

Nicodemus

Opening Hymn: Appendix K — “Take Time to be Holy”

The name Nicodemus means “conqueror among his people.” Although the name was relatively common in Israel, a person with this name appears only in the gospel of John. This truth-seeking Pharisee comes on the scene in chapter 3:

John 3:1,2 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night . . .

Later references to him in chapters 7 and 19 both identify him as the Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night. Most commentators think he came at night because he feared what others on the Sanhedrin would think of him spending time with Jesus, a man who in their collective view was a false teacher. If that was his reason, we would surely not criticize him. Paul wrote, “What for you is a good thing must not become an occasion for slanderous talk” (Rom. 14:16, New English).

I think there was a different, even more likely reason for the night visit. The end of chapter 2 says that Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time of passover. The city would be teeming with people. Jesus always attracted crowds and no one could have had a private conversation with him during the day. At night the people returned to their homes. It was much more likely Jesus would be available then and that’s why Nicodemus came at night. The Jews were always asking Jesus for a “sign” of his authenticity, conveniently ignoring the many miracles Jesus did every day. It was these miracles that impressed Nicodemus. His first words are, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). Later in John 10:38 Jesus urged the Jews to believe his works even if they couldn’t believe in him. That was what Nicodemus was doing. And because he did it, we have a description of spirit begetting from Jesus himself we might not otherwise have had.

Born Again

The conversation begins in verses 3 and 4:

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born [gennaō] again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born [gennaō] when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born [gennaō]?

In the first chapter of Matthew we see one man named as the father of the next man on the list. The Greek word used is *gennaō* and it is correctly translated “begat.” But note what we have in Matthew 1:16, “Jacob **begat** [gennaō] Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was **born** [gennaō] Jesus, who is called Christ.” The same Greek word is translated by two different English words. A man’s role in bringing forth new life is that of begetting; a woman’s role is the delivery or birthing process.

Jesus begins by saying a person must be “*gennaio*-ed” again. But since he does not mention the operative agent, Nicodemus thinks he’s talking about a woman bringing forth a baby at birth. Naturally he is confused. So Jesus continues by saying...

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born [*gennaio*] of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born [*gennaio*] of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born [*gennaio*] of the Spirit is spirit.

Now that Nicodemus hears that the operative agent is “of water and of the Spirit” he undoubtedly understood that this ambiguous Greek word was referring to spirit begetting, not spirit birth.

We can all understand the necessary role of God’s holy spirit in begetting a new life within a believer, but why water? Jesus is not talking about literal water. Water in Scripture symbolizes truth, and truth comes from God through his son Jesus.

James 1:18 Of his own will **begat he us with the word of truth**, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Jesus used the phrase “rivers of living water” as a metaphor for truth in John 7:

John 7:37,38 In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

John follows this quotation with a parenthetical thought (verse 39): “But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive, for the holy spirit was not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

This text presents a problem. As it appears in the King James, it is out of the belly of the believer that rivers of living water flow, and that this is spoken of in “the scripture.” And which scripture might that be? There is none. The Companion Bible suggests that Jesus is really saying that the “rivers of living water” come from him. Faulty punctuation hides the true meaning of his words. It should be rendered...

Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and let him drink, he that believeth on me. [*end verse 37, begin verse 38*] As the scripture hath said, out of his [*the giver—Messiah—not the receiver*] belly shall flow rivers of living water [*which become available for believers to drink*].

With this corrected understanding we turn to Zechariah for confirmation:

Zech. 13:1 In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.

Jesus is that “fountain.” We must drink or appropriate the “living water” which comes from him and receive God’s holy spirit if we are to ever have life on the spirit plane.

Going and Coming Like the Wind

John 3:7,8 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born [*gennao*] again. The **wind** bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born [*gennao*] of the Spirit.

Most Bible Students believe this text applies to spirit beings, those who were not just begotten of the spirit, but who were also born of the spirit. That's because you and I who have been begotten of the spirit do not "go and come like the wind." Yet there is nothing in the Greek to suggest that Jesus was shifting the meaning of the ambiguous word *gennao* from begettal to birthing. It is far more likely he used *gennao* to mean begettal during his entire conversation with Nicodemus.

But if this is so, how can we say spirit begotten ones go and come like the wind? We can't, and this is not what the text is saying. The problem is with the word "wind." Consider:

John 6:18 And the sea arose by reason of a great **wind** that blew.

This Greek word is *anemoz*, Strongs #417. It appears 31 times in the New Testament and is always translated wind(s). But in John 3:8 the Greek word is *pneuma*, Strongs #4151. It appears 385 times and is always translated spirit (or ghost as in "holy ghost") with one exception—here in John 3:8 where *pneuma* is translated wind. Surely if Jesus was talking about the wind we would find the word *anemoz*. But instead we find *pneuma*, not just once, but twice in the same sentence: "The wind [*pneuma*] bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is [begotten] of the Spirit [*pneuma*]."

In fact it is the **spirit** that "breathes where it pleases" which makes it consistent with the other 384 times *pneuma* appears in the New Testament. Here is Rotherham:

John 3:8 The spirit where it pleaseth doth breathe, and the sound thereof thou hearest; but knowest not whence it cometh and whither it goeth. [*also Diaglott*]

Nicodemus was being touched by the spirit—he heard its voice through the words of the Master. Did he respond appropriately when it touched him? I think he did because at the death of Jesus, he comes forward boldly during the daylight hours with Joseph of Arimathaea and willingly defiles himself by touching Jesus' dead body to bury it:

John 19:39 There came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

The Conversation Continues

John 3:9-13 [Weymouth] "How is all this possible?" asked Nicodemus. "Are you," replied Jesus, "the Teacher of Israel, and yet do you not understand these things? In very truth I tell you that we speak what we know, and give evidence concerning what we have

witnessed, and yet you all reject our evidence. If I have told you of things on earth and none of you believe me, how will you believe me if I tell you of things in heaven? There is no one who has gone up to heaven except One who has come down from heaven, namely the Son of Man whose home is in heaven.”

Nicodemus is hearing what he has never heard before. Surely this was not something taught by the Pharisees. Yet it should not be a completely new idea to him. Consider this prophecy from Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 36:25,26 Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

Nicodemus asks, “How is all this possible?” How is it that God sent his son with the water of truth which combined with the operation of the holy spirit causes a begetting process to begin within those who are rightly exercised by it? The answer is in verse 16, perhaps the best known and greatly beloved texts in the Bible:

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

“God gave.” This new arrangement is possible because it is a gift from God. Jesus repeated this answer when he spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well in the next chapter in John:

John 4:10 Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the **gift of God**, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

Jesus again speaks of himself as the source of the life-giving waters of truth by which we are begotten to the spirit nature; if faithful, we will one day be born on the spirit plane.

Incidentally, why does God love the world when he specifically tells us to not love the world?

1 John 2:15 Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

God loves the world because he knows its condition when his plans and purposes have been fully accomplished, when it will have been brought back to perfection and harmony with him. He does not love the world in its sinful, depraved condition and neither should we.

Moses and the Serpent

John 3:14,15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Those who study the Bible know that the Old Testament contains types and pictures of what would occur in New Testament time periods.

1 Cor. 10:6 [Diaglott] Now these things were made **types** for us in order that we might not be cravers after evil things even as they craved.

In his conversation with Nicodemus Jesus identifies as a type an experience the Israelites had in the wilderness. After a particular egregious lack of appreciation for what God had done for them, the Israelites were plagued with fiery serpents and many died. Moses was told to make a copper-colored serpent and place it on a pole so any who looked upon it would live and not die (see Numbers 21:4-9). This, Jesus tells Nicodemus, pictured himself. He would be “lifted up” on a “pole” and those who looked to him would live and not die. Later in this gospel John quotes Jesus as saying this even more directly to a wider audience:

John 12:32,33 And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die.

As is always the case with a type, the Old Testament experience is much inferior to the glorious antitype. True, “bitten” Israelites who would quickly die if they did nothing, were able to live if they looked at that which had been lifted up for their salvation. But of course they did die eventually. There was nothing they could do to stop the dying process which sooner or later culminated in their certain death. Only when we see Jesus do we appreciate the far grander antitype. Looking to Jesus, and him crucified, brings life, and not just life for a few years, but everlastingly.

God is Light

John 3:19,20 Light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

Light is a word John uses more than the other gospel writers. In 1 John 1:5 he says “God is light.” We know Jesus is the embodiment of God. Water is a symbol of truth and so is light. Jesus was like a light shining in a dark room making visible all the imperfections.

What do we do when a shaft of bright light pierces a darkened room and we see all the dust and imperfections we never saw before? We have three choices:

1. Ignore what we see and accept the imperfections as they are;
2. Correct the imperfections now that we are aware of them;
3. Turn out the light and pretend everything is just fine.

Those with the power within the Jewish Sanhedrin preferred choice #3. So they plotted to destroy Jesus and effectively “turn out the light.”

John 11:49,50,53 Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the

people, and that the whole nation perish not. Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.

It is easy to criticize the Pharisees for blinding themselves to the obvious truths being delivered to them on an almost daily basis. Surely we would never be so blind. But is that true? How do we react when someone “turns on the light” regarding our personal behavior, our class policies, or whatever else in our environment is defective but of which we prefer to stay blissfully ignorant? Trying to turn out the light, or killing the messenger, or otherwise trying to silence the critic who says what we don’t like is hypocrisy.

The only other place where Nicodemus is mentioned is in John 7 where the Sanhedrin tries to silence an unexpected critic in their midst:

John 7:45-52 Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees. They said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? The officers answered, Never man spake like this man. Then answered them the Pharisees, Are ye also deceived? Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed. Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.

The Pharisees conveniently ignore the prophet Jonah who was from Gath-hepher (see 2 Kings 14:25) a village in Galilee, but clearly Nicodemus would hardly want to debate this point with them.

Conclusion

May we all praise God for what he through the spirit has done for us. May we rejoice that his spirit has touched one here and one there, and opened our eyes to see and our ears to hear. Jesus performed many great miracles during his earthly ministry, but just as types are inferior to antitypes, so his miracles are so much less than what will occur in the future. If we are faithful unto death, we will have the privilege of performing even greater miracles in the kingdom.

John 14:12 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.

Closing Hymn: #238 — “Heavenly Truth”

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I WILL LEAD THEM IN PATHS WHICH THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN (Isa. 13:16)

A time there was when we in man-made ways
Walked blindly on, not knowing where they
led,

Unconscious of the light of Truth, whose rays
Were ever shining brightly overhead.

Then came Thy call, and as we listening stood,
New light fell on the perils of our way,
And what we deemed desirable and good
Were now but lures to lead our feet astray.

All wondering we turned to Thee and cried,
"We have been led astray like foolish sheep;
Take Thou our trembling hand, be Thou our
guide,
And in Thy paths our erring footsteps keep."

And thou hast led us on in paths that we
Had never known before, so richly fraught
With joy and peace, that as we followed Thee,
Each step we took fresh life and blessing
brought.

Before us spread in one harmonious whole
Thy perfect plan, wherein no room was found
For creeds vindictive, which oppress the soul
And keep mankind in chains of error bound.

We saw, instead, the riches of Thy grace,
So lavishly displayed to all mankind,
That every member of our fallen race,
Eternal life and happiness may find.

All worldly wisdom we esteemed but dross,
Earth's wealth and pleasure and its vain
display,

And bore with joy the consecrated Cross,
To win the Crown that fadeth not away.

When wearied with the struggle Thou didst
bring

Our feet into a sweet and peaceful vale,
Where we forget our toil and suffering,
And where no foes could harm or cares assail.

Still guided by Thy wise and loving hand,
With eager feet we climbed a mountain slope,
And from the crest beheld a glorious land,
The goal of all our striving and our hope.

Enraptured with the sight and gazing long,
We seemed, like John, to see the city fair,
And hear the music of the angel's song,
Which filled us with a longing to be there.

And now, dear Lord, with patience we await
Thy call to enter on the final stage,
The path of glory, which shall terminate
The toil and sorrow of our pilgrimage.

And though it leads to Jordan's rolling tide,
We will not on the bank reluctant stand,
For through the flood Thou wilt with us abide,
And bear us safely to the Promised Land.

—Martin Mitchell, *Poems of the Way*, p. 47