

JOHN 3:1-16

NEW BEGINNINGS

“Now 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 him, ‘Truly, truly, 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, ‘Truly, truly, 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 its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’

”“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹

You have undoubtedly at some point in life found yourself wishing you could begin again. Perhaps you became disappointed in your career, realising that you had not accomplished all that you would have hoped to accomplish. Perhaps you just had a heated argument with your spouse and in a fit of self-pity you groused to yourself about life would have been different if someone else had shared your life. Likely, you were disappointed and found yourself wishing you could start over in life.

We age, and aspirations that once glowed brightly fade into distant memories. Training and careers that at one time loomed large on our horizon fade into a past marked with multiplied regrets. It is somewhat amazing to note that wishing to begin again is not restricted to those who have attained advanced age. Youth are perhaps as prone to wish for another chance, a new beginning, as are their elders.

Life is a flowing stream and the moments go by quickly, never to be repeated. Life is defined by opportunities, many of which we create ourselves. Whether the opportunities are seized or missed is dependent upon our decisions at the time of opportunity. Seldom do we have a realistic expectation of beginning again. However, I am convinced that we can begin again. We can have a second chance. Especially can we have a second chance at life that will fulfil our inmost, often unspoken, desires.

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Life is to be lived boldly; we are created with an adventuresome spirit that longs to see what lies over the next mountain, always reaching for the next great challenge. It is only as we stifle that spirit of infectious curiosity and desire to find what lies beyond the next horizon that we become senescent and curiosity grows quiescent, dead at twenty-five and buried at eighty-five. There lies within each individual a “God-shaped” void that can be filled only through intimate knowledge of the True and Living God. Those who fill that void are equipped to live adventurously, exuberantly—living confidently and energetically, living a life that the Master described as “abundant” [see JOHN 10:10].

The message of life delivered through the Word of God has been entrusted to us as Christian so that we can quench the spiritual thirst of each person willing to receive the message we bear. A church of the Living God should be marked with a spirit of adventure as the congregation advances Christ’s Great Kingdom.

Jesus spoke of this life of adventure and joy on one occasion when He was approached by a Jewish leader. That interview Nicodemus sought set the stage for the transformation of his life, and his exchange with the Master became the setting for what is undoubtedly the best known of all Bible verses. Join me in a study of the account that the Evangelist John provides in the third chapter of the Gospel bearing his name.

PLAYING IT SAFE IN THE RELIGION OF THE FATHERS — “Now 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 him, ‘Truly, truly, 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, ‘Truly, truly, 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 its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’”

In the text, Nicodemus is clearly presented as a man who was “playing it safe.” The text identifies him as a “ruler of the Jews,” a member of the Jewish Ruling Council, the highest legal, legislative, judicial body among the Jews at that time. One did not become a member of the Sanhedrin through taking risks; rather, one was elevated to this position through avoiding threats to those holding power.

Just so, one does not usually advance in politics through taking risks. Since churches tend to become political in their governance with the passage of time, it is perhaps inevitable that ultimately people are elevated to leadership to be caretakers of *what is*, instead of becoming dreamers of *what can be*. People often complain about the “lack of vision,” but visionaries are usually shunned or stoned in their lifetime for espousing their dreams and working to transform what is into what can be.

Thoreau was undoubtedly correct when he wrote that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” His conclusion is that they “go to the grave with the song still in them.” Though we cannot advocate shirking responsibility, neither dare we argue that we must resign ourselves to marching in place for the duration of days. Those whom we call great are men and women who live boldly, pushing the boundaries of life as we know it.

What was Nicodemus' purpose in engineering a secret meeting with the Master? Jesus constituted a problem for the religious rulers of the Jews. He challenged them, publicly holding them accountable for the truth they professed to guard. They were increasingly agitated because He did not recognise their importance and failed to acknowledge the validity of their multiplied rituals. Consequently, they were intent on getting rid of Him because He threatened their continued hold on power.

John records, "The Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God" [JOHN 5:18]. Later, he writes, "After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him" [JOHN 7:1]. Jesus' mere existence threatened the Jewish leaders.

Jesus had spoken of the challenge of righteousness, of the need to be disciplined for those following Him; and most of those who casually followed turned away and no longer followed Him [see JOHN 6:60-66]. He did not make them feel good about themselves and He admonished them to excel in godliness. "After this," the leadership of the Jews were determined to kill Him. He did not play by their rules and His message was far too demanding. Rather than face His call to follow the teaching blessed by the Father, the power brokers sought to rid themselves of the One they saw as the root of their discomfiture. Nothing much as changed in the ensuing two millennia.

Perhaps Nicodemus was truly curious to understand Jesus' teaching. More likely, he sought affirmation of his own position. From my reading of the pericope, I believe that Nicodemus was attempting to build his self-esteem—to make himself feel good about who he was and about what he taught.

Aware of the discussions among the religious leaders, Nicodemus dared not approach Jesus openly. Instead, he came to Him covertly, at night to interview the one who at once intrigued him and repelled him. Actually, we do not know the precise reason Nicodemus approach the Lord. Having opened his conversation with fawning flattery, the teacher in Israel never quite got around to saying what was on his mind.

"Rabbi," began Nicodemus, "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." He addresses Jesus as "Rabbi," acknowledging that He was recognised as a teacher in Israel. Then, he continues by conceding that Jesus has been sent from God. Whether Nicodemus spoke from conviction at this point or whether he was being disingenuous is uncertain. What is certain is that Jesus treated his approach as an opportunity to draw the Jewish sage out of the safety of his sheltered world and into the excitement of real life.

Jesus did this by addressing the truly great need in Nicodemus' life. One recent translation has captured the force of Jesus words quite clearly. "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."² Jesus used a word that could have a double meaning. The word *ánōthen* could mean either "again" or "from above."

This is a favourite technique employed by John in the Fourth Gospel, and it is ignored in almost all translations available to us in this day. He uses the word five times [JOHN 3:3, 7; 3:31; 19:11 and 23]. In the latter three cases, the context makes clear that Jesus meant "from above." Here, it could mean either, but the primary meaning intended by Jesus is "from above." Jesus was speaking of a second birth—a spiritual rebirth.

² The NET Bible, First Edition, Biblical Studies Press (Logos Electronic Edition, 2006)

Nicodemus apparently understood it the other way, which explains his reply, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus was locked into the fleeting faux safety of this present, dying world, and he therefore failed to grasp immediately what Jesus was saying.

If I am generous in my estimate of Nicodemus, I would say that he accepted Jesus’ words literally, failing to see that instead of speaking of iterative physical births, Jesus was speaking of a spiritual birth necessary to enter into the Messiah’s Kingdom. More likely, Nicodemus was incredulous, not accepting that transformation of life at the spiritual level was reasonable. Nicodemus was locked into religion and thus failed to be open to life as God intended man to have. For Nicodemus, the practise of his religion was more important than the knowledge of God. He was trapped in a “safe” religion.

Many professed Christians live “safe lives.” They go to church instead of being the church. Being the church is messy; it requires that we involve ourselves in the lives of fellow believers, encouraging each one to explore how best to serve God while holding one another responsible for godliness. Going to church costs nothing emotionally, and demands little of us intellectually. There is no responsibility imposed in going to church, but being the church makes us individually and collectively responsible for one another.

Opting to live “safe lives,” worship becomes an expression of who we are, instead of being a discovery of who God is. Professed Christians choosing to live “safely” seek a religion that makes them feel good about themselves instead of embracing worship as the spontaneous event arising from the knowledge that they have been in the presence of the True and Living God. Ritual, whether consisting of cant mandated through august and imposing rites with roots in antiquity or whether expressed in lively choruses repeated to the throbbing beat of modern instrumentation, can never be an effective or satisfying substitute for living in the presence of the True and Living God. Worship is not a duty, it is an opportunity; and service to the Lord God is a privilege of the highest order.

Tragically, what is presented as modern worship often becomes a spiritual narcotic to dull the disquiet arising from frenetic lives instead of giving the worshipper spiritual strength to stand firm against the enemy, instead of encouraging the fearful, or instead of consoling the saint who has been injured in the course of spiritual conflict. Consequently, too many preachers have permitted themselves to become paid employees speaking as directed by the “official board,” instead of being spokesmen speaking according to the will of the Lord God of Heaven and earth.

Has worship for you become a mere formality—a series of activities so routine that you perform the act without thinking? Does worship consist of what you do? Or is worship defined by the One whom you meet? Has service to God become mere duty? Or do you realise that you are participating in the greatest task ever assigned to mortal man—the task of declaring the life-giving message of God’s grace to sinners who are perishing and sharing in the glory of the Living God?

Whatever became of men who lived courageously with a godly purpose indelibly marking their lives? Whatever became of women whose lives were distinguished by quiet dignity and power that grew out of time spent in the presence of the Lord God? Where is the congregation that fears nothing save evil in their midst and is determined to stand firm in the Faith once delivered to the saints? Have we become mere practitioners of religion? Or are we fellow workers together with God, holding evil at bay, glorifying God and bringing many souls to glory?

Dear people, we can attempt to have a safe religion, but we cannot know the power of God until we venture forth into a glorious world where He reigns as Master. We can never know His glory until we begin anew, rejecting the staid, mundane and pedestrian world of a safe religion that threatens not only our eternal welfare, but the eternal safety of those whom we love and for whom we are responsible.

EXPOSED BY THE MASTER — “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’”

Nicodemus appears incredulous at this point. He hears what Jesus says, but he seems unable or unwilling to process the information. Consequently, Jesus rebukes him sharply. Notice in particular the tenth verse. “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” In verse one, Nicodemus was identified as “a ruler of the Jews.” Here, Jesus calls him “*the* teacher of Israel.” This indicates that he was more than one of many members of the Jewish Ruling Council. He was respected and revered as a scholar of religious studies.

Notice another significant point raised in the dialogue. Jesus shifts to the plural when he refers to His own teaching. “*We* speak of what *we* know... *We* bear witness to what *we* have seen...” Of whom is the Master speaking? What should be abundantly clear is that Jesus was not trying to be diplomatic, to soothe wounded feelings; He was drawing a distinction between Nicodemus and those identified with his position, and those represented by the truths that Jesus spoke. His words, deliberately chosen, were divisive and confrontational. Nicodemus had to understand that he was on the outside.

Perhaps Jesus was responding to the flattery Nicodemus had used when he said, “We know that you are a teacher come from God,” but it is more likely that the Lord was saying that the prophets, Moses and everyone who delivered the message of life through the knowledge of God were part of a great Body of witnesses spanning time and culture.

Whenever a preacher stands to deliver the message of Christ, holding forth the Word of the Lord and faithfully speaking according to the Spirit, that preacher is part of a great fellowship that extends throughout the ages all the way back to Moses and Abraham and Enoch and ultimately Adam who looked for the promised Redeemer. In the same way, you, as a child of God, when you tell another of the life offered in Christ the Lord, are part of a great, unseen fellowship. You become one with the Master, speaking according to His grace and standing with the Apostles and the Prophets. Whenever we serve the Lord Jesus, we are not alone; rather we are part of a great host of witnesses.

What a powerful testimony is given by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” [HEBREWS 12:22-24].

Nicodemus was a Jew, and a teacher of the Jews, and yet he was excluded from that great host of which Jesus spoke. Just so, one may be a church member and even a teacher within a congregation, and yet be excluded from the Assembly of the Firstborn. Jesus cautioned His disciples, “Do not rejoice ... that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in Heaven” [LUKE 10:20]. Those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life [see REVELATION 21:27] are included among those of whom Jesus spoke in our text.

Jesus exposed the fraudulent nature of Nicodemus’ religion. Though the experience was doubtless painful for Nicodemus, it was necessary if he would find life. Jesus was actually showing mercy by speaking so pointedly, for He was drawing Nicodemus out of the safety of his religion and into the possibility of new life.

Transitions, whether in employment or in attitude, are often painful. Unquestionably, the new birth to life in Christ can be painful. That birth will require us to release what was in order to seize what is. The past must have no further claim on the one who would be born of the Spirit. Such a transition may be agonizing to the one who has invested much of himself or herself in the life that is passing away.

It is not as if Nicodemus should have misunderstood. Jesus did not mislead him. The Master had clearly distinguished between physical birth and spiritual birth. However, since the teacher in Israel did misunderstand, it provided opportunity for the Lord to instruct him, and because John records the incident in his Gospel, all mankind is able to discover the mind of the Master.

It is important to emphasise that at the time of his approach to the Master, Nicodemus showed no evidence of being alive to God. Though he had advanced in observance of his religion, he was unaware of the vitality of the Spirit. This is not to say that he had no desire to know God, but it is simply an acknowledgement that he gives no evidence of knowing God in this interview with Jesus. We would not be remiss to say that as is true for many professed Christians, Nicodemus was religious, but lost.

How many professed Christians are lost! The evidence for this dreadful malady infecting the churches is witnessed in the numbers whose lives are unchanged though they have submitted to baptism as a ritual or joined a church. These poor creatures recite prayers, go to church, perform prescribed rituals of their particular communion, but they are essentially as they were before they began the rituals. For them, church is a political organisation to be controlled for their personal benefit, or it is a place to perform duties that they imagine to be necessary for delivering them from the consequence of their sin.

It is easy to sit in discussion groups, to sit in a study and to read books, it is easy to discuss the intellectual truth of Christianity; but the essential need for each one who professes to be born from above is to experience the power of Christianity. Christianity is not something to be discussed—it is life to be experienced. It is certainly important to have an intellectual grasp of Christian truth; but it is still more important to have a vital experience of the power of Jesus Christ. When a man receives treatment from a doctor, when he has to have an operation, when he is prescribed medication, he does not need to know the anatomy of the human body, the scientific effect of the anaesthetic, the way in which the drug works on his body, in order to be cured. Ninety-nine men out of every hundred accept the cure without being able to say how it was brought about. There is a sense in which Christianity is like that. At its heart, there is a mystery, but it is not the mystery of intellectual appreciation; it is the mystery of redemption.

Jesus illustrated the need for a new beginning by speaking of an incident that would have been instantly recognised by Nicodemus. Jesus spoke of the serpent in the wilderness. Perhaps you recall the account recorded in **NUMBERS 21:4-9**. God judged His people when they grumbled by sending venomous snakes to torment them. Make no mistake, these serpents killed anyone who was bitten. The people quickly realised that they were the source of their own misery, and so they confessed their sin and asked God for relief. God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent coiled about a pole. Whenever a person was bitten, if they would but look at the serpent, they would not die.

The stricken people could not formulate a medication to avoid the sentence of death. Though such efforts would have given the people something to do, the efforts would have proven futile. If we heed the advice of many professed saints of God today, the people who were bitten would have been encouraged to make themselves better people. However, they would have nevertheless died. All the efforts to feel good about themselves and all the efforts to improve themselves would have only resulted in death. Neither were the people encouraged to pray to the snake on a pole or even to God.

This particular issue demands careful consideration. Those who are dead in trespasses and sins are incapable of praying; praying is only for believers. Perhaps you will recall several of the Proverbs and speak to this sobering truth.

“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.”

“The LORD is far from the wicked,
but he hears the prayer of the righteous.”

“If one turns away his ear from hearing the law,
even his prayer is an abomination.”

[**PROVERBS 15:8, 29; 28:9**]

The people were not encouraged to pray, but rather to look to the serpent on the pole. Just so, sinners are not encouraged to pray, but to look to the Son of God for salvation. We can only encourage those outside of the Saviour to look to Christ Jesus the Lord, believing that He died because of their sin and was raised for their justification. The Word promises: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10**].

Notice especially that the people who were dying in the desert were not told to band together and fight the deadly serpents. Donald Barnhouse has perceptively written: “If the incident had been met after the fashion of our day, there would have been a rush to incorporate the Society for the Extermination of the Fiery Serpents, popularly known as SEFS; and there would have been badges for the coat lapel, cards for district workers, secretaries for organization branches, pledge cards, and mass rallies. There would have been a publication office and a weekly journal to tell of the progress of the work. There would have been photographs of heaps of serpents that had been killed by the faithful workers. The fact that the serpents had already infected their victims would have been played down, and the membership lists would have been pushed to the utmost.

“Let us accompany one of the zealous workers as he might take a pledge card into the tent of a stricken victim. The man had been bitten and the poison had already affected his limbs. He lies in feverish agony [for the phrase “fiery serpents” refers to the effects produced in the ones bitten, not in the colour of the snakes], the glaze of death already coming to his eyes. The zealous member of the Society for the Extermination of Fiery Serpents tells him of all that has been done to combat the serpents, and urges the man to join—as a life member if possible (fee \$10,000), a sustaining member (fee \$1,000), contributing member (fee \$25), or annual member (anything the organizer can get). The dying victim fumbles in his pocketbook for money and then takes a pen in hand. His fingers are held by the worker who helps him form his signature on the pledge and membership card, and the man signs in full—and dies.”³

Let us indeed mop the fevered brow. Let us comfort the stricken patient. But let us also recognise that the cure of sin’s sting lies only in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the promises of God that accompany His sacrifice. Let us declare the truth that death lies in man’s best efforts, but salvation is of the Lord.

LIFE AS GOD INTENDED — “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Eternal life is more than length of days. Eternal life speaks of a new quality of life—a new way of living based upon a new relationship with the True and Living God. Eternal life demands a new beginning, just as surely as physical life demands a birth. The one born from above is alive in Christ and knows it as surely as that one knows that he possesses physical life.

God never intended that we should content ourselves with being merely religious. Instead, as the Westminster Divines cogently wrote so many years ago, He intended that we should know Him and enjoy Him forever. The Word of God teaches us to “walk by the Spirit” [GALATIANS 5:25], to walk in the works God prepared for us beforehand [EPHESIANS 2:10], to “walk in love” [EPHESIANS 5:2] and to “walk as children of the light” [EPHESIANS 5:8]. In other words, Christ redeemed us “to the praise of His glory” [EPHESIANS 1:12], and the New Birth equips us to enter into this holy walk. Christ promises new life indeed, and if we possess that life, we know it.

May I speak quite pointedly to struggles I have witnessed among some professed brothers in recent days. They have concluded that the institution is greater than the Founder, that the church is of greater importance than the Saviour. In their estimate, the form is more significant than the function. Consequently, they conclude that the ends justify their means. However, such teaching is utterly foreign to the Word of God.

I have frequently pondered something that Charles Spurgeon wrote following the struggles leading to his censure by the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Spurgeon wrote, “I have taken a deep interest in the struggles of the orthodox brethren; but I have never advised those struggles, nor entertained the slightest hope of their success. My course has been of another kind. As soon as I saw, or thought I saw, that error had become firmly established, I did not deliberate, but quitted the body at once. Since then my one counsel has been, ‘Come ye out from among them.’”⁴

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, **God’s Remedy** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1954), 219, cited in James Montgomery Boice, **The Gospel of John: An Expositional Commentary** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2005) 222

⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Attempts at the Impossible,” *The Sword and Trowel*, December 1888, http://www.spurgeon.org/s_and_t/dg12.htm, accessed 18 August 2007

When men tolerate error and when those professing to love the Master love the praise of men more than His approval, those who would honour the Lord must not hesitate. The godly man or the godly woman must immediately leave that affiliation, declaring himself or herself firmly in league with the Master. Hesitation in standing with Him reveals more about the character of those refusing to so stand than all their professions and protestations against being categorised by others. Those who love righteousness will live righteously and do what is right. Those who love the praise of men will do all that is possible to maintain that praise.

Life as God intended is not necessarily an easy life, nor will those living as God intended often enjoy the approval of this world. However, they will enjoy the blessing of Heaven and walk in the certain knowledge that God is glorified through their actions. Only let all who name the Name of the Lord live godly and righteous lives.

Are you born from above? Do you have the evidence of salvation residing in your life? God sent His Son to die because of your sin. All that remains for you to know the life He intended is to believe the message of life. Look to Christ, believing that He gave Himself because of your sin and that He has been raised to declare you righteous before the Father. Believe this message and enter into the life God gives to all who are willing to receive it. Amen.