

John 3:1-8

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Nicodemus, a Jewish ruler, visits Jesus because he sees that Jesus is a teacher and miracle worker sent from God. Jesus tells Nicodemus a spiritual truth that perplexes the Jewish ruler: A person must go through a second birth by the Spirit of God to enter God's kingdom.

After Jesus has cleansed the temple and attended the Passover in Jerusalem, John now provides a discourse between Jesus and a Pharisee named *Nicodemus*. This is early in Jesus' ministry, and is likely an opportunity for Nicodemus to become a disciple of Jesus, perhaps one of the twelve. John introduces Nicodemus, telling us *Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews*. The fact that Nicodemus was a Pharisee meant that he was highly educated in the Jewish Law, and presumably followed religious rules very closely, particularly the oral tradition of the Pharisees. John notes that Nicodemus is *a ruler of the Jews*, meaning he was a member of the Jewish ruling council, called the Sanhedrin. It had seventy one members, and heard the most important cases.

The Greek word "synedrion" appears twenty two times in the New Testament, and has been transliterated into the English pronunciation as "Sanhedrin." It was the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus to death (Mark 14:55) as well as Stephen (Acts 6:12). In each case, the word "Council" is used as a translation of "synedrion." At the end of John's gospel, we learn that Nicodemus participated in the burial of Jesus and provided spices for his burial. We are not told whether he continued to be a member of the Sanhedrin at that time.

We are told that Joseph of Arimathea, in whose tomb Jesus was laid, was a secret disciple of Jesus, for fear of the Jews. It could be that Nicodemus was a disciple as well. This seems likely. Nicodemus would have been the best source from which to collect this episode, and would not have provided it had he not become a follower of Jesus.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He probably visited Jesus *by night* in order to avoid attention. As we will see, Nicodemus is intrigued, but has not believed. He seems to be trying to avoid incurring persecution for actually seeking understanding. Jesus will use the occasion to contrast those who seek the light and those who seek darkness.

Nicodemus said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Nicodemus makes an obvious statement, but one that many of the Pharisees either avoided or were unwilling to see. That was, very simply, that there was no explanation for the amazing *signs* or miracles Jesus had performed other than that they were the work of *God*. Nicodemus recognizes Jesus could not do such things unless *God is with him*.

Nicodemus opened his statement with a term of respect, calling Jesus *Rabbi*, which is "teacher." Jesus' credentials were often questioned by the authorities. But Nicodemus is at this point being respectful. He has not believed, but it appears he is genuinely seeking.

In a typical conversation, we would expect Jesus' response to include appreciation for the kind words of this highly ranked and prestigious person, and a return of pleasantries. But *Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Nicodemus starts with a plausibility and gets a challenge in return. Nicodemus had said, "I see the work of God in what you do" and Jesus replied that the only way someone can *see the kingdom of God* is if they have been *born again*. Jesus is telling Nicodemus, "Actually, you are not seeing, because you are not born again."

Although Nicodemus has recognized that God is working through Jesus, he has not recognized that Jesus is the long-awaited King of the Jews, the Son of David. Not only that, Jesus is also the Son of God. Therefore Nicodemus has not recognized the kingdom of God, because he has not recognized the true identity of Jesus, the king of the kingdom. At this point Jesus focuses on what was required in Nicodemus in order for him to have eyes to actually see the things of God.

Nicodemus appears to be clueless of what Jesus is talking about, and *said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"* Nicodemus took Jesus' statement about being *born again* in a physical sense, and asks how someone can go *a second time into his mother's womb and be born* a second time. But this is not at all what Jesus is talking about. *Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."*

Jesus started this conversation telling Nicodemus that being *born again* was a necessary condition to be able to "see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus had seen the work of God. But he did not recognize who Jesus was, so could not see the kingdom of God. Now Jesus makes clear that the second birth of which He speaks is a spiritual birth. The first birth, physical birth, is to be *born of water*. We know a baby is about to come when the mother's water breaks. The baby comes out wet with amniotic fluid. So the first birth necessary to be able to see the kingdom is to be born physically, to be *born of water*. The second birth that's necessary is to be *born of the Spirit*. Both are necessary in order to *enter in to the kingdom of God*.

Jesus continues to explain, saying, *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*. Jesus makes clear that physical birth is a birth involving a physical body. The physical birth is of *flesh*, so is evidenced by *flesh*. We know a baby is born when we see its little body arrive. But the spiritual birth is a birth of the *Spirit*. It involves the *Spirit* of God bringing new life to the *spirit* of a human. The new life provides spiritual eyes to see the kingdom of God.

Apparently Nicodemus' mouth was gaping, or he was in some other way expressing amazement, because Jesus continues, saying *Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'* Jesus now provides an example from everyday life to help Nicodemus understand. Jesus says *The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit*. The Greek word translated *spirit* is "pneuma." "pneuma" also means "wind" or "breath." So literally, what Jesus said in explanation to being born of the Spirit ("pneuma") was that *the wind* ("pneuma") *blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from*.

When the *wind* (“pneuma”) *blows*, we do not see it, but we still know it is blowing. We know because we see the trees sway, and the leaves move. But we do not see the wind. We *hear the sound of it*, but we do not see it. It *goes where it wishes*. We cannot control the wind (“pneuma”).

In like manner, the Spirit (“pneuma”) of God goes where it wishes. No one controls the Spirit of God. And, like the wind, we can see its impact everywhere (Psalm 19). But you do not see the Spirit (“pneuma”). The Spirit (“pneuma”) comes upon people who are born again, and brings them a new birth. You can’t see the Spirit (“pneuma”), and you can’t see the rebirth. But when the Spirit (“pneuma”) brings new birth to a person, it has an impact of giving them eyes to see spiritual things.

It could be that Jesus and Nicodemus were having this conversation in Hebrew. But if so, the effect of the double-meaning would have been the same, for the Hebrew word for Spirit is “ruah” and it also means “breath” or “wind.”

Since Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin, he would likely have known the Bible by heart, as well as the oral tradition. He was a learned man. Yet it appears he had never heard anything like this.

Biblical Text

3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ Nicodemus *said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”