

## **Religion and Rebirth**

South Africa is a very religious country. According to official statistics, we are supposedly a very Christian country. The Joshua Project, which tracks the state of missions in countries all over the world claims that 77% of South Africa claims to be Christian, and 21% claims to be evangelical Christian. You would think if 77% of 60 million people were Christian, we might see different crime statistics, or abortion statistics, or drunkenness, or domestic abuse, or corruption in high places, or perhaps even a different work ethic in the economy at large.

But what we are really seeing is religion, but not genuine renewal. We are seeing what you might call natural religion, religion composed and practiced from below, from human resources and human ingenuity, not supernatural religion, not something from above, from beyond our ability.

The vast difference between religion and renewal is the difference between an outward conformity and a radical inward change. It's the difference between outwardly respectable hypocrites, and inwardly transformed sinners. It's the difference between mere morality and a living relationship with God, between washing the outside of the cup but not the whole dish.

The Gospel of John is not about religion. Indeed, John wrote to many people who were steeped in religion: the religion of Judaism in the synagogues of his time, the religions of Rome that we practised all around him. But he wrote so that people would find more than religion, but a living relationship with the true God. Man-made religion and real relationship with God have been and ever will be in conflict.

We saw the religionists in an earlier chapter. Remember that chapter 2 closed by referring to those people who superficially believed in Jesus because of the signs, but Jesus did not believe in them. He knew they were sign-seekers, not Saviour seekers, people who wanted a cultural religion but not complete renewal. What follows in John's Gospel is a series of conversations that illustrate the true seeker from the false; the one after true worship vs the one satisfied with empty worship. Those conversations will be with Nicodemus in chapter 3, and the Samaritan woman in chapter 4.

Here we will get to eavesdrop on a conversation between Religion and True Renewal. Nicodemus, was the consummate religionist, the ultimate in learning a religion and perfecting its practice represents Religion. Jesus, the living Word, represents radical, renewed relationship with God. Here we will witness a conversation between Religion and God, between organised human piety, and the Creator. And we must choose if we are with Nicodemus, and agree with his perspectives, or if we will hear the Son of God and truly believe in Him.

### **I. Religion From Below**

<sup>1</sup> 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."

Nicodemus is actually a Greek name, but plenty of Jews had Greek names in the first century. There is also an Aramaic form of this name, Naqdimon, found in the first century. He was part of the Pharisees, who were really a tiny group, taken as a proportion of the population of Israel. There were only about 4000 in Pharisees, in a country of about 1 million. They had a disproportionate influence on Israel because they were considered the elite religionists: the 12<sup>th</sup> Dan masters, 100% pure Law-Keepers, Judaism's ultimate Torah-scribes.

Nicodemus seems to have been even higher up, because of the title, “ruler of the Jews”. This likely means he sat on the council of the Sanhedrin. This was the equivalent of a Supreme Court, made up of 71 elders, deciding the most important cases in Israel. They resided in Jerusalem, and since this is where Jesus is when this conversation takes place, we think Nicodemus was on the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus has been seeing the miracles Jesus does in Jerusalem. John does not detail them for us; he just mentions in passing that Jesus was doing several miracles in Jerusalem. Nicodemus is impressed, and knows that Jesus is remarkable. He doesn't yet fully understand who Jesus is, but the miracles have triggered his interest. So Nicodemus asks for an interview with Jesus.

We aren't sure why he went by night. It could be because there was already opposition to Jesus among some of the leaders and he didn't want controversy. It could be because he wanted an unhurried, uninterrupted interview with a very popular and sought-after man. At the very least, we know that Nicodemus was broad-minded enough to investigate for himself. It seems John had a home in Jerusalem, so this meeting may very well have been in John's home, likely on the flat rooftop area that sometimes had a small additional room. John might have been a silent witness to this conversation.

Nicodemus begins with a courteous opening nicety: you are a God-sent Teacher; no one can do what you are doing unless God is with him. In other words, I believe you are on the right side, on our side, on the side of of Israel, and the Law, and our synagogues.

This is exactly the sort of thing religion likes to say about Jesus: Jesus was an incredible teacher. Jesus was such a wise man, an incredible philosopher, a moral sage, a profound thinker. He was one of the good guys.

Further, Nicodemus is likely trying to feel out where Jesus stands. He might well have witnessed the cleaning out of the Temple, and since the Pharisees didn't like the Sadducees, and the priests and Temple officials, he might have been cheering that on. But now, where exactly does Jesus stand within all the groups and denominations of 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism? Religion likes to get God to sign at the bottom, agree with us that we are correct. Religion wants God to write a blurb for the back of its book, an endorsement to say others should buy into it.

Jesus' answer cuts straight to the heart.

## II. Rebirth From Above

<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?”

Notice Jesus doesn't respond to Nicodemus' statement about Him. Instead, He dives into the question of how you *see*, or as verse 5 will put it, *enter* the kingdom of God. Both mean *experience* the kingdom of God. This is the only time the phrase *kingdom of God* comes up in the Gospel of John; it occurs all over the place in the Synoptic Gospels. But here it just refers to the universal rule of God. God's cosmic timeless rule, which will also leads to a particular rule in time and space. You first enter God's kingdom spiritually, by changing loyalties, and then one day you will experience the realisation of that kingdom in resurrection life, either in the Millennial kingdom or on the New Heavens and New Earth.

Nicodemus wants to see if Jesus is on his side, is Jesus with the Pharisees or not; Jesus flips it around and says, no one, not even Nicodemus will ever experience God's kingdom now or in the future, unless he has been born again. It doesn't matter how advanced you are in religion, you will fail unless you are reborn.

It's a very strong term: **unless** this happens, you cannot experience Heaven, or God, or eternal life. Jesus uses this very same “except this happen”, or “unless this happen you cannot have” several times in the Gospel of John.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:44)

unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. (John 6:53)

no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.” (John 6:65)

for if you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins.” (John 8:24)

unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; (John 12:24)

The word translated *again* is a word in the original that can mean *again*, but it can also mean *above*. It likely carries both: to be born again, with the source of the birth being God, Heaven, above.

“Reborn from above”.

Jesus often uses a well-known physical image with a deeper spiritual meaning. He does this in John several times. Drink of the living water I give. Eat my flesh and drink my blood. Each time, Jesus is misunderstood, and the words are taken too literally.

Nicodemus, being an advanced teacher is probably straining to get at the spiritual meaning, but cannot, and so reverts to just asking Jesus to explain the figure of speech. “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Now Nicodemus might not have known what Jesus meant, but readers of John's Gospel have already come across this:

<sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:13)

So now Jesus will clarify, by repeating what He has said in different words.

<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.’”

Being reborn from above is the same as being *born of water and the Spirit*. Again, no experience of God, His rule, His eternity unless you experience this rebirth of water and the spirit. So what does that mean?

Well, here a host of interpretations have popped up. Some have said that the water here must refer to baptism. Being born of water is baptism and being born of the Spirit is Spirit baptism, or something like that. But that is so foreign to the context. Not only has the Lord Jesus not yet even instituted Christian baptism, but there is no way Nicodemus would have even remotely connected baptism to being born of water. Furthermore, baptism symbolises our salvation, it never achieves it. A second interpretation is that the water here refers to natural birth. Human pregnancies have amniotic fluid, plenty of water, so the idea is that being born of water simply means being born the first time, born physically. But there are real difficulties with that view as well. First, in the ancient world, water was not really connected to natural birth, that's more of a modern conception. Second, it is a bit silly to say, unless one is first born and then Spirit-born. The first, natural birth is assumed; Jesus is explaining what is included in the second birth.

In fact, in the original language, there is a little preposition, *ek*, which is applied to both water and spirit equally. In other words, in English, we might even hyphenate it: *born of water-and-spirit*. To extend the image: spiritual water; or the pouring of spirit. Now this has to be something which Nicodemus could have found in the Old Testament, because Jesus expects that Nicodemus should have understood it. The text which has all the elements for this is Ezekiel 36:25-27

<sup>25</sup> Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*. (Ezekiel 36:25–27)

There you see the water, the cleansing, along with the new heart and spirit, the Spirit himself coming in. Nicodemus would have read this text, and maybe applied it corporately to the whole nation, but Jesus is showing it needs to be applied to the individual.

Apart from Israel, apart from the sect of the Pharisees, you as an individual must experience this spiritual renewal, where God begins again inside you, starts a new creation, an altogether new life, washed clean of the old.

Paul uses this language to distinguish true Christianity from religion: <sup>5</sup> 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 3:5)

What does this mean? It refers to the moment when God applies the atoning work of Christ to a human heart, and forgives his sin, and replaces that independent, selfish, dying nature, with a bit of Himself: the divine nature. He puts something to death in you, and He restarts life in you, life which now looks up to God as Father, which now craves food from Him, and lives life in Him.

<sup>17</sup> 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)

<sup>3</sup> Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (1 Peter 1:3)

There doesn't need to be emotional fireworks. Not every rebirth is a Saul of Tarsus Damascus Road conversion. No need for there to have been some kind of ecstatic utterance or miraculous mystical moment. But there should be newness.

Spurgeon once imagined a child born and raised in a coal mine, and one day years later taken up and out for the first time to see the sun and grass and flowers. The boy would be surprised and delighted. But might not fully be able to explain everything he was now seeing and experiencing. “So we do know that we are born again, for we feel a new life and live in a new world. Things we never dreamed of before we have realized now. I remember one who when he was converted said, “Well, either the world is new or else I am.” This change is to us strong evidence that faith is in us, and has exercised its power.<sup>1</sup>

Now this is where religion gets really uncomfortable. It doesn't like all this born again terminology. Just give me church in moderation, or keeping some kind of code, or some set of rules, declare that I am a normal, stable member of society, and I'm happy. But this reborn stuff sounds fanatical, eccentric, extreme. This belongs to wide-eyed, wild-hair, hysterical people, right? Doomsday cults, weird sects with weird rules, right?

Well, who is it that is talking about being born a second time? Is it some fanatical person? It is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He is bringing up the idea. And He says it is not a new idea, it is an old one. In Israel of old, there was always the remnant within the mass. There were always those who were circumcised in their hearts, not just in their flesh. There were those who were Israelites in their hearts, not just in their citizenship. Always, amidst a large cultural religion, there are those who have received the new heart, the spiritual washing, the restart.

As one pointed out, the phrase “born again Christian” is redundant. It is like saying “canine dog.” It

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, C. (2017). [300 Sermon Illustrations from Charles Spurgeon](#) (E. Ritzema & L. Smoyer, Eds.). Lexham Press.

misleads you into thinking there is more than one kind of Christian. If you are born again, you are a Christian. If you are a Christian in the scriptural sense, you have been born again. There is no such thing as a Christian who has not been reborn from above.

This is why Jesus says That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>

What has been born by spiritual means is spiritual.

There is no evolution from natural to spiritual. You cannot have a purely natural, human, everyday religion, as normal and routine as eating your cereal or going for your jog, and expect that it will somehow morph into a truly spiritual religion. No, these are fundamentally different. <sup>50</sup> Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. (1 Corinthians 15:50)

In fact, because it is spiritual, it is also uncontrollable.

<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.”

Jesus likens the work of God in regeneration to the wind. The wind has visible effects, but an unpredictable course. You can hear the wind, but not comprehend all its mechanisms. Jesus may be alluding to Ecclesiastes 11:5 As you do not know what *is* the way of the wind, *Or* how the bones *grow* in the womb of her who is with child, So you do not know the works of God who makes everything.

Regeneration is God's work. It is inscrutable by man, and not controllable by man. Throughout the book of John, Jesus takes out of the hands of proud religionists the ability to control God. No one gets to claim they decided to approach God first; no, God draws you first. No one who is proudly rejecting Jesus gets to say they have turned Him down, in fact it turns out God has turned them down. If you are proud, you will hate the idea that God controls this whole thing, because you want some credit, some control, some bargaining chip. But being reborn from above is not like that. As many a teenager has once said, “I didn't ask to be born!” No, you didn't. It was out of your hands. So it is with the new birth. It is not man-made religion, not a ladder we build up to Heaven.

Well, Nicodemus' response is exactly the response of a religionist when you tell them that this is a work of God.

### **III. Rejection or Reception**

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

How is this possible? How can this work? It seems impossible, even random. Jesus has two responses to this. First, he is going to rebuke the unbelief of Nicodemus' religion in verses 10-13, and second, He will tell him how it works in verses 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? <sup>11</sup> Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

First, Nicodemus, you're a teacher, and you aren't teaching this? How can you have reached this place of education and status and missed first principles? Jesus says, I am not making this up. We speak what we know, we witness what we have seen. The plural “we” may refer to Him and His disciples, or it may be a reference to the Trinity. But the point is, Jesus says, “I'm speaking to you

from firsthand knowledge, what I know and have seen. I have personally seen that which is above, where you must be born from.

How so? Verse 13 – that's where I am from. That is my realm. In fact, the last phrase, “Son of Man who is in Heaven” is not in some of the modern versions because it isn't found in a few old manuscripts of John, but it is found in the vast majority, and I think it is original. What does it mean? It means the divine Logos, the Word, even while He is present on earth talking to Nicodemus according to His human nature, He is in Heaven according to His divine nature. When we speak of Jesus leaving Heaven's glory, we mean it metaphorically. We shouldn't have this crude idea that there was a gap in the Triune God, or an empty seat on the throne. No, God the Son remained omnipresent. It is after the ascension that we now have the Son of Man occupying a throne in Heaven. The point is, who is most qualified to tell Nicodemus about Heavenly things.

And in verse 12, Jesus says, you are struggling to understand earthly things – wind and birth. You want to know how this works, before you even believe that it does work! If you don't believe in rebirth from above, how will you understand if I try to explain to you how that actually operates in the heavenly realm?

In other words, if you have a problem with the idea of being born again, take it up with Jesus! He's the only one who has ever been in both places – Heaven and Earth, and can tell you how you get from the one place to the other. If you don't believe that you need to be born again, after hearing it from the lips of Jesus, then nothing is going to convince you.

But is this all then a sovereign work of God that we have no role to play in? Are we just puppets, and God will simply regenerate whom He will, and we just sit by, hoping? No, as always happens, we see the divine and the human laid side-by-side, parallel lines that do not touch. If God's sovereignty doesn't harden your heart into more proud rejection, but instead humbles you into yielding, then there is good news for you. Here it is:

<sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:1–15)

In the time of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, they began murmuring and complaining again. So as a judgement, God sent poisonous snakes among them, and many people were bitten and died. As the people cried out for mercy, God told Moses to make a bronze snake, and then lift it up high on a pole. Whoever was dying, had a choice. They could remain in their rebellion and murmuring and die. Or they could trust in God's provision. God had now provided a bronze snake – a symbol of death, that would bring life, if the Israelite would look to it in trusting hope and faith that God would heal him. And whoever looked to that lifted up provision would receive life instead of death.

Now, Nicodemus has no idea that Jesus is going to die on the cross. We're three years away from that. But Jesus says He too will be lifted up. That refers to when Jesus will also be lifted up in the sight of Israel, a symbol of death bringing life. He will also be lifted up when He is resurrected and ascended. But just as the Israelite needed to place his hope and trust in that provision to be healed, so the sinner must place his hope in Jesus Christ, God's provision. If you turn the eyes of your heart away from trusting in your religion, in your baptism as a child, in your morality, in your own integrity, in your own common sense, in your own sincerity, in your own spirituality, and turn your heart's trust entirely to the person and work of Jesus, in Him you will gain this regeneration, this renewal, this life from above that is eternal in quality.

That's eternal life. It is not just living forever in heaven when you die. It is quality of life that changes the moment you get it. It is life focused on and coming from eternity, no longer just this

world and this life. It continues into eternity, but it begins the moment you are reborn, renewed, life from above.

And if you don't get it, Jesus warns that you will perish. You will die, not just physically, but spiritually. Alienated from God forever, living in the torment of your own selfishness, ever decaying but never ending, ever weakening but never ending. It is a serious thing to be an image-bearer of God. Immortality sits on your shoulders whether you like it or not; you must decide if you wish immortality without your Creator or with Him. No one sees or enters the kingdom of the Creator without being reborn from above.

Yes, rebirth is sovereign, like the wind. But it is also human choice: you must believe. You must accept that even with religion, you are dying, that you cannot save yourself, that you need a deep, radical, inward change of heart and loves, and tastes, and desires, and that you cannot reform yourself, you must be reborn. You cannot birth yourself, but you can turn and trust. Look away from self and look to Him and live. Repent and believe.

So how did Nicodemus' story end? We do not know for sure, but we have at least his clue.

<sup>39</sup> And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. (John 19:39)

Nicodemus went public with his allegiance to Jesus by caring for His body, an act that must have infuriated the rest of the Sanhedrin, if not ostracised him altogether. We are not told if he had become a full-blown disciple, but we can be hopeful that the religionist had been truly reborn. But this is written for us now. Now, in 2023, there are many Nicodemus', maybe even some here today, relying on rituals, on old codes, on religion, but without memory or experience of rebirth.

Have you been born again? Have you believed and received eternal life? Do not allow another day of religion in your life without true, rebirth from above.