraordinary wickedness.

It's not that much different from today.

It's a commonly believed that if you're raised in church, you'll go to heaven.

Or if you're baptised.

But just because a mouse is born in biscuit tin doesn't make it a biscuit. Just because you were born in a garage doesn't make you a car.

And being born into a Christian family doesn't make you a Christian.

Literally, Jesus says, "Amen, amen, I say to you..."

You might think, what a weird thing to say, but the root meaning of amen is "certainty, steadfastness."

When you say it at end of someone's prayer, it means, "Absolutely, I totally agree."

It's a way of emphasising the absolute certainty of something.

Which is why my Bible translates it as "most assuredly" and the NIV as "I tell you the truth."

What Jesus is saying in effect is, "Nicodemus, I understand that you are an extremely religious man, dedicated to the Scripture, and that you're highly trained and cultured, but here's something you absolutely need to know: unless you are born again, you will never see the Kingdom of God."

And that was like a smack in the face to Nicodemus.

It would have messed up all his religious thinking.

I can imagine lots of things going through his head, things like: But I'm a Jew; I'm a Pharisee; I'm a teacher of Scripture.

But what came out was more like, "What the!!!"

And he asked what he thought was a logical question: How can a guy go back into his mother's womb and be born a second time?

### **3. Jesus explains**

#### **John 3:5**

Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

So first, you have to be born of water and the Spirit to get into God's kingdom.

What does that mean?

#### **Ephesians 5:25-26**

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,

The water isn't baptism, otherwise you would have to be baptised to go to heaven.

And we know that's not true because the thief on the cross wasn't baptised.

Being born of water and the Spirit means being washed clean from our sins and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul says (Rom 8:14) For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Without the Holy Spirit, there is no second birth.

Jesus emphasised His point: (John 3:6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

You can have the finest Christian couple in the world, but when they have a baby, that baby is not born a Christian.

You can christen it, baptise it, raise it in the church, but flesh can only reproduce flesh.

As they say, God doesn't have any grandchildren.

When they stand before God, our children will never be able to say, "But I'm Tony and Alli's son / daughter."

Each person must individually come to a point of surrender to God's Holy Spirit and allow Him to bring about that second spiritual birth.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Nicodemus says, "How can these things be? I don't understand."

Jesus' answer is actually a rebuke.

Are you the teacher of Israel and don't know these things? Seriously?

This is the starting point of a walk with God and you don't know this?

Jesus expected that he should have known this stuff.

#### **Ezekiel 36:25-27**

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.

Without that inner spiritual transformation, we haven't even begun our real journey with the Lord.

#### 4. What does this mean for us?

First, according to Jesus, being born again is essential.

Philip II was king of Macedonia. He had just won a battle capturing the town of Potidaea when three messengers arrived, one after the other. The first one told him the good news that his favourite general, Parmenion, had won a great battle against the Illyrian tribes. The second told him that the horse he'd sponsored in the Olympic Games had won first prize. The third told him that his wife, Olympias, had just given birth to a son, who would one day become Alexander the Great. To celebrate the news he valued most, he issued orders that a silver coin be minted to celebrate his horse's victory.

We need to get our priorities in life sorted.

How important is it to be born again? Mark 8:36 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

Second, yielding to Christ and being born again is not only important, but urgent.

A medical student was asked how much of a certain drug should be administered to a patient. "Five grams," said the young man. A minute later he raised his hand and said, "Professor, I would like to change my answer to that question." The professor looked at his watch and said, "Too late. Your patient has been dead for 40 seconds."

Sincerity is no substitute for the truth; we need to make sure we have the truth now.

It will be too late to change our minds in eternity; the decision to follow Christ and allow God's Spirit to give new life to our spirit is urgent.

Don't put off that decision, don't procrastinate

#### **2 Corinthians 6:2**

For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Jesus told a story in Luke 12:14-21.

The point of this story is that you can have plans for the future, but you never know when your time is up.

#### **John 3:16-17**

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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Don't delay; this may be your only opportunity.