

# VI

## Born of the Spirit

*“In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’ ‘How can a man be born again when he is old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.’”*

(JOHN 3:3-5)

A book of meditations about the Person and work of the Holy Spirit would be incomplete if attention was not given to what is related in John 3 about the matter of rebirth, as it came up in a conversation between the Lord and Nicodemus. The Lord Jesus had a rather remarkable talk with the Pharisee Nicodemus. Through this conversation we receive deeper insight into the key matter of rebirth and, more importantly, the work of the Holy Spirit in this respect.

The passage in verse 7, “you must be born again,” is perhaps one of the most-used and most-quoted texts of Scripture. A passage of such fame generally starts to lead a life of its own, and becomes almost like a slogan for a single cause. Some movements have based their whole theology on this single aspect of being reborn. We will not deny the importance of this aspect, but must seek to understand it properly.

### **The identity of Jesus of Nazareth**

In order for us to determine what this passage means, it is important that we look at this passage in its *context*. We learn that the purpose of this

meeting was not to engage in a theoretical, theological discussion about regeneration. The discussion was (and still is) very concretely about the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

For Nicodemus comes with a question (verse 2). It is a veiled question. Like a true member of the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus is a careful and diplomatic man. But nevertheless it is a very obvious question.

The fact that Nicodemus comes at night is often interpreted as resulting from fear of his fellow-Pharisees, but this need not be the case. Sometimes the best time for a deeper and longer discussion is at night, when there is peace and quiet. Nicodemus really wants to get to the bottom of things here, and needs the time and privacy with the Lord Jesus to do so.

### ***The real question***

What exactly is his question? We find in verse 2, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” By “we” (plural) Nicodemus must mean himself and many of his fellow Pharisees. Not everyone might perhaps be open about it like Nicodemus is here, but everyone, including the Jewish rulers, knew that Jesus was special. His signs and wonders were too convincing to dismiss him lightly. The Lord Jesus indeed takes the “we” to mean the Pharisees and the other members of the ruling council. See verse 11, where we find: you, people (plural), do not accept our testimony.

Nicodemus is asking: who are you really? Surely Jesus is someone who came from God, a miracle worker, a prophet of sorts, but is he the one whom the Jews ardently expect, the great Messiah? By leaving the question unspoken, Nicodemus actually emphasizes it. Note that the Lord does not directly answer the unspoken question either. He does not say: I am, or am not, the Messiah. Instead he indicates that the matter goes much deeper: no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (verse 3).

### ***Rebirth: a divine working***

To come to the right conclusion about Jesus Christ, much more is needed than any human reasoning or conclusion. What is needed is nothing less than rebirth, and this is what a person cannot do on his own. It is remarkable that many have taken this passage to demonstrate the need for a personal human decision and commitment. But that is what this very passage actually denies. We learn that rebirth is nothing less than a mighty work

of God through the Holy Spirit, which is needed by everyone who will enter the kingdom of heaven.

We will look at three aspects here. This passage emphasizes the necessity of rebirth. It acknowledges the mystery of rebirth. And it rejoices in the simplicity of rebirth. The prevailing line is that rebirth is not a human achievement, but it is the working of the Holy Spirit in us. Without the Spirit, the bride cannot be reborn and adorned for the Lord.

### ***Rebirth: a very serious matter***

Nicodemus comes with an unspoken question. At this point in his ministry our Lord's emphasis in his teaching is on the coming of the kingdom of heaven. See, for example, Matthew 4:17, "From that time on Jesus began to preach: repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." He therefore responds to Nicodemus in this vein as well (verse 3), "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of heaven unless he is born again."

The words "I tell you the truth" are the translation of "Amen, amen." Whenever the Lord uses these words, he indicates that what follows is not only true, but is of the *utmost importance*. The Lord Jesus repeats the double amen (verse 5) to counter Nicodemus' rather silly response: how can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born? The Lord then strongly indicates that this rebirth is a very serious matter.

The double amen even has the quality of emphasizing what precedes it. Nicodemus can say that the Jewish leaders know that Jesus has come from God, but little do they know how true it is. And they will never begin to see how true it is, and so enter the kingdom of God, unless they are born again.

Notice that the Lord uses two different verbs here. In verse 3 we read: no one can *see* the kingdom of God, unless he is born again. Seeing is here meant in the sense of "discerning." In verse 5, after Nicodemus' light-hearted retort, the Lord tightens up the matter: no one can *enter* the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. To see the kingdom, even more, to enter that kingdom and be saved, one definitely needs to be born again. There is here not a mere repetition but a progress of thought. Rebirth is vital; do not make light of it.

### ***Supernatural***

At first the Lord Jesus used only the expression: if someone is not born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of heaven. However, the verb can also be

translated as born *from above* (as the NIV text note indicates). The idea of being born from *above* is apparently not close at all to what Nicodemus understands, for he takes it in a natural and earthly manner. Therefore the Lord Jesus has to explain further that being born anew means being born of “water and the Spirit.” Rebirth is not a natural matter, but something that is *supernatural*.

This is precisely one of the words used by the *Canons of Dort* to describe regeneration, “(III/IV, Article 12), “This conversion is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, the making alive, so highly spoken of in the Scriptures, which God works in us without us. But this regeneration is by no means brought about only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a mode of operation that, after God has done his part, it remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not regenerated, converted or not converted. It is, however, clearly a *supernatural*, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvelous, mysterious and inexplicable work.”

### ***Is Nicodemus serious?***

How are we to regard the response of Nicodemus to Christ’s first statement about rebirth? Nicodemus talks about literally entering again into the mother’s womb to be born. Surely the Lord Jesus cannot mean that! Is Nicodemus trying to be funny, or is he serious? Or is he, perhaps, just plain ignorant? In verse 10 we read that the Lord says: you are Israel’s teacher, and do you not *understand* these things? Is it a lack of understanding? There is a sense of reproach in the Lord’s question.

All this prompts us to ask in general: did the Jewish leaders really not understand anything about rebirth, regeneration, or renewal? Did they know of its necessity? I think it is safe to say that they did know. They knew about the necessity of a new heart (Psalm 51). They knew about the coming new covenant when the law would be written on the hearts of God’s people (Jeremiah 31). The Jews referred to a proselyte (a convert to Judaism) as a child newly-born. If you wanted to be a part of the covenant people, you had to be like a new-born child. A whole new beginning must be made. If Nicodemus knew all this, why did he respond in such a flippant manner?

At bottom the matter is not so difficult to understand. Birth is the beginning of physical life outside the womb. Rebirth is the beginning of spiritual life. As we are born to live in this world, we must be reborn to enter God’s kingdom and to function in this world as God’s children. Did Nicodemus not know of this basic truth?

## ***A tactical move?***

Various answers are given to these questions. Maybe Nicodemus was deliberately trying to feign ignorance because he did not like the direction of the conversation. This is a common tactic: pretend you do not understand. Perhaps as a Pharisee he did not like to be addressed as someone who has to make a whole new start like a proselyte. Or maybe he was trying to say that an entirely new start is impossible in life. After all, we carry with us all kinds of baggage, from our upbringing, our past, and our life's flow, and it is impossible to start over. It's nice to talk about rebirth, but it is really an impossible matter, like coming again out of your mother's womb. Anyway, it is clear that Nicodemus cannot really work with this concept of rebirth.

What about you? Can you work with it? Do you become uncomfortable or uncertain when it is said that you have to be born again, and when the necessity of rebirth is stressed? Does this bring us suddenly into uncharted waters, into the open ocean of which we do not know where our vessel will go? Rebirth is taught in the Scriptures, confessed in our creeds, but does it also function in our lives?

## ***Born of water and the Spirit***

The Lord Jesus does not retreat one inch because of Nicodemus' reaction. Typically, he makes his previous statement even clearer and stronger. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit! Nicodemus may not evade the issue. Do not use any debating tactics here to get away from the real point. It is not a physical matter, as Nicodemus can well know. If it must be said more plainly and clearly, let it be so: unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

What does it mean to be born of water and the Spirit? Again we must consider the context. John the Baptist was at that very time baptizing with water. What did this baptism with water mean? It was symbolic of the washing away of sins. It meant also that one entered a new life, a life that is dedicated to the service of God. The Jews knew all about water baptism. They knew of washings and cleansings in the law. They had a special proselyte baptism which was required (besides circumcision) for any heathen to become like a Jew and have access to the temple of the LORD.

## ***An entirely new life***

Nicodemus knew that baptism with water meant beginning a whole new life, not in a physical sense, but in a deeply spiritual manner. To make sure that Nicodemus did fully understand, the Lord added born of water *and the Spirit*. John the Baptist was the one who first very clearly spoke to the Jews about the fact that baptism with the Spirit was necessary. The water is an outward sign of what must take place internally. And then John the Baptist (see John 1:29-36) clearly and unmistakably identified Jesus of Nazareth as the one who would do this great work: bring about the forgiveness of sins and grant renewal of life.

Nicodemus asked: who are you really? Jesus answered: John the Baptist identified very clearly who I am, but you need rebirth to grasp it in faith. You need a whole new beginning, a new way of looking at things, and a totally unobstructed openness to my words and works by the working of the Holy Spirit so that you may confess me and embrace me as the Messiah of God.

The Lord Jesus adds a simple but important sentence: flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. We are not talking about our natural birth into the flesh, but we are talking about spiritual birth in the kingdom. This birth can only be brought about by the Holy Spirit.

## ***Rebirth is mysterious***

Perhaps the Lord saw that Nicodemus was surprised at what he was saying. In any case he adds: you should not be surprised at my saying: you must be born again! It is not as if Nicodemus is now being confronted with something never spoken of before. But there is an element which is not easily understood: this rebirth by the Spirit is mysterious.

The Lord Jesus uses the example of the wind. This is possible, as we saw earlier, because in the original the word for Spirit and wind are the same. The Spirit is in a certain sense like the wind: you hear it, but cannot see it. You feel it, but you do not know its origin. It goes by, and you do not know exactly where it is headed. Above all, the Spirit is sovereign: the wind blows where it pleases. No one can govern it, guide it, direct it, claim it, capture it, govern it, or limit it. The wind brings the water that brings the crops to grow. The Spirit of God causes the new life to start and sprout so that we may bring forth fruit unto God.

What is of interest here is that the working of the Spirit is experienced, just like you can feel the wind, but this working remains *mysterious*,

beyond our vision and control. Rebirth is completely from beginning to end a work of the Holy Spirit alone, and since it is mysterious, we cannot comprehend it or customize it. Therefore we must be careful when speaking about rebirth. We should not try to make it into something that we can bring about through some extra sensory perception devices. Mysterious means that we know this work exists, takes place, and can be experienced, but it can never be fully explained or comprehended.

The Canons of Dort, as we saw in the quote given earlier, use the same word mysterious to describe regeneration or rebirth (III/IV, Article 12). The church has believed and confessed these things for centuries.

### ***In us, without us***

God himself by his Holy Spirit must change us, renew us, and grant us in his mercy and love a new beginning, a spiritual birth. Otherwise we will never see, much less ever enter, the kingdom of God. I think that one point then stands out very clearly. The Spirit of God alone initiates spiritual life. We cannot by any attempt or act from our side bring about this regeneration. It is the work of God in us, without us (i.e. without our effort), and for us, and it is done because of God's sovereign grace.

It becomes clear that this is an important element when you compare this teaching of the Lord Jesus with the official Judaist line of the Pharisees of whom Nicodemus was a member. The Judaists taught that good works are meritorious. They earn salvation. Keep the law and live. Salvation is at bottom a matter of the human will and effort. But Jesus says: forget it; there is no way that you can bring this new life about, not even by any well-intentioned effort. It is a mystery which points to one source: God's sovereign and omnipotent grace.

So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. Those born anew will not stress their effort, but confess God's grace. This is not a matter of arguing about words or of finding the right formulation. This is the essence of our Christian faith. This is also the experience of the Christian faith: you hear the wind, but cannot tell from where it comes and where it does. Why me, Lord? What have I ever done to deserve even one of the blessings you give? I have certainly not deserved the great blessing of redemption, salvation from sin and death.

## **Straightforward**

Let rebirth be mysterious, there is one thing about it that is very simple and straightforward: it leads us to Christ. Sometimes we unnecessarily make things very complicated or complex. About regeneration and its effects there has been much debate and strife, also in the Reformed churches. It touches a personal level: how do I know that I am born again? The emphasis then comes to lie sometimes on the fruits of faith, or on the good works that must follow from faith.

It can be a proper and healthy emphasis. By its fruits true faith is known (Hymn 24, *Book of Praise*). But it can also be lethal or deadly, if not properly understood. Paul warns us in Galatians 3 about the danger we face. He exclaims: O foolish Galatians! After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (verse 3) When we start with the sure faith that we are saved by grace alone, we would still derail if we suggested in any way that our works have a bearing on being saved.

Discussions about rebirth can sometimes be endlessly complicated. Let us understand the true simplicity of it all. Where did the whole nightly discussion with Nicodemus lead to? It led to the wondrous declaration of John 3:16: for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only (only-begotten) Son that *whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life*. This is the simplicity of rebirth. It leads to faith in Christ and him crucified. Do you believe that Jesus Christ is your one and only Savior?

## **A key question**

The discussion on rebirth leads to a key question: do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins and that in him you are forgiven and have received the gift of eternal life? If you do, the floodgates of thankfulness will go open. The simplicity of rebirth, of living faith in Jesus Christ and him crucified, will lead to the activity of rebirth: a life of thankfulness and good works to the glory of God.

Rebirth must be given to us, or we cannot be saved. Rebirth is given in a clear and yet a mysterious manner. Rebirth leads to one hope. This hope is in Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord. This is called the hope of faith. This faith activates us to a life of service.

Let it be so.