

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

Christ Church, Crouch End Hill

Tel/ Fax: 020 8340 1566

No: 87

"Encounters with Jesus" 1- Nicodemus (Jan. 2011)

Brief Talk on John 3: 1– 18

General Introduction

Nicodemus was a religious man. He is referred to not just as teacher but "the teacher", pointing to his religious pre-eminence. If anyone knew the truth about God and God's people, surely it would be this man. Yet, for all of his religiosity, Nicodemus was not a fulfilled man. There was an emptiness within him that religion had not filled. He said: "Master, I have kept all of the rules and forms and rituals of our faith, but something is missing. Tell me what else I must do to fill this void."

Nicodemus was a powerful person for he belonged to the ruling class. Yet, for all of his power, Nicodemus did not have peace of mind.

Nicodemus was an educated man, yet his education had not brought him ultimate fulfilment. He had the right pedigree but that still did not fill the void in his heart.

Nicodemus... Whether educated or uneducated, Jew or Gentile, black or white, rich or poor, powerful or weak, religious or sinner - You must be born again.

Born again: The ancient Greek word translated again (another) can also be translated "from above." This is the sense in which John used this word in John 3:31 and in John 19:11 and 19:23. Either way, the meaning is essentially the same. To be born from above is to be born again.

" And to make his point Jesus points us back to an OT story from Numbers 21. The people of Israel rebelled against God and in judgment he sent poisonous snakes into the camp which would cause many Israelites to die. But God acted in mercy as well, and he told Moses to make a statue of a bronze snake and put it on a pole. So wherever the Israelites were bitten, they would look up at the pole and be healed. And Jesus says that his death on the cross will do a similar but much more profound thing.

Questions for discussions

Although Nicodemus is a so-called professional in religious matters, It seems a bit strange that Nicodemus comes to discuss these matters with Jesus who is younger than him, and is neither as educated, nor in as high a social position as himself.

1. (a) From what you see in this text, what are both the strong and weak points in the character of Nicodemus? (b) For what reasons might Nicodemus have come to Jesus at night?

2. Who might Nicodemus mean when he says “we” in verse 2 and who might Jesus be referring to when he uses the word “we” in verse 11? _____

3. (a) Why did Nicodemus visit Jesus? (b) List 6 spiritual truths stated by Jesus about himself in verses 13 through 18.

4. Nicodemus asks Jesus: “How can this (being born again) happen” (verse 9)? Explain in your own words what Jesus says to him in reply (verses 10-16).

Note: Eternal life therefore begins now. Jesus tells Nicodemus that if anyone is to participate in this eternal kingdom they must enter it here and now. What this exposes – to the shattering of human pride – is that by ourselves we are impotent to enter the kingdom of God. However privileged our birth, however religious or refined our nature, however pure our blood, however esteemed by other, however superior our achievements, entrance to God’s kingdom is barred to us. Apart from a thorough-going regeneration, a creation act of God, making us a new kind of person altogether through a new kind of birth, we cannot enter the kingdom, or even see it (3,7).

5. (a) What does it mean to be born of water and the Spirit (v.5)?
(b) What happens and what will be changed when somebody is born again (verses 3-8)?
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Note: Jesus speaks here of a total transformation. Verse 5: "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.'" So what does Jesus mean here? Well in verse 10, Jesus expects our theology professor to know the answer, so the answer probably lies in the OT. And it's possible that Jesus has in mind a passage like Ezekiel 36 vv 25-26: "I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you." Here the prophet Ezekiel is promising a time when we can be forgiven and washed clean totally from all the wrong things we have done. And Jesus is saying that time is here. It is possible now for our lives to be washed clean of all the things we have ever done wrong and will ever do wrong so that we can enter heaven. And it's not just a clean up act that Jesus is talking about. We're not just cleaned up and left to get on with it ourselves.

This transformation is in God's power. He is the one who actually cleans us up, gives us a fresh start and empowers us to live a new life in his power (By his Spirit). That is what it means to be born again. It is to be brought to life spiritually speaking by God himself. The new birth is something God does in us. Verse 6: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

6. When explaining the new birth, Jesus takes an example from Israel's journey in the wilderness, the incident where God sent venomous snakes to punish the sins of his people. Later on, however, God gave a remedy for this poison: whoever looked at the bronze snake hoisted by Moses, was saved (Num.21:4-9). What does that incident have in common with the death of Jesus on the cross? Think of as many similarities as possible (verses 13-16)
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7. (a) What does this incident in the Old Testament have to do with being born again? (b) In the Bible, the snake is almost always a symbol of Satan, God's adversary. Why do you think Jesus drew a parallel in this case between himself and the serpent (cf. 2 Corinth. 5:21)?
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Conclusion

It is the responsibility of all to believe in Jesus. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

How can the snake of Numbers 21:4-9 be a picture of the holy Jesus when Serpents are often used as pictures of evil in the Bible (Genesis 3:1-5 and Revelation 12:9)?

Moses' snake in Numbers 21 was made of bronze, and bronze is a metal associated with judgment in the Bible, because bronze must be made by passing it through the "fires" of judgment. So, a bronze snake does speak of sin, but of sin judged. In the same way Jesus, who knew no sin became sin for us on the cross, and our sin was judged in Him.

In the Numbers 21:4-9 account, the people were saved not by doing anything, but by simply looking to the bronze serpent. They had to trust that something as seemingly foolish as looking at such a thing would be sufficient to save them, and surely, some perished because they thought it too foolish to do such a thing.

As it says in Isaiah 45:22: "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other." We might be willing to do a hundred things to earn our salvation, but God commands us to only trust in Him - to turn to Him. The Lord looks for a definite response of faith in his claims: to take Him at His word and trust in His promises. Moreover, not to believe in Him would have momentous consequences as we are told in John 3:36: "... whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."