

You Must Be Born Again

John 2.24-John 3.1-24, NKJV

Paul Bailey

²⁴“But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

¹There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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.” ³Jesus answered and said to him, “**Verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “**verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter 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 marvel 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 cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” ¹¹“Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.” ¹²“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” ¹³“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven.” ¹⁴“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,” ¹⁵“that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” ¹⁷“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” ¹⁸“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” ¹⁹“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” ²⁰“For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.” ²¹“But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” John 2.24-John 3.1-21, NKJV

The passage we have just read follows immediately from where Phil left off last week. Jesus has just performed the sign of cleansing the temple, literally reclaiming his Father’s house on the behalf of those to whom it legitimately belonged. The John notes these words:

²⁴“But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.”

Now John tells us this to give us an insight into Jesus’ frame of mind, and then Jesus has a night-time, clandestine visit from a Pharisee named Nicodemus. His name gives us a clue as to this man’s calibre and pedigree. His Hellenistic name is Nico-demos which means conqueror (Nico) of the people (demos). John describes this man as “ruler” (NKJV) (Greek “archōn” first or chief, hence leader) of the Jews. This man is most likely a member of the Jewish aristocracy as well as being a key member of one of the most powerful political and religious parties in the First Century Palestine, the Pharisees.

You Must Be Born Again

John 2:24-John 3:1-24, NKJV

Paul Bailey

The Pharisees were a group of influential Jews active in Palestine from 2nd century BCE through 1st century CE; they advocated and adhered to strict observance of the Sabbath rest, purity rituals, tithing, and food restrictions based on the Hebrew Scriptures and on later traditions.

According to the Jewish Encyclopaedia "The Pharisees formed a league or brotherhood of their own ("ḥaburah"), admitting only those who, in the presence of three members, pledged themselves to the strict observance of Levitical purity, to the avoidance of closer association with the 'Am ha-Arez (the ignorant and careless boor), to the scrupulous payment of tithes and other imposts due to the priest, the Levite, and the poor, and to a conscientious regard for vows and for other people's property (Dem. ii. 3; Tosef., Dem. ii. 1). They called their members "ḥaberim" (brothers), while they passed under the name of "Perishaya," or "Perushim."¹

The Jewish encyclopaedia continues, "The aim and object of the Law, according to Pharisaic principles, are the training of man to a full realization of his responsibility to God and to the consecration of life by the performance of its manifold duties: the one is called "'ol malkut shamayim" (the yoke of God's Kingship) and the other "'ol hamizwot" (the yoke of His commandments). Every morning and evening the Jew takes both upon himself when reciting the "Shema" (Ber. ii. 2). **The Torah preaches: Take upon yourselves the yoke of God's Kingdom; let the fear of God be your judge and arbiter, and deal with one another according to the dictates of love**" (Sifre, Deut. 323)."²

What John tells us in the phrase, "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews..." is that Nicodemus was a man of tremendous breeding and spiritual and political substance. He was not one of the normal "hangers-on" or "wannabes" who would wait around for a private audience with the exciting new radical Rabbi for Nazareth. This man was a serious man of immense, wealth, breeding, intelligence and sagacity, who by his very presence, demanded serious attention and consideration.

Then John tells us that Nicodemus gives Jesus the following salutation: "'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'" Notice Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee and Jewish aristocrat calls Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth (who, according to Nicodemus' peers, is of questionable birth and reputation) rabbi. Nicodemus sees the signs and recognizes God's presence at work in this Jesus.

Now please get the picture, Nicodemus (aristocrat, leader and Pharisee) has made time in his very busy schedule to come and see Jesus at night, a time that is likely to be relaxed and conducive to deep theological and political discussion. To the casual observer if there is a "wannabe" in this scene it is Jesus, new sensation from Nazareth. Consider with me also that fact that if you are going to launch a new ministry, one that is likely to have a dramatic impact of the future destiny of First Century Palestine Nicodemus is a good man to have on your side; speak about 'friends in high places'

¹ Jewish Encyclopaedia <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/pharisees>

² Jewish Encyclopaedia <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/pharisees>

You Must Be Born Again

John 2:24-John 3:1-24, NKJV

Paul Bailey

on paper if Jesus can handle this right he could be connected to the epicentre of Jewish religious and political power in a single meeting. How would you play it?

Jesus does spend time in small talk, he penetrates to the heart of the matter and says **“Verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** Let’s not waste time here Jesus, don’t gently warm up to the subject... Just launch forth!

Those of us who are used to reading this passage and are familiar with the phrase “born again” are at risk of losing the deep and sudden impact of this phrase. As I have indicated Nicodemus is a high-born aristocratic and pious Jew who is leading member of one of the strictest and morally scrupulous sects of the Jewish religion. It is very likely that he has a pedigree (family tree) that can be traced back through the exile to the earliest patriarchs of his tribe. This man could not have a nobler birth and Jesus, the carpenter’s son says to him **“Verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** Notice Jesus does not tell Nicodemus to change his theological perspective, or his political views or allegiances, he does not tell him to find a new rabbi or join a new synagogue, take another course or earn another degree; he does not tell him to make a Nazarite vow or make a special pilgrimage to touch a holy relic; he does not tell him to make an offering or to see a priest. Jesus says to Nicodemus that the whole substratum or foundation of his existence and ground of his being is false. Jesus says to him, that if he wants to see God’s kingdom, he must be born again.

Why would Jesus say this? Was Jesus being argumentative? Was he trying to humble the humiliated? Was he, to use the colloquialism, “rubbing his face in it?” I do not for a second believe that Jesus was playing games of any kind with Nicodemus, who is less than a believing disciple but is nonetheless a serious seeker. Jesus was penetrating to the heart of Nicodemus’ ultimate concern. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus lived his life under two yokes **“'ol malkut shamayim”** (the yoke of God’s Kingship) and the other **“'ol hamizwot”** (the yoke of His commandments).” This was a man who lived for the kingdom of YHWH. The full realization of God’s kingdom was his ultimate concern. Earlier I shared with you from the Jewish Encyclopedia, that Pharisees believed that **“The Torah preaches: Take upon yourselves the yoke of God’s Kingdom; let the fear of God be your judge and arbiter, and deal with one another according to the dictates of love”** (Sifre, Deut. 323).”

Far from being rude to Nicodemus Jesus addressed himself to Nicodemus’ ultimate concern: namely seeing the Kingdom of God. Jesus explains to Nicodemus that the only way to fully interact and engage in God’s rule is to be born again.

⁴“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?”

I think that Nicodemus is using sarcasm to recover from the shock of Jesus’ penetrating insight but what he is really asking is “What is being born again?”

⁵Jesus answered, **“verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”** ⁶**“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the**

You Must Be Born Again

John 2.24-John 3.1-24, NKJV

Paul Bailey

Spirit is spirit. ⁷“Do not marvel 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 cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Firstly, let me say there is a real danger that the new birth or being “born again” is reduced to mere sacramentalism, where particular religious rituals are believed to bestow grace or blessings to believers. When Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, you must be born of water and the Spirit, he is saying more than you need to take another ritual washing. I believe that Jesus is referring to a radical inner transformation that is initiated by God’s Spirit. It is not simply a cleansing of the physical body that prepares one to take part in the activities of the physical temple: it is a spiritual intra-personal cleansing that can only be described as a regeneration or a rebirth. Just as in chapter 2 Jesus is the Lord who cleanses the physical in chapter 3 he is the Lord who, in the power of the Spirit, uses the water of the living word to cleanse the inner temple of the human spirit (this of course is the real temple).

Christians of all ages have used this scripture to point to the NT experience of water-and-Spirit baptism. The question is, is this a legitimate application of this passage? Where is the textual warrant for this? The key, that connect Nicodemus’ story to the comments of John in verses 16-21 is verses 14-15 ¹⁴“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵“that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” What Jesus is referring to is an incident that took place in Numbers 21. The people of Israel disbelieved in God’s ability to provide for them and grumbled: the Bible says ⁶“So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. ⁷Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸Then the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.”

The people were punished by YHWH for the ultimate sin: unbelief. It was faith and repentance embodied in the act of looking at lifted bronze serpent (an instrument of punishment and death) resulted in healing. In the same way Jesus is to be lifted up on another instrument of punishment and death and looking to him will result in healing not just of the body but of the soul and spirit.

It is the use of symbol for salvation that provides that warrant that connects Christian baptism to this verse as part of the experience of being born again. Just as the symbol of the bronze serpent was a symbol of God’s salvation in the same way baptism is a union with Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection.

So then "Christian baptism is in essence the representation of a man's renewal through his participation by means of the power of the Holy Spirit in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,

You Must Be Born Again

John 2:24-John 3:1-24, NKJV

Paul Bailey

and therewith the representation of man's association with Christ, with the covenant of grace which is concluded and realised in Him, and with the fellowship of His Church."³

When this is accompanied by inner repentance and faith this is what John and the Apostles understood as being born again.

What this encounter means is that realizing the kingdom is a result of the Spirit's activity. A person cannot remain who they are and as they are and embrace the kingdom. Entering the kingdom is not a matter of electing a new course of study or choosing to vote for another political part. It is a dramatic wrench out of one reality and into another. Jesus compares this wrench to the experience of being born: being born again. Birth is a dangerous and traumatic experience in which a fetus forces its way out of one plane existence and presses his or her way into another. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again he is saying night time discussions will never be enough. The must be a radical regeneration that is an impartation of the God-life from above.

To see God's kingdom God must work supernaturally and we must respond in the kind of faith that takes us to the very edges of our reality. This is way Jesus says, ¹³"No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵"that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. ¹⁸"He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

Jesus is saying to us, like he said to Nicodemus, if we are really serious about seeing the Kingdom it going to take nothing less than a rebirth that comes from God's all-powerful Spirit. Following Jesus into the life of the kingdom is not an intellectual conversion to a new idea, or a personal change to a new lifestyle choice it is a radical re-birthing; it is a "do-it-all-over-again" demand and unless you are willing to make this leap into another reality you cannot see or enter the kingdom. Just as no one chooses to be born but simply find his/herself in the womb and has to fight his/her way to birth. In the same way a person who is born of the Spirit is being carried by a power greater than the entire universe. "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." If this sounds scary, it is. If this sounds overwhelming you're right. If this sounds life-changing, you're not wrong. If think this means that reality as you know it will change forever; you're bang on the money. Jesus said ⁶"That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again."

³ Karl Barth *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, trans. Ernest A Payne (London SCM, 1948) p. 9, cited in Millard Erickson *Christian Theology*, p. 1101 Baker Book House 1990.