

Our Lord and Nicodemus

*“There was a man
of the Pharisees,
named Nicodemus,
a ruler of the Jews:
The same came to
Jesus by night.”
—John 3:1,2*

THE ACCOUNT OF JESUS’ meeting with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, is found in John 3:1-15. It is one of the most interesting of the many incidents in the Gospel record, illustrating

the attitude of at least some of the rulers of the Jews toward God’s only begotten Son, whom the Father had sanctified and sent into the world. More important than this is the illustration this account provides of the attitude of a well-learned natural man toward spiritual things, and his difficulty to receive and understand them.

The Pharisees were considered by many, including themselves, as the holiest sect of the Jews in Jesus’ day. They claimed special sanctity as a result of keeping the Mosaic Law, manifesting scrupulous care for all its ceremonial features. Being spoken of as a “ruler of the Jews,” and a “master of Israel,” Nicodemus was much like some of the influential leaders in the churches of today. (John 3:1,10)

Though he no doubt attempted to live to the extent of his ability in accordance with many features of the Jewish Law, he was not able to grasp spiritual things on account of being a natural man, and thus was unable to receive the things of the Spirit of God, or to understand them, “because they are spiritually discerned.”—I Cor. 2:14

WHY BY NIGHT?

The account states that Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night.” It has been suggested that he went at that time because he did not wish to be seen visiting such an unpopular person as Jesus was with the scribes and Pharisees, and he did not want to have it known that he was in any way influenced by his message. On the other hand, it may be said that the nighttime hours would be the most convenient time for a quiet, private conversation, especially in view of Jesus’ busy life of teaching, performing of miracles, and frequently having great multitudes following him.

For example, when the friends of the man “taken with a palsy” wished to bring him to Jesus, there was such a throng of people surrounding the house that the only way to obtain access to the Master was by making an opening in the roof, and lowering the sick man “into the midst before Jesus.” (Luke 5:18,19) On another occasion we read that there were so many going and coming to see our Lord and his disciples that they had “no leisure so much as to eat.” (Mark 6:31) Furthermore, we need not think of Nicodemus coming in the middle of the night, but merely after dark, perhaps the best time available for him to make a visit.

Nicodemus' approach to our Lord was very respectful: "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." (John 3:2) From our Lord's reply, it is quite evident that only part of the conversation is recorded. It also seems clear that the vital subject of Messiah's kingdom, in which every Jew believed, must have been mentioned. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born [begotten: please see the next paragraph for further explanation] from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (vs. 3, *Rotherham Emphasized Bible*) Nicodemus had evidently heard that Jesus was preaching that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Possibly he heard that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah—the great king—in that kingdom.

By way of explanation, the word "born" as rendered in the foregoing verse, is a translation of the Greek word *gennao*. This word is unique in that it can refer to either the act of begetting—the beginning of the gestation period—or the actual birth at the end of the same period. Thus, *gennao* can be correctly translated either "begotten" or "born," depending on whether the subject is the father, who begets, or the mother, who gives birth. In this case, it should be translated "begotten," because God, the Father, "from above," is involved. The rendering of *gennao* as "begotten" should also be made in verse 7 of this chapter.

Returning to our lesson, in view of Jesus' absence of political influence, and with generally only followers from among the common people, Nicodemus was understandably perplexed that the Lord would make such bold claims regarding to the "kingdom

of God.” Hence Jesus emphasized the fact that a man must be begotten from above if he would “see,” in the sense of understanding, the kingdom in its embryonic stage during the present Gospel Age. Later, for example, the Apostle Paul said that God “hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.” (Col. 1:13) Here the apostle suggests that God’s people, when begotten from above, enter into a new, spiritually focused, way of life, with new hopes, aims, ambitions, interests. “Old things are passed away,” and “all things are become new.”—II Cor. 5:17

The apostle says: “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17) Christians, prospective members of the heavenly kingdom, are not restricted in the use of food, as were the Jews under the Law Covenant, nor are they bound to keep one day in seven as a day of physical rest, although, when possible, it is wise and advisable to do so. However, as prospective members of the kingdom, our liberties, privileges, and blessings are much greater than freedom to eat what we like, or liberty to busy ourselves, when necessary, with work on the first or seventh day of the week. Rather, as Paul states, some of the chief blessings we enjoy are “righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

In spite of centuries of effort, and with the sole exception of Jesus, complete righteousness was not attained by any Jew as a result of keeping the Law. Peace with God was not the possession of any in natural Israel. The Law only condemned, and told God’s typical people that they were short of the divine requirements, and therefore under judicial

condemnation. (Rom. 3:20; 7:7-11) Similarly, neither was spiritual blessings, resulting from the operation of the Holy Spirit, the portion of any until Pentecost after our Lord's resurrection. We see how true it is that an individual must be "begotten from above" before they can understand or become intimately acquainted with the kingdom of God and the blessings to be enjoyed by those called to that hope during the present time.

THE NATURAL MAN AND SPIRITUAL THINGS

Nicodemus asked questions in response to Jesus: "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) Here we see the operation of the natural mind, with its ability to reason only on the level of earthly things. In his reply, Jesus enunciates a further vital truth which can be fully appreciated only by those who have been spirit-begotten. "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." (vs. 5) To "see," or understand, that kingdom, one needs to be "begotten from above," but to "enter into" the heavenly kingdom to which the church is called, it is necessary not only to be begotten, but also to be "born" of the Spirit. As Paul says in another place, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." (I Cor. 15:50) A new spiritual body must be received before we can enter the Father's kingdom.

The Christian's birth, Jesus tells us, is brought about by means of two things: "water" and "Spirit." First is the cleansing, sanctifying power of the water of truth; living by "every word that proceedeth out

of the mouth of God;” and being built up by “the word of his grace.” (Eph. 5:25,26; Matt. 4:4; Acts 20:32) Second is the operation of the Holy Spirit, quickening our mortal bodies in the work of sacrificing the flesh, “renewing” and transforming our minds that they may become more and more like “the mind of Christ.” (Rom. 8:11-13; 12:1,2; I Cor. 2:16) In these ways we are prepared to be “born” as spirit beings in the resurrection. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again [begotten from above].”—John 3:6,7

Our Lord here tells us that there is more than one kind of begetting and birth. As the begetting and birth of the flesh are actual events, so the begetting and birth of the spirit is just as real, and necessary, if one would enter the heavenly phase of Messiah’s kingdom. However, as the record indicates, Nicodemus continued to marvel and wonder as to the meaning of Jesus’ words. How frequently has this been the experience of the Lord’s people since that time, as they have come into contact with well-meaning individuals whose minds, however, are unable to discern spiritual truths.

In John 3:8, Jesus attempts to provide Nicodemus with a simple illustration of the powers possessed by one born of the Spirit. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” From this we gather that, to our limited human understanding, spirit beings are like the wind, invisible yet powerful, and their means of movement

very rapid. To use a common expression, they are able to “come and go like the wind.” Even with this explanation, Nicodemus, still handicapped by his natural mind, replied, “How can these things be?”—vs. 9

DID NICODEMUS BECOME A DISCIPLE OF JESUS?

There is no definitive record in the Bible that Nicodemus became a disciple of Jesus. However, we know he defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees and the chief priests had sent officers to take Jesus captive. (John 7:32) However, when they returned without the Lord and were asked why they had not brought him, their reply was, “Never man spake like this man. Then answered them the Pharisees, Are ye also deceived? Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed. Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.” (vss. 45-52) What the Pharisees did not know was that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea, not in Galilee.

When Jesus was crucified, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of the Lord, asked to take his body for burial. Pilate granted the request, and together with Nicodemus, who brought embalming spices, they placed Jesus’ body in a sepulchre owned by Joseph. (John 19:38-42) These events suggest that Nicodemus had a great interest in Jesus and

his teachings. Certain traditional writings imply that after the resurrection of Jesus, Nicodemus became a disciple of Christ, and received baptism at the hands of Peter and John. Some writings further suggest that the Jews, in revenge for his conversion, deprived Nicodemus of his office, drove him from Jerusalem, and that upon his death he was buried near the graves of Gamaliel and Stephen. We know not, however, whether any of these claims are true, for the Scriptures are silent on the matter.

OUR FAITH ENABLES US TO SEE

As we review in our minds this interesting meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus, how thankful we should be that, as a result of our faith in the Redeemer and consecration to God through him, we have been enabled to lay aside the natural mind. By being “begotten from above,” we “see the kingdom of God,” and we appreciate the spiritual things related to it. In addition, we understand the conditions for membership in God’s kingdom, and the work associated with it, both now and in the future. To actually enter into that kingdom, however, we must be “born of the Spirit.” Therefore, let us each strive daily to fulfill our vow of consecration to God, that being “rich in faith,” we might be “heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him.”—James 2:5