

# THE EXPLANATION OF THE NEW BIRTH

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"Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God' (John 3:4-5).

In the opening verses of chapter three, it is recorded that Nicodemus met Christ face to face. To the Lord Jesus Christ Nicodemus made a startling admission. This was the mark of greatness in him. For he not only recognized greatness wherever he saw it, but he was also willing to give tribute to whom tribute was due. Nicodemus had opened the way, so Christ confronted him with an amazing declaration concerning the new birth. This was the evidence of deity in the Lord Jesus Christ. For the announcement ran counter to all the thinking of men on this theme.

First impressions are often lasting impressions, and that was true in this case. Frequently the very force of those impressions carry the movement of thought on to the issue. At least, that was true in the case of Nicodemus. The very force of this amazing declaration swept from the mind of Nicodemus his original purpose and plunged him into the very depths of the mystery associated with the new birth. This brought Nicodemus and Christ a step closer together. Now they may be seen mind to mind, two great minds, one finite mind trained in the wisdom of his profession and the other infinite in whom is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, turning over the issue of life.

Without a doubt Nicodemus had been grappling with problems gathering about this point throughout the long period of his ministry. Confronted time and again with problems in his own society, he had done additional research, and then reviewed again the whole field of professional opinion on these points. Undoubtedly, after years of prolonged study and the weighing of opposing and varying theories, he had finally reached a conclusion. Perhaps he was not satisfied with his conclusion, but it was the best that he knew in the light of information that was available. No doubt the position he held, when examined under the searchlight of reality, had much to condemn it. But still, it was the best that he knew. Even when he came to the Old Testament, he was unable to recognize the truth because he was looking through the lenses of a false system of theology.

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But now, from the lips of this Galilean peasant with the breath of heaven upon Him, there fell upon his ears a clear, concise statement of new birth that ran counter to anything he had ever heard. In this statement there was the dogmatic note, no speculation and no proofs offered. The trained mind of Nicodemus recognized in this pronouncement the element of authoritativeness. Christ had prefaced His statement with words indicating absolute finality. Like blinding lightning his consciousness was electrified and his mind illuminated. All of the problems of sin and salvation, of promise and prophecy, of the Messiah and His kingdom seemed to converge on this point of personality.

The movement of thought in verses four and five depict these two great minds joined almost as one and plunged in the depths of thought. They are weighing the most mysterious, the most momentous, the most miraculous, the most marvelous thing in God's plan for men. Nicodemus is confronted with a problem which he sets forth in two questions. Jesus responds with the solution consisting of a series of five principles.

#### THE PROBLEM OF NICODEMUS IS STATED IN TWO QUESTIONS

"Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4).

The first question contains within it a clear admission. Before the problem of this man can be viewed in its full proportions, the admission of wonder must be considered. The question begins with the word "How?" The presence of this word does not necessarily deny the fact just affirmed by Christ, but it does raise the problem of method or procedure. The very weight of Christ's declaration with its finality has convinced Nicodemus of its truth. Jesus left no room for argument here. "For he taught. . . as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matt. 7:29). But here was the problem of procedure. "How can a man be born when he is old?" Since another birth is the solution, how then can this be brought about?

Another birth! It is the wonder of this thought that flashed through the mind of Nicodemus. Would it not be wonderful to start life all over again. If one could only move the clock of time backwards and begin life all over again. Or if one could only start where he is today and live his life all over again. Life is so brief. There is so much to do. There is so little time to change.

Nicodemus is now old. With advancing age he had acquired the perspective of age. Like all, as he grew older, he was given to retrospect. No doubt in those closing years of life, he had many times reviewed his past life, and with few exceptions found reasons for regret. If only the past could be blotted out, or he could begin life all over again. And now, like a breath from heaven, this teacher from God makes authoritative announcement of another birth. Another birth for those who have already been born! Another birth for men who lived their lives and have grown old! The very wonder of the thought captures this sincere and thoughtful man.

The psychology of Nicodemus was doubtless as up-to-date as ours. He knew the facts of personality. He knew that what he was that day was the result of all his yesterdays. All

those experiences of infancy, of childhood, of adolescence, of youth, and of manhood added up to make him what he was now in old age. He knew that the evil and unfortunate experiences also have their issue in later life. He knew that the good and blessed experiences also have their issue in later life. No thinking man could shut his eyes to these realities, some of them almost brutal realities. But if there were only some way to prevent them before they occur, or once they have happened to undo them. But alas, these are impossibilities. But this amazing teacher from God, in unequivocal language, has just announced another birth. Could this be the answer to the longing in his heart?

What parent has not thought of this problem of personality in relation to his own children. If those children could only start life where the parent leaves off and profit from what good or ill has been in his experience. But they cannot. The entire realm of human experience argues that this is impossible. So every child starts where his parents began. They pass through the same experiences, learning very little from the counsel of the parents. And when they reach old age, they cherish the same hope expressed by their parents as they look back over the brief span of years allotted to them. But is it possible that there is another birth that will in some way cancel out the lost years and give something above and beyond anything they have ever known? This teacher from God declared that there is.

But Nicodemus must face the problem. It cannot be denied to Nicodemus the wonder of the thought that has so lately flashed through his consciousness. It is wonderful. The very wonder of it warms the hearts and minds of those to whom it comes. But Nicodemus cannot stop there. He must raise the problem, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Procedure posed a problem to him. It seemed infinitely so to Nicodemus. But it was quite evidently the wonder of this thought that led him to appeal for an answer concerning method or procedure. One cannot day dream forever. He must finally come to grips with reality. And reality dictates that Nicodemus ask the question, "How?"

How is it possible for a man to be born when he is old? This makes a very literal translation of the question from the original Greek. This is laying emphasis upon the process, procedure, method, or manner. Is it possible to turn the wheel of nature back to the beginning and start life all over again? Is it possible to start life anew at the time of old age and build on what has already been accomplished? Others have no doubt thought of these things before Nicodemus. The doctrine of reincarnation among Hindus is no doubt an attempt. It remained for Nicodemus to think the thought and receive the clear answer. But this man's thought processes are far from clear, and it remains for him to express his confusion in another question.

The second question is an attempt to answer the first on the human and physical level. "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Surely this teacher in Israel, intellectually gifted, professionally trained, widely read in the Scriptures, and spiritually sensitized, recognized something more in the words of Jesus than merely another physical birth. The words "see the kingdom of God" must have quickened his thinking at this point. He must have sensed that Jesus was reaching below the level of the mere physical to the spiritual and psychological substance of life. But he also knew that the spiritual and psychological elements of life run concurrently with the physical and are inextricably

cably bound up with it.

Within this frame of reference Nicodemus phrases his next question. "Is it possible for one to enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?" The obvious answer he was expecting was "No." The very construction of this sentence in the original Greek indicates that he expected the answer "No." Nicodemus knew that he was the result of processes. He knew that at the moment he voiced the question, he was the result of what he was an hour ago, a day, a week, a month, a year, all the years of his life. Could he now be turned back into embryonic form in his mother's womb and be born again? This he knew was impossible on the physical level. The inseparable association of the spiritual and the psychological with the physical made it equally impossible on the higher level. In fact, the very nature of the spiritual and psychological elements of personality made it even more impossible for such a thing to happen.

The second question, therefore, was designed to answer the first question, but to do so by drawing proof from impossibility on the physical level. In this response Nicodemus was frankly facing the problem of procedure with the best knowledge available. Nicodemus may be censured for this, but Jesus did not do so at this moment. He apparently recognized the sincerity of this man, and the wonder that had been awakened in him, and He went on to satisfy that wonder. The wonder of the thought lingers with Nicodemus. It is only the process that throws a shadow across his path. "How?" "How is it possible?" That is what he wants to know. And Jesus goes on to answer this problem in his mind.

#### THE SOLUTION IS GIVEN BY CHRIST IN A SERIES OF PRINCIPLES

"Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Verses five through eight comprise the full answer made by Christ to the two-fold question of Nicodemus. In this answer Christ enunciates a series of five principles. Wisdom dictates that this meditation be limited to a discussion of the first principle as set forth in verse five, and that the remaining four principles become the subject for the next study.

At this point, for the purpose of properly introducing Christ's answer in verse five, a series of observations should be made to keep thinking clear. First, verse 5 does not introduce a new subject. Jesus is still dealing with the subject of new birth. Second, this is a restatement of the declaration made in verse three, though in slightly different words. Third, this statement is the answer to the appeal of Nicodemus as expressed in the word "how." Fourth, the words "born of water and of the Spirit" are intended to explain the word "again" (from above) in verse 3. Fifth, this verse is intended to correct the false impression of Nicodemus that this birth is in any way to be interpreted as on the human level. That is the reason for the words, "of the Spirit." Sixth, but it is also intended to explain the means by which this becomes effective in men. This explanation is to be found in the words "of water." Seventh, verses 6-8, while a part of the answer, do not supply any added information. They are intended as notes to guard Nicodemus from arriving at any false notions about what He has said. They constitute safeguards so he will not slip off the narrow path of truth stated in verses

3 and 5.

Much of the statement appearing in verse five appears almost word for word in verse three. Since we have already considered much of this when studying verse three, it will not be necessary to repeat it in this meditation. But there is a phrase which is new, that portion of the verse which reads, "Of water and of the Spirit." It is the purpose of this discourse, therefore, to examine these words carefully, because they no doubt were intended by Christ to explain the word "again" (from above) in verse three. It was the failure of Nicodemus to catch the full significance of this word that impelled him to ask "How?" Now Christ must direct His answer to that particular point.

These words, "of water and of the Spirit," describe and enumerate the means or the elements which combine to bring about the event of new birth. It is essential to note five different things about these words to determine precisely what they mean. These may sound a bit technical, and they are. But they are essential to the understanding of this statement of Christ. If the Greek language were the native tongue of those who read this account, there would hardly be any need for this explanation. It still remains, though, that once the original language is accurately rendered into English, the ideas must be carefully examined for the sake of knowing what great truth Christ was conveying to this great teacher in Israel. In logical order these five fundamental facts will now be examined.

There is just one thing under consideration in these words, "of water and of the Spirit."

The phrase "of water and of the Spirit" is the rendering given in the King James version of the Scriptures. The American Standard version and the Revised Standard version translate, "Of water and the Spirit." It will be noticed that the second preposition "of" in the KJV is in italics, indicating that it does not appear in the original Greek. Both the ASV and RSV properly omit it in their translations. This means that there is just one preposition "of" used with "water and Spirit." The conclusion is a most important one. Since there is just one preposition governing the entire phrase, this points to the fact that the words "water and Spirit" are to be regarded as one thing, and not as two separate things. Both of these things joined together as one are absolutely essential to bring about the new birth. While the easiest reading of this text would lead the average person to this conclusion, the grammatical usage of the one preposition followed by two words joined by "and" makes this conclusion absolutely and technically valid.

This one thing under consideration as set forth in the phrase, "Of water and of the Spirit," has two sides to it.

It is only fair now to point out that while there is just one thing under consideration, this one thing has two sides to it. As you look at one side you see water, and as you look at the other side you see Spirit. In other words, these two aspects work together. They do not work separately in relation to the new birth. The aspect of water not only stands first in the phrase, but it also works first in order, and also in the nature of the case. Spirit not only stands second in the phrase, but it also works second in order and in the nature of the case. Nor is the above explanation to lead the reader to conclude that these two things work separately from one another. In fact, they are so vitally bound together into one thing, that the order sometimes is

only logical, not necessarily chronological; that is, the two work at exactly the same time. The working of water is primary and fundamental. The working of Spirit is pursuant and completing. The water prepares the way for the Spirit to operate, and thus they join to bring about and complete the event of new birth.

These two sides, as expressed in the phrase "of water and of the Spirit," are both on the same level or in the same sphere.

In this phrase, water and spirit are joined by what is called the coordinate conjunction "and." This conjunction is used to join things that are on the same level or in the same sphere. By this we mean that these two things must be either material on the one hand, or they must be spiritual on the other hand. One cannot be material while the other is spiritual.

The most common interpretation is that water refers to the material side of the new birth and the spirit refers to the spiritual side of the new birth; that is, water points to the ordinance of water baptism and spirit points to the experience of regeneration. But this cannot be the case, if one is to observe the clear grammatical structure of the phrase.

In spite of the pressure of numbers, to conclude that this must be the meaning of this phrase, several features involving pure logic forbid it. First, even though the word water appears in the text, the word baptism does not appear. To assume that the word water refers to baptism is thus wholly gratuitous. Second, if this is water baptism that is meant, to what water baptism does it refer? Jewish baptism? John's baptism? the one Jesus authorized? or Christian baptism which was yet three years away? Third, if it is to be argued that this is Christian baptism, surely, it must be the right kind of Christian baptism. What mode is to be insisted upon: trine immersion, affusion, or sprinkling?

If one still insists that water refers to the material element of baptism, then the word spirit should also be interpreted as referring to some material element in order to comply with the grammatical construction. In the material sense it must then refer to wind; for the same word is translated "wind" in verse 8. Is it reasonable to conclude that Jesus has declared that the new birth is something that is accomplished by means of water and wind? It is the opinion of the writer that most Christians would recoil from such a suggestion.

This means that there is just one other alternative left. It would therefore seem far better, since both of these things must be in the same realm or on the same level, to understand that these two things, water and wind, are symbols of immaterial or spiritual things. The water symbolizes something that cleanses, and the wind symbolizes something that quickens. To this point the Scriptures are very clear, and they provide abundant evidence for this fact. Here are two things that combine in the spiritual realm to bring about the miracle of new birth.

These two sides, represented by water and spirit, are definitely qualitative in nature.

At this point it is necessary to point to another item of the Greek language, though technical in nature, that is yet definitely helpful in determining the meaning of this statement. The definite article "the" does not appear at all in the original Greek of the phrase. In the KJV

the article "the" does not appear with the word water, but it is used with the word Spirit. But in the original Greek it does not appear with either word. The absence of the article means that these two words are to be considered from the standpoint of their nature and function.

The nature and function of water is to cleanse. As such it serves as a remarkable symbol for the instrument which prepares the way for the new birth. In this same Gospel, Jesus declared that it is the Word of God which cleanses. "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (John 15:3). Paul attached the same function to the word, "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:26). This particular cleansing of the word of God is judicial in character. It leads one to the realization that he is a sinner under the sentence of divine judgment. This word also informs him that it was the blood of Christ that paid the penalty and fully satisfied a holy God. It encourages such a sinner to accept remission of penalty by faith in Christ, and thus to experience judicial cleansing from sin. There is a personal, experiential cleansing of the Word of God that operates in the believer after regeneration, but that aspect of the Word of God is not under consideration in this passage. But once the judicial cleansing from sin is a settled fact, the new birth takes place. That is why James declared that the Word of God is the instrument in bringing about the new birth. "Of his own will begat he us by the word of truth" (Jas. 1:18).

The nature and function of wind is to give breath. As such it serves as a remarkable symbol for the personal agent in bringing about the new birth. The personal agent in the new birth is the Holy Spirit of God. His particular nature and function is to quicken, make alive, impart life. Later in conversation with the Jews, Jesus declared this. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth" (John 6:63). From Genesis to Revelation, when the immediate source of life is denoted, it is always the Spirit of God to whom this function is attributed. It is therefore altogether logical that the Word of God and the Spirit of God should be joined together in the event of new birth.

It is therefore in order to affirm at this point that there is an affinity between the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Both are said to be living. And since they are, it is not surprising that they both function in the miracle of regeneration. In almost the same breath when stating the fact that the Spirit makes alive, Jesus went on to say, "The flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63).

To clinch this fact in relation to the new birth, the reader should have his attention called to one passage where the Word of God and the Spirit of God are both declared to be operative in the new birth. "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever" (I Pet. 1:23). The incorruptible seed is the Spirit of God who imparts life. The Word of God is the instrument by means of which this new birth is effected.

These things so clearly stated in the phrase "of water and of the Spirit" were revealed long ago in the Old Testament.

This means that Nicodemus should have known them. And Jesus told him so. "Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things?" (John 3:10 ASV). The popularity

and prominence of this man in Israel as an able and accurate interpreter of the Old Testament should have qualified him at this point. But it did not. He undoubtedly knew the words to which Christ made reference, but due to systems of theology which twisted them out of their most natural meaning, the truth was hidden from his eyes. This was indeed a tragedy. This man whose wide learning and sincere motive could have made him a power among his people for good was ignorant of one of the primary and fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures in its relation to the kingdom.

Six centuries before, when the fortunes of Israel were at their lowest ebb because of the sin and wickedness of the people, God promised new birth as the method of preparing men for His kingdom. "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them" (Ezek. 36:25-27).

In this prophecy of long ago, the words water and spirit appear. It is clear that the water is for cleansing, and the spirit is for quickening. The cleansing will proceed from the statutes and judgments they will obey, and the new heart will be experienced from the presence of the Spirit of God within. For people who experience this transformation, the prophecy goes on to say, "And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. . . . And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden: (Ezek. 36:28, 35). Could ever language more clearly set forth the preparation of people for the kingdom.