

---

## Born from Above

In John 3 we find Jesus having a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. We do not know much about Nicodemus except to say that he showed an interest in what Jesus had to say, and in his first words to Jesus, he shows that he believes that Jesus has come from God because he is able to do things which only God can do. Nicodemus, being a Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish people, was very interested in what God was doing in his world. Thus, he has an interest in what Jesus is doing.

In response to Nicodemus' interest, Jesus says something that could be construed as being rather insulting to Nicodemus. He says, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." This could be construed as being insulting to Nicodemus because Nicodemus believed that he was very much part of the kingdom of God, for, after all, he was a Pharisee who was born into God's covenant community and did his best to live in obedience to God's commands. He saw himself as being a faithful citizen of the kingdom of God, and for Jesus to talk about seeing the kingdom of God was to say that perhaps Nicodemus was not yet a citizen of that kingdom.

It is helpful to understand that the concept of being born again was not foreign to Nicodemus. From time to time a Gentile would become convinced that the God of the Jews was the only true God, and he would seek to become part of the covenant community. Through circumcision and obedience to the commands, a God-fearing Gentile could become a Jew, and his conversion was often referred to as being born into the new community. His new life began at the moment he was welcomed into the covenant community. For Jesus to suggest to Nicodemus that he needed to be born again was a kind of an insult, for Jesus is implying that Nicodemus was outside of the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus displays a little puzzlement and frustration with Jesus when he asks how it would be possible for someone like him to be born again. Would he have to enter into his mother's womb a second time to be born a second time? He seems to be implying that he doesn't need to be reborn because he is already in the community. A rebirth would make no sense to him.

Reading this exchange in the English causes us to miss something that is far more evident in the Greek. The Greek word for "again" is more commonly understood as "from above." While both understandings are equally valid, the more likely understanding is that Jesus meant "born from above," but Nicodemus heard "born again," perhaps because he did not want to admit that he needed something more than just his birth and his obedience to God's commands to become part of God's kingdom. It seems that Nicodemus is not willing to admit that it was not his own work that made him part of God's kingdom but rather it was God's work as God caused the new birth.

As the conversation continues, it becomes evident that Jesus was thinking of the more common understanding "from above" while Nicodemus decided to hear "again." But what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus is this: being born into the covenant community and living obediently to God's commands doesn't make you part of God's kingdom. What needs to happen is something that God does to you, not that you do yourself. Nicodemus needed to be born "from above" meaning that God had to act upon his

---

life in such a way that he was included in the kingdom. In other words, inclusion in the kingdom is God's action, not ours, meaning that all of Nicodemus' striving to be the possible Pharisee he could be was for nothing, at least as far as becoming a faithful citizen of God's kingdom is concerned.

Jesus explains a few moments later that flesh gives birth to flesh and spirit gives birth to spirit. In other words, all the human efforts that Nicodemus might put into being included in God's kingdom do not result in him becoming part of the spiritual kingdom of God. Only that which is spiritual (not fleshly) can give bring about spiritual birth. Thus, it is only by the work of the Holy Spirit that we can be born into the spiritual kingdom of God.

What Jesus has done in his conversation is make being part of God's kingdom an impossibility for all human beings if it is up to them. For a Pharisee that was not good news, for Nicodemus had been believing that he could, by way of his physical birth as a Jew and by being obedient to the law, become part of God's kingdom. Of all the people who lived in Jesus' time, the Pharisees were the most likely to have been the ones who were part of God's kingdom. And Jesus has, in effect, told Nicodemus that not even he, a leading Pharisee, was able to accomplish that.

It is in this context that John, the one who records this conversation, gives us the solution to the problem: God loved the world so much that he sent his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (which, in John's gospel, is equivalent to being part of God's kingdom). As John explains further, light has come into the darkness, and by that light we can "see" the kingdom of God, to use Jesus' earlier words. To become part of God's kingdom is not something that Nicodemus could accomplish through his good works and by the good fortune of being born to the right parents. Nicodemus had to accept the work of Jesus who was raised up on the cross as being that one thing that would cause him to be born anew from above.

Nicodemus, it becomes evident, did believe in Jesus, for we see him participating in the burial of Jesus, something that he would not have done if he had thought that Jesus was not from God. I am fairly certain that we will see Nicodemus the Pharisee in heaven. The same can be said for all who believe in Jesus.

Pastor Gary