

## “THE HOLY SPIRIT’S WORK IN SALVATION”

John 3:1-7

*“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 story in John chapter 3 is about a night-time encounter Jesus had with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. He came to Jesus for answers to spiritual questions. He was a member of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish Supreme Court, which may be why he came at night, unobserved by those critical of Jesus.

- Nicodemus was a man committed to studying and obeying the Law;
- He respectfully addresses Jesus as a teacher from God;
- He was more open-minded than most of the religious leaders of the day.

Jesus gets right to the point – He said, “unless you are born again you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” (3:3) Although Nicodemus was evidently a learned man and a teacher of the Law, he found this concept of rebirth perplexing. So he asks, “How can a man be born when he is old?” (3:4) and “How can this be?” (3:9) Jesus answers Nicodemus’ questions in this passage. Let us consider first:

### THE CONCEPT OF THE NEW BIRTH

It is obvious that Nicodemus did not understand the concept of being born again. Being born again appears absurd unless we grasp the spiritual concept of what Jesus said. Nicodemus should have been familiar with the Old Testament book of Ezekiel to whom God said, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.” (Ezekiel 36:26) That’s exactly the same concept and the same promise that Jesus was communicating to Nicodemus.

What does the term “born again” mean? The term “born-again” has become part of modern language. This doesn’t mean that people necessarily understand what Jesus meant. This term has unfortunately been turned into a generalized way of indicating any new awareness about almost anything. One politician was described as a “born-again Socialist”; an automobile dealership that changed from selling one make of autos to another called itself “a born-again dealership”; a football player who had been lethargic, and who was later found to have begun using steroids, was said to have become “born-again” with new energy. While using this term may suggest change, it has nothing to do with what Jesus was talking about.

Some who call themselves Christians shun using the term thinking “born-again” is passé. In fact, it is on the cutting edge of teaching straight from the lips of Jesus and right out of the pages of Scripture! It is an essential truth of our faith and critical to our eternal destiny.

What does being “born-again” mean? It means the spiritual change brought about in a person's life, by which we become possessors of God's nature and life. In order to make sense of this concept, we first need to recognize that we are born spiritually dead. We're told in Ephesians 2 - “You were dead in trespasses and sins” (v. 1).

In this context, being born-again means having a New Birth which produces a New Life Godward. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17) The New Birth is a spiritual birth, a transformation, an internal revolution, a resurrection, regeneration!

This is the truth that Jesus communicated to Nicodemus resulting in his asking, “How?” How Can such a thing happen? In His answer, Jesus told Nicodemus about the Agent of the New Birth.

### **THE AGENT OF THE NEW BIRTH**

Nicodemus' “How?” led to Jesus' revelation: “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.” (John 3:5-8) The Holy Spirit is the Agent of the new birth. In his letter to Titus, Paul echoes the same truth: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:4-6)

All persons have a first birth, of course, but Jesus was talking about a second birth. The first, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, is "of the flesh" – that is a physical birth, the agents of which were our father and mother. The second birth is "of the Spirit" - that is a spiritual birth, the agent of which is the Holy Spirit.

### **THE INSTRUMENT OF THE NEW BIRTH**

Jesus continues His explanation to Nicodemus with these words: "I tell you the truth; no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." (John 3:5) It is held by some that the “water” refers to physical birth, the fluid released at birth when a mother's “water breaks”, and the “Spirit” to a second, spiritual birth. I do not believe that is the proper interpretation. It is both logical and rational that no one could experience a second birth unless he has had a first birth. For Jesus to say to Nicodemus, “You have to become a human being before you can become a spiritual being” would have been an insult to the intelligence of the learned Nicodemus.

To be “born of water” I believe, refers to the Word of God which is called “water.” In Eph 5 we are told that “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.” (vs.25-26) Also, the Apostle Peter wrote: “being born again, not of corruptible seed but of in-corruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.” (I Peter 1:23)

The Instrument of the New Birth is the Word of God. The Holy Spirit uses the truth of God's Word to bring about the New Birth. The Holy Spirit wrote the Scriptures and uses the Bible to bring us to a knowledge of the truth.

### THE EDICT ABOUT THE NEW BIRTH

Jesus straightforward edict to Nicodemus was, "You must be born again." (John 3:7) Note our Lord's imperative emphasis: "You *must* be born again." "Must" is a strong word. Jesus is saying that there is no other way to heaven but that of rebirth.

There are many "must" statements in the New Testament such as:

Mark 8:31 – "The Son of Man *must* suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

Luke 22:37 – "I say to you that this which is written *must* still be accomplished in Me."

Luke 24:7 – "The Son of Man *must* be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again."

Acts 4:12 – "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we *must* be saved."

These Imperial Imperatives are of equal importance relative to our soul's salvation. Why would anyone, especially propagators of truth, choose to avoid using any one of these "must" statements? Some do not use certain Bible terms lest they "offend" sinners. Jesus had no such sensitivities that precluded Him from saying to a sophisticated Pharisee, "You must be born again."

### CONCLUSION

We have heard it said that "Life begins at 40." In other words, life begins to make sense when you are mature and healthy enough to make the most of it. But in the realm of the spiritual, life begins when we turn to Christ and receive His forgiveness at any age! This act of faith results in a:

- A New Birth,
- A New start,
- A New Life,
- A New purpose,
- New priorities,
- New values,
- A New family – God's family!
- A New direction,
- A New destination – heaven!

"If anyone is in Christ, he *is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." (II Corinthians 5:17)

The new birth is the result of the ministry of God's Holy Spirit who offers us the opportunity to start over. Starting over may seem implausible and impossible, however, the Holy Spirit makes new life a supernatural possibility! Have you been born-again? "You must be born again" if you ever expect to have never-ending life with God in His heaven!

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