

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night

JCV Integrated Text: **John 3:2-13**

who came to Him at night and said, "Rabbi, we see that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could give the signs that You do unless God was with him." Jesus replied, "Truly, truly, I tell you, unless someone is born from above, he is not able to see the Kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he go through his mother's womb, and be born, again?" Jesus answered, "Most surely I tell you, unless someone is born of water and spirit, they can't enter into the Kingdom of God! Flesh is born of the flesh, but spirit is born of the Spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it pleases. While you hear its sound, you don't know where it comes from and where it goes next. So is everyone born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus asked Him, "How do these things happen?" Jesus answered him, "You're Israel's teacher, don't you understand these things? Most surely I tell you, we speak about what we understand and share-witness to what we have seen, but you people don't fully get our witness. If I told you earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has gone up into heaven, but He who descended out of heaven, the Son of Man, [who is in heaven]."

Introduction

In the last session we got to know a bit more about the background of Nicodemus whom **John** introduced as 'a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews' (**John 3:1**). Nicodemus is part of the wealthy Jewish Gurion family. He is a Rabbi in his own right (**John 3:10**) and sufficiently senior in the family to be part of the Sanhedrin.

Rabbi to Rabbi dialogue

This is not a secret meeting between two individuals, it is a private meeting between two Rabbis and their disciples. We can infer this noting the use of 'we' by both Nicodemus and Jesus, see **John 3:2, 11**. Given the midday heat, a meeting after sundown would not be unusual.

What follows is similar in format to other discourses between teachers which are recorded for the sake of their pupils. The format allows a teacher to ask naïve questions as the answers are in part for their pupils. In turn the naivety can be gently mocked but at risk to the defendant if he is unable to answer such a 'simple' question.

A key idea among the Pharisees at the time was that if Israel could keep the Law perfectly for one single day it would usher in the Kingdom of God. This provides a backdrop to the dialogue.

Nicodemus honours Jesus and invites Him to teach

Remember this meeting happens before the start of Jesus' public, itinerant ministry (which is where the synoptic Gospels pick up the story). Nonetheless, He has gathered some of His own disciples and been speaking and doing things which have caught people's attention. Nicodemus has noticed this and honours Jesus by acknowledging that He has come from God (**John 3:2**). Jesus responds saying man must be born again to see the Kingdom of God.

The terminology 'born again' was already in use. We see examples in the Talmud which, although they were written about 100 years after this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, represent traditions which long pre-date it. **Alfred Edersheim: The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, p. 384** lists other situations where people are described as 'born again' in the Talmuds:

- A bridegroom on his wedding night
- The Chief of the Academy on his promotion
- The King on his enthronement.
- The proselyte on entrance to Judaism

The key one for this conversation is that of the proselyte on his entrance into Judaism. For example:

- **Rabbi Yosei** says of the proselyte: 'They would not be punished for their deeds prior to their conversion because **a convert who just converted is like a child just born** in that he retains no connection to his past life'. **Yevamot 48b**
- A proselyte who was first circumcised, then offered sacrifice and finally baptised is described by The Talmuds as: 'When a proselyte comes up after his immersion, he is reckoned to be an Israelite in all respects. One who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born.' **Pesach 92a**
- 'When **he is healed** from the circumcision, **they immerse him immediately, and two Torah scholars stand over him** at the time of his immersion **and inform him of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot**. Once **he has immersed and emerged, he is like a born Jew in every sense.**' **Yevamot 47b**

Note: The mitzvot was a washing ceremony. The water symbolises both the water of the womb of the mother and male semen, so being 'born of water' carries an understanding of being born naturally.

John the Baptist had adopted this symbolism as he called for people to repent and be washed in baptism. Jesus confronts Nicodemus, with his own need to go through a renewal experience.

Nicodemus responds with a question

In his response (v4) Nicodemus is not saying that he doesn't understand the allegory, rather it's is a very personal response indicating that he does not see the need for him as a mature, learned, good Jew to undergo a renewal and start all over again! His question allows Jesus to unpack more...saying that someone must be born of water AND Spirit, born naturally AND supernaturally, flesh AND Spirit.

Note Jesus' word play in **verse 8**: 'The wind blows where it pleases. While you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from and where it goes next.' The Hebrew word for 'wind', ruach, is the same word used for 'spirit.'

Jesus is challenging Nicodemus. Jesus is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus doesn't see where Jesus has come from (He didn't go to the correct school, He wasn't from the proper family...) Nicodemus has recognised that something significant is happening with what happened at Passover at the Temple and hearing stories of what Jesus has said and done....but he doesn't know where it's going next!

Nicodemus wants to know how

Nicodemus has been teaching that people should try harder and persuade everyone around them to keep the Law perfectly just for one day to bring in the Kingdom of God. Whereas Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is heaven's initiative.

Since this is something which people cannot effect by themselves and is not about their earthly heritage, Nicodemus asks a genuine question, 'How do these things happen?'

In his response Jesus, first honouring Nicodemus by acknowledging his great teaching abilities (v10), challenges him that there is something different which he needs to understand. Nicodemus' understanding of the Kingdom of God has been so earthly. Jesus says the Kingdom is not gained by drawing on human expertise and experience to get things perfectly right but rather it is initiated from heaven – you cannot be sure where it has come from nor fully understand yet where it is going but when it's there you can 'hear' it, i.e. you can recognise it.

Note:

- Jesus uses the word 'we' in **verse 11**. We cannot be absolutely sure whether Jesus is referring to Himself and His disciples, or to Himself and Nicodemus. Perhaps more likely the former as Jesus is with there with His disciples and is effectively saying 'we are living this now'.
- When Jesus says 'you people' the 'you' is plural - He is referring to Nicodemus and his disciples.

In **verse 13** Jesus uses the term 'Son of Man for the first time. Nicodemus understands that phrase from **Daniel 7:13**,

'I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the **sky one like a son of man**, and he came even to the ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.'

In doing so and also following it by saying that no one has ascended into heaven but the Son of man has descended out of heaven, Jesus has given Nicodemus something to reflect on and study which will draw him towards the truth. Jesus has been honouring towards Nicodemus, allowing him to come to his own realisation of who Jesus is and accept the implications of it.

The final four words of the passage, 'who is in heaven', are bracketed as they appear in some manuscripts but not others.

Conclusion

This draws to a close the recorded words of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Next time we move on to **John** the Gospel writer's own words in his concluding summary.