

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Jesus' Teaching of Spiritual Biogenesis

by Dan Trygg

We are introduced to Nicodemus in 3:1. We are told that **he was a Pharisee, and a “ruler” of the Jews.** **The Pharisees** were a religious party within Judaism. They typically were middle-class merchants or tradesmen who had “separated” themselves unto God (“Pharisee” meant “separated one”). They were deeply devoted to the scriptures and rabbinic traditions of Judaism, and were especially dedicated to keeping their lifestyles consistent with those teachings. At a time when other Jews were adopting some of the practices of the Greek/Roman culture, they were “preservationists”, strongly resistant to compromise or the incorporation of any artwork, architectural design, customs or entertainments that reflected the larger “heathen culture”. They were focused on maintaining ritual purity and religious practices. They were opposed to mingling with gentiles, or “sinners”, lest they be “defiled” by the impurity of their lives. Pharisees were very popular among the people, and were seen as serious followers of God. **Their base of popularity and power was in the *synagogues*,** which were also focused on preserving tradition and culture. The other major religious party was **the Sadducees.** They were from the aristocrats, the nobility and priestly families. They tended to be more open to compromise in lifestyle, and were willing to curry favor with the Romans. They did not believe in angels, demons or the afterlife. **Their power base was centered in the *temple*.** **The national ruling body of the Jews was the Sanhedrin,** which was composed of Sadducees, scribes, elders and Pharisees. As a “ruler of the Jews”, Nicodemus would have been a member of this group. In vs. 10, **Jesus calls him “the teacher of Israel”, so he must have been a preeminent Rabbi** in his own right. (Nicodemus appears again in Jn. 7:48-51, and in 19:38-40.)

Note that Nicodemus did not come to Jesus in a public setting. He came under the cover of darkness for a private interview. Evidently, he did not wish to be seen conversing with Jesus. Nicodemus begins the dialogue with a greeting of respect, **“Rabbi, we have seen that You have come from God as a teacher”** (vs. 2). We are not given any more specific information as to who the “we” might be, but **there were probably others among the Pharisees and rulers who were open to consider Jesus in this light.** His words and actions had not alienated them, yet, and **the evidence of God’s presence in Jesus’ life and ministry was very difficult to simply dismiss.** “...for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him”. The import of the miraculous signs was convincing to Nicodemus. The fact that he refers to them in the plural is another indication that Jesus was performing *many more miracles* than those John chooses to record for us in this book (e.g., Jn. 20:30,31; 21:25).

Jesus quickly changes the direction of the conversation. “Truly, truly, I say to you...” -- Literally, **“Amēn, amēn, I say to you...”**. **The word, amēn, is not a Greek word, at all. It is actually transliterated from the Hebrew, and means “truly”, or “may it be so”.** This particular phrase was a Hebrew idiom used to point out a serious, solemn or very weighty saying. **When used to introduce a statement it served as a way of saying, “Listen up, now, this is important.”** This occurs in the gospel of John twenty-five times, and is unique to his record (1:51; 3:3,5,11; 5:19,24,25; 6:26,32,47,53; 8:34,51,58; 10:1,7; 12:24; 13:16,20,21,38; 14:12; 16:20,23; 21:18). **Twenty-five times in this gospel, Jesus says, “Listen up, now, this is important...”**. **Don’t you want to see what *He* thought was so important?** He continued, **“...unless one is born again, he is not able to see the kingdom of God...”** -- A more primitive translation might be, “If ever anyone might not be born/begotten from above/again...” **The first observation is that this begetting or birthing happens to the person, i.e., it is not done by them.** They are the passive recipients of this change. **Secondly, the Greek word anōthen can mean “from above, from a higher place” or “again”.** The definition must be determined by the context. (Cf. 3:31 – Here, the context strongly suggests that it mean “from above”.) **Third, Nicodemus *misinterpreted* what Jesus had said as meaning “a second time”** (vs. 4). It is obvious from the following explanation that Jesus gave that He had the *former meaning* in mind. **Fourth, without birth from above, one is spiritually blind, i.e., “...he cannot see the kingdom of God”** -- Literally, “he is not *able* to see...”. **The awareness and discernment of the reign of God must follow the impartation of life “from above”.** It is like one’s faculties of spiritual perception are “turned off”, “tuned out”, or non-existent until this inner change occurs. (This is in agreement with what the apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 2:14 and II Corinthians 4:3,4.)

Nicodemus asks, “How can a man be born when he is old?” (vs. 4)– The question is sound. **“He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born”** -- Obviously not. Clearly, Nicodemus heard the word anōthen as meaning “again”, so Jesus’ statement sounded absurd to him. **What is Jesus getting at?**

Jesus responds, “Truly, truly, I say to you... (Again, the precursor to a solemn declaration of truth!) unless one is born of water *and* Spirit...” (There is no “the” in the Greek). There has been much debate over these words throughout the centuries. If we put aside any theological preconceptions, and approach the passage from the point of view of an everyday, common-sense first-century listener, the meaning becomes quite clear. **Being “born out from water” is a clear reference to the natural process of physical birth. The womb is literally a bag of waters out from which a baby emerges at birth.** These people were very familiar with this phenomenon. Animals giving birth was also a natural part of everyday life which they observed. The gush of waters from the womb was one of the first sure signs that the process of birth was underway. The baby, or calf or lamb, came out all wet, and would need to be dried off. **Being “born out from water” was a very natural and descriptive way of referring to the *normal*/birth experience. The unusual addition that Jesus made, “...and Spirit...” would have caught Nicodemus’ attention.** It is also what Jesus *expanded on* in the verses to follow. **Jesus was referring to an entirely different *kind* of birth experience. “...he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God.” -- Not only is it impossible to *discern*, or *see*, the kingdom of God, but entrance into it is not possible apart from this other kind of birth.**

The concept of “the kingdom of God” is a primary theme of the synoptic gospels. The idea occurs 101 times. The message Jesus and His disciples were preaching was called the “gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 9:35). **By contrast, this passage in John 3 is the *only time* Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God in this gospel** (vss. 3,5). John prefers to talk about eternal life (The Greek word “eternal” is *aiōnion* = “age-type”, an adjective derived from the word for “age”, *aiōn*). **The thrust of the message about the kingdom of God is that it presents the larger picture of our relationship to God in terms of a much bigger enterprise, the entire scope of His reign as King.** We are clearly His subjects, ...among a *host* of subjects. **Believing upon the name of Jesus is tantamount to offering our allegiance to Him as our King.** The picture painted in the other gospels also presents the kingdom of God as infiltrating and reclaiming subjects from the kingdom of this world, ...an evil kingdom of force, domination, and oppression which has held humankind in bondage. **The message of Jesus and the early disciples was that the kingdom of God has come to set us free from the dominion of darkness** (Mk. 1:15; Matt. 9:35; 12:28; Lk. 9:1-6; 10:1-20; Col. 1:13). **John’s preference for the phrase, eternal life, ...or “age-type life”, as I will describe it..., seems to emphasize more of *the quality of life* that comes with being a citizen of the kingdom of God.** It is more *personal*, less cosmic to our ears, in a sense, though it does refer to an age, ...the kingdom of God that is *here now* but is also *yet to come*. **Age-type life is the spilling over of the power and vitality of the Age to Come into this present evil age in the lives of those who have believed in Jesus** (Gal. 1:4).

In vs. 6, Jesus clearly presents the kingdom principle of spiritual biogenesis, i.e., spiritual life can *only* come from spiritual life. In the history of science, people used to think that life came *by itself* from non-living materials. Maggots would suddenly appear on meat that had been lying out for a time. Mice would be found within a pile of old rags, within a short period of time. We now know that maggots came from the eggs of flies that had landed on the meat. Mice did *not* magically appear in the rags, rather they were attracted to nest in a comfortable environment which they discovered in their endless foraging for food. This was not at all apparent to the casual observer in earlier days, however. Joseph Lister and Louis Pasteur conclusively demonstrated that **biological life can only come from other living things.** They disproved the popular theory of spontaneous generation. **This biological principle has a parallel in the area of spiritual birth.** Jesus put it this way, “The (thing) having been begotten out from the flesh is flesh...” -- **What is from natural origin, or from self-effort, can only produce what is of like nature, i.e., natural, ...not supernatural or spiritual.** Hence, physical birth, or any earthly effort, cannot produce spiritual life. “...and the (thing) having been begotten out from the Spirit is spirit.” -- **The Spirit must produce a spiritual birth.**

The logical conclusion of Jesus’ statement becomes quite apparent: “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You *must* be born from above’” (vs. 7). There is an interesting distinction in the Greek between the two parts of this verse. The first time the word “you” occurs it is in the singular form, i.e., He is speaking to Nicodemus. In the second half of the verse, the word “you” is plural, meaning that “y’all (i.e., all people) must be born from above” (Gr. - *anōthen*). This has the effect of universalizing the statement. Also the word translated as “must” is quite strong in Greek. It means “it is necessary” or “it is bound”. A more literal translation of this phrase would be, “It is necessary y’all to be born/begotten from above/again.” **Why is it necessary? Because spiritual life comes *only* from the Spirit of God!**

Finally, Jesus makes another important comparison to establish that there is something *unpredictable* or *mysterious* about the ones who have been born from above (vs. 8). As you observe the effects of the wind/spirit, but don’t know where it is coming from or going to, *in this same manner*, or, *like this* is everyone having been begotten/born out from the Spirit. In other words, **you may not be able to see the spiritual birth taking place, but you *can* see the *effect* in a person’s life.** “...so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” – **They will be changed!**