

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Things which accompany salvation: New Birth

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*.

We are mid-way through a series called; "Things which accompany salvation" and the title of today's talk is "New Birth". I must admit this has been for me a very difficult subject to understand and even harder to try to explain. With God's help I trust that as you listen you will be helped, as I have been in the preparation of this talk.

You first need to understand what Salvation means to have any chance of understanding what "New Birth" means. Salvation is deliverance from sin and its consequences, which is brought about by faith in Christ. Salvation is based on God's righteousness having being maintained and declared in the death of Christ, and therefore the believer is saved in Christ. Salvation comes as one repents from their sins and puts their trust in the Lord Jesus as Saviour. Salvation means that we have been saved from our sins; therefore we will escape the righteous judgement of a Holy God.

The main teaching of "new birth" or being "born again" is found in John 3:1-13 and is taught by the Lord Himself. New birth was a teaching that the Jews needed to understand. Nicodemus was a Jew and a Pharisee, which meant he lived by and demanded that others lived in obedience to the strictest Jewish law. Not all of the Pharisees were hypocrites and evidence indicates that Nicodemus was deeply sincere in his quest for truth. He knew little of the truth, but he saw that the truth was in Jesus Himself, and he desired it. He came to Jesus by night for instruction and was greatly astonished to find that, instead of instruction, he was told that he needed to be born again. It seems that Nicodemus's conscience had been reached and seeing and hearing Jesus had put a sense of need in his heart.

Nicodemus, being a teacher of the Jews himself, had great respect for the Teacher from Galilee. It also seems that he had an instinctive sense that his fellow Pharisees would be against him; as he came to Jesus by night (John 3:2, John 7:50, John 19:39). On the other hand, he could have come at night just so he could have the Lord all to himself and to have a quiet, uninterrupted conversation. The "we" in John 3:2 and the "you" (plural) in John 3:7 could indicate that he was actually there representing the religious leaders. However we are not told exactly why he came to Jesus by night. But we do know that Nicodemus himself was a man of high moral character, deep religious hunger and yet profound spiritual blindness!

Let us read John 3:1-13: *"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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.'" Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'. 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?' Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 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." 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'. Nicodemus answered and said to Him, 'How can these things be? Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven'"*.

Jesus stops Nicodemus short as he begins to address Him. Jesus knew that Nicodemus was attracted by the miracles He did and that he failed to understand that God was not only with Jesus but Jesus was God Himself. Nicodemus could not see this. Nicodemus, although he was a learned teacher and an intelligent man, found it impossible to understand the things of God. These things are spiritually discerned and cannot be understood by a natural man. The kingdom of God could neither be seen nor entered into without a spiritual change happening within Nicodemus. Nicodemus was spiritually blind; he did not have a clue what Jesus was talking about. Jesus was speaking about spiritual birth, but Nicodemus thought only of a physical birth. Nicodemus needed to be taught what new birth was. As we have said already, new birth comes with salvation and salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Nicodemus,

being a proud Pharisee, needed to be stripped of every ounce of self-righteousness that was in his heart and the very source of his nature needed to be renewed for him to understand what Jesus was saying to him.

Jesus explains to Nicodemus what was required for new birth (John 3:3). Nicodemus immediately latches on to a natural birth rather than the spiritual birth that Jesus was talking about (John 3:4). Jesus almost ignores Nicodemus's question whilst He goes on to explain what was required for new birth and how new birth spiritually was different to new birth naturally (John 3:5-8). New birth really means "born from above" so the transaction is instigated by God. New birth is something that happens to an individual on earth and the effects are seen on earth by others in the individual's life. Jesus goes on in John 3:14-18 to tell Nicodemus that the righteous foundation of new birth was in Himself as He was about to die on the cross.

Like Nicodemus, you and I have a fleshy nature which is a product of natural birth. This is the nature that we are born with! It is a nature that is attracted to wrong things, sinful things, whereas a spiritual nature is a product of being born from above. Children of God have implanted a nature of moral likeness to God - a divine nature. Let me tell you an illustration I picked up that may help you to understand what I mean.

Once there was a briar growing in a ditch and there came along a gardener with his spade. As he dug around it and lifted it up, the briar said to itself, "What is he doing? Doesn't he know I am a worthless briar?" But the gardener took it into his garden and planted it amid his flowers, while the briar said, "What a mistake he has made planting me among these beautiful roses." Then the gardener came once more and made a slit in the briar with his sharp knife. He grafted it with a rose and when summer came lovely roses were blooming on that old briar! Then the gardener said, "Your beauty is not due to what came out but to what I put in." We are brought into this world with nothing and without choosing to do so. New birth is the work of God and of God alone in the heart of one who believes. New birth does not create a new personality, but it gives us a nature like Christ. The author of this illustration is unknown.

Nicodemus was reminded of teaching from the prophet Ezekiel that when Israel as a nation enters the kingdom in a future day everyone will be born anew. In Ezekiel 36:25-27, Ezekiel quotes God as He describes a new moral and spiritual condition for His people after the captivity: *"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. 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. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them."* Here the old is put away, and God introduces the new.

The heart is desperately wicked (see Jeremiah 17:9), and none can cure it; rather, cleansing leads to a new heart, and God then places a new Spirit within. It is the same today; we are cleansed through the word of God revealing the value of the blood of Christ, after which it shows a new pathway for the believer. The Spirit not only effects this change, but He then enters into a believer's heart.

This new life does not reform the old nature, but is in addition to it; the old man or nature is now reckoned to be crucified with Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that we are *"a new creation"* in Christ, with *"all things becoming new."* *"Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever,"* 1 Peter 1:23.

Both in Ezekiel and in John's Gospel we see that water and Spirit combine to effect this wonderful transformation. Water is a symbol of purification which, with the Spirit, produces this "living water". The two things are necessary: born of water **and** of the Spirit. Spiritually, water cleanses the affections, the heart, the conscience, thoughts and actions. Those born of the Spirit will display the fact that the Spirit lives within them. They will display the mind of Christ; they will be engaged with things which are above and they will love the word of God and there will be fruit borne out in their lives.

New birth will be evident in new life: *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit"*, John 3:6. A truly born again Christian has his or her nature from the Spirit of God. This new life is in the Spirit. Without this, man cannot enter into the kingdom of God. A Jew is already a nominal child of the kingdom, but the door is now open to the Gentiles; a Gentile is anyone who is not a Jew. Nicodemus marvelled at the Lord's description of the origin of the new birth, but the Lord wanted men to have faith, not just to marvel at things that could not be fully understood. Nothing could be seen of the inner working of the *"water and Spirit"* that would bring new life as a result of new birth. Afterwards, its effects would be seen of course, but not its origin. Jesus uses the wind as an illustration (John 3:8). Wind blows; we cannot see it, we don't know where it comes from but we see the effects of it. The work of the Spirit in new birth is likewise. When Spirit comes, and how He works cannot be explained. The verse of a hymn comes to mind:

*"I know not how the Spirit moves,  
Convincing men of sin;  
Revealing Jesus through the word,  
Creating faith in Him".*

Daniel Webster Whittle (1840-1901)

Nicodemus, as a teacher of Israel and a student of the Old Testament was challenged that he ought to have understood these things. Nicodemus should have remembered Ezekiel 37:1-14. The prophet saw a valley of full of dead bones; but when he prophesied to the wind, the Spirit came and gave the bones life. Again, it was the combination of the Spirit of God and the Word of God that gave life. The new birth from above is a necessity, but it is also a mystery. Everyone who is born of the Spirit is like the wind: you cannot fully explain or predict either the wind or the child of God! Only Jesus could reveal heavenly things because of who He was. Jesus had come from the Father and was here before Nicodemus to declare everything He knew and the things He had seen with His Father. The defiled nature of man could not be in relationship with Him who had come from heaven. Man must be born again to possess this new life. Jesus bore testimony therefore, as having come from above and knowing that which was suitable to God His Father. Nicodemus might be convinced outwardly by miracles, but to receive that which was befitting the presence of God was another thing. The Lord had to undertake the work to put sin away. He had to be made sin in order that the dishonour done to God should be washed away, and the truth of His character maintained.

Nicodemus is mentioned three times in John's writings. Once here in John 3:1-13 as he comes to Jesus by night; then we read of him in John 7:50 where he is with the Pharisees, and then at the cross in John 19:39. Although we are not told specifically, there must have been this spiritual change in his heart. Why do I say this? Because there was evidence of new life in his life, his thoughts and in his actions. In John 7:50 when the officers were asked by the chief priests and Pharisees why they had not arrested Jesus they replied, *"Never man spoke like this man."* Nicodemus, in Jesus' defence said, *"Does our law judge a man before it hears him, and know what he is doing?"* His fellow Pharisees turned to him accusing him of coming from Galilee as Jesus had come. This was evidence of a spiritual change; he was thinking like Jesus thought. He spoke as if it was Jesus speaking and he was not afraid to speak up.

When we come to John 19:38-42, we really see the change in Nicodemus. Jesus had been arrested, tried and crucified by wicked men, but we read something wonderful as loving hands took His body from the cross. Joseph of Arimathaea, who was a secret disciple of the Lord Jesus because of his fear of the Jews, pleaded with Pilate for the body of Jesus (John 19:38-42). Pilate granted Joseph of Arimathaea the body of Jesus. And who was there to help him? Nicodemus! How marvellous! Nicodemus brings a large amount of costly myrrh and aloes and helps Joseph of Arimathaea to take the body of Jesus and they carefully wrap the body of the Lord in linen clothes with spices. Then they carefully laid the body of their Lord into the tomb that nobody had lain in before, a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathaea. If you need any proof that Nicodemus had received new birth, then there you have it. New birth, I believe, is clearly seen in Nicodemus's life.

Another hymn comes to mind at this point:

*"What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought  
Since Jesus came into my heart!  
I have light in my soul for which long I had sought,  
Since Jesus came into my heart!*

*Since Jesus came into my heart,  
Since Jesus came into my heart,  
Floods of joy o'er my soul like the sea billows roll,  
Since Jesus came into my heart".*

Rufus Henry McDaniel (1850-1940)

Nicodemus now understood who Jesus was and Nicodemus showed his love for his Lord in his actions. There was a great change in him which could only come because of new birth.

In John 1:4 we read of the state of darkness in which man is found because of sin. A work of God is necessary (even in the best of men - Nicodemus) before man can receive Christ. New birth is the great initial act in the blessing of the soul. In John 1:13 we read of the source from which it proceeds, God Himself; we are born of God. James 1:18 says that this was by His own will. New birth is the outcome of, and is brought about by the operation and action of the Holy Spirit, by the word, in the soul. The figure of water is introduced because of the need for purification (moral cleansing). See John 13:10 and John 15:3. Moral cleansing is by new birth which is effected in us by the Holy Spirit implanting in us the incorruptible seed of the word of God.

The result and effect of new birth is that it gives entrance to the kingdom of God. It is the preparation of the soul, by God, for the reception of the Son of God. Believing in the Son of God (the Christ) is the proof and outcome of being born again. It is the act of those who are born again.

Thank you for listening to this morning's talk. I pray that if you are not "born again" that you will be challenged and if you are, that you may understand the truth of "New birth" a little bit better.

May God bless you all today!

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