

### A Dialogue Between the Lord and Nicodemus

#### John 3:1-8

John 3:1-8 - *"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.<sup>2</sup> 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."*

<sup>3</sup> *Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

<sup>4</sup> *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?"*

<sup>5</sup> *Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.<sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'<sup>8</sup> 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."*

#### Background Notes

At that time there was a man named Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, and who was also a ruler of the Jews (v1). Pharisees belonged to a religious sect within Judaism at the time of Christ. Most of the Pharisees were self-righteous, legalistic hypocrites who rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Nicodemus, however, was refreshingly different. He came to Jesus Christ with an open mind, asking questions and listening to what the Lord had to say. He addressed Jesus as "Rabbi," which was a title of respect given to Jewish teachers of the Law. Nicodemus realized that the wonderful works that Jesus was doing **had to be from God**.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night (v2). Why did he come at night? It may have been for convenience, but perhaps he was afraid to come by day when his fellow Pharisees would know. In any case, he did the right thing - he came to the Lord with his questions.

Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee, but he was also a "ruler of the Jews." That means he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews at the time of Jesus. It consisted of seventy members, plus the high priest. Under the Roman Empire, which was then in power, the Jewish Sanhedrin could make and enforce laws - except for enforcing the death penalty, which was reserved for the Roman authorities. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus defended the Lord when the Sanhedrin tried to bring charges against Christ. *"Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, (being one of them) said to them, "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?"(John 7:50-51).* So Nicodemus came on strong! He was fully committed to the Lord Jesus!

## Doctrinal / Teaching Points

### 1. Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus said to the Lord, *“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” (v2-3).* What an abrupt reply! Notice that the Lord didn’t say, “Well, thank you, Nicodemus - I really appreciate that remark.” No, the Lord abruptly confronted Nicodemus with what he **really** needed to know: *“unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

What did the Lord mean by that statement? We certainly know that the Lord didn’t mean that a person must become a fetus once again, and be born again physically as a baby, because Nicodemus asked about that. From our Lord’s further comments, we know that He was referring to a **spiritual birth**, a birth brought about by the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 6: *“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’(v7).*

Don’t be surprised, Nicodemus, that there are two different births, two different realms. Primarily Jesus was talking about spiritual birth here. And by the way, the word “you” in verse 7 is plural, showing that the Lord is talking not just to Nicodemus, but also to **everyone**. We **all** must be born again!

Speaking about a spiritual birth, brought about by the Holy Spirit, verse 8 says, *“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.”* Why did the Lord use the illustration of wind? Because you can’t see wind! You know it’s windy because you can hear the sound that it causes, and you can see the effects - but you can’t see the wind! So it is with spiritual birth. It’s not a physical thing that you can see – but you can see the **effects** when someone is born again.

Furthermore, as the wind is not controlled by human power, but is completely under the sovereign power of God, so is the spiritual birth of everyone who is born of the Spirit. The phrase “born again” can also be translated “born from above, or born anew.” It is a spiritual birth, brought about by the Holy Spirit.

Our doctrinal point is this: unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. The Lord was telling Nicodemus, “Unless you have this spiritual rebirth, we can’t even **talk** about spiritual things, even though you want to. You can’t see, or understand spiritual things without being born again. Nicodemus, until you are born again, you cannot, and will not share in the kingdom of God.”

The same is true for everyone today. You may be a nice person. Nicodemus was a nice person. You may be a religious person. Nicodemus was a very religious person. You may think of Jesus as a great teacher, as Nicodemus did. But like Nicodemus, unless you are born again, you can't share in the kingdom of God – now or forever.

## **2. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**

*“Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’(v5).* What did the Lord Jesus mean by “water and the spirit”? There are a number of different interpretations for this phrase, and it is not easy to decide which one is correct.

Was the Lord talking about baptism? Well, He certainly wasn't talking about Christian baptism, because Christian baptism had not yet been instituted. Not only that, the rest of Scripture indicates that you cannot be saved by baptism.

Well, maybe the Lord was speaking about the baptism of John the Baptist. That was a baptism of repentance, by water, and Nicodemus was familiar with John's baptism. In other words, “Nicodemus, you need to do more than undergo John's baptism of repentance. You need to do more than repent if you are going to be born again. You must have spiritual rebirth!”

Other Christians believe the “water” in verse 5 refers to Scripture, because “water” is used as a figure for Scripture a number of times in the Bible. And we certainly know that the Holy Spirit uses Scripture in bringing about the new birth. 1 Peter 1:23 says, *“having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.”* Certainly the Holy Spirit does use the Word of God to bring a person to new spiritual life.

Some Christians interpret the “water” as a symbol for the purification, or the cleansing associated with salvation. Titus 3:5 says, *“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.”* Do you see the connection? Regeneration, washing, are figurative expressions for the cleansing and the renewing by the Holy Spirit.

Other Christians have said that water refers to the Holy Spirit Himself, because the little Greek word here translated “and” can be translated “even.” Thus you would have, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water, [even] the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*

Finally, some Christians believe the “water” refers to physical birth because of the watery amniotic fluid associated with physical birth. In this interpretation, the Lord was saying, “Nicodemus, you must be born again - not only born of water, born physically, but now you must have that second birth to be born spiritually.” While the “natural birth” interpretation seems like a wild idea at first, in the context it seems that the Lord, both before and after verse 5, was drawing a distinction between the natural realm and the spiritual realm.

Nicodemus asked, “*Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*” And Jesus answered, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” Thus the Lord would be saying, “No, Nicodemus, we are not talking about the natural realm. You must be born not only naturally, of the water, but also of the spirit.” Now verse 6, “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*” The Lord drew a definite difference between the natural and the spiritual. And when you go to the historical context – how did people speak of natural birth back in those days? Well, “born of water” was used in reference to natural birth.

So what is the correct interpretation of “water” here? We can’t be sure! However, the main point is hard to miss - you can’t enter the kingdom of God apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in your life! Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he can’t enter the kingdom of God.

## Practical Application

### Let’s be like Nicodemus, not like Demas!

Demas? Who was Demas?! At one time Demas worked in ministry with the apostle Paul. But he quit! He wasn’t fully committed to the Lord. Demas “*loved this present world,*” so he left the ministry team. He stopped serving the Lord. In 2 Timothy 4:10 the apostle Paul wrote, “*Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica.*”

What a contrast between Demas and Nicodemus! **Nicodemus finished strong!** He started out by coming to Jesus by night, but he became a strong believer. In spite of the risk, he defended the Lord in the Sanhedrin. And he boldly came forward to help bury the body of the Lord, when even the disciples had forsaken the Lord! They ran away, but Nicodemus finished strong.

Demas started out his Christian life well, but he didn’t finish strong. Nicodemus was fully committed to the Lord, and he finished strong.

Let’s not be like Demas. Let’s finish strong, like Nicodemus!