

"YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN."

– JAN. 22. – JOHN 3:1-16. –

NICODEMUS displayed both a noble and an ignoble disposition in coming to the Master. (1) He had a nobility of mind which was able to discern distinctly that Jesus was not an impostor, but a Teacher from God; and it was his desire for the truth which led him to seek it from the lips of one of no reputation amongst the worldly wise. (2) But he displayed the ignoble element of his disposition by coming privately, secretly, at night, whereas he should have acted up to his convictions fairly, and have come forward to inquire of the Lord, if not in public, at least in daylight and openly. There are a good many Christians of the Nicodemus type. They have a standing in the nominal church, and a great respect for the "honor of one another," so general in it.

Some to-day, for instance, see something of the light of present truth, and are convinced that the meat in due season now spread before the household of faith is from God's Word, and not human speculations. They will confess this much to themselves, and privately to some of the servants of present truth, and privately, secretly, so far as their denominations are concerned, they procure and read MILLENNIAL DAWN and ZION'S WATCH TOWER – perhaps subscribing in the name of some one else, "for fear of the Jews." But altho this is an ignoble course, the Lord does not refuse them the opportunity they seek and, like Nicodemus, they are made acquainted with the truth. But, as we hear little more respecting Nicodemus, so the Nicodemus class of to-day very rarely develop into true overcoming disciples, servants of the truth. Fear is good, caution is good, when properly exercised; but when these are allowed to have any voice in dictating our course after we have found the truth, their influence can only be evil, enslaving, demeaning. Those who are thus bound by love of human approbation, and fear of the consequences of a public, bold advocacy of the Lord and his truth, are not worthy of

him, as he declared: "He that is ashamed of me and my word, of him will I also be ashamed." We urge that all who find in themselves the Nicodemus disposition seek immediately to overcome it, and to get their hearts so filled with the love of God and the love of his truth that it will make them free from bondage to sectarianism, and to fear of man, which bringeth a snare. "Perfect love casteth out fear." Whom the Son makes free is free indeed. – 1 John 4:18; John 8:36.

Evidently but a small portion of this conference between Jesus and Nicodemus is furnished us – merely the leading features. Evidently the questions which Nicodemus asked related to the Kingdom of God, which John the Baptist had declared was at hand, and which our Lord also declared to be at the door. As a teacher amongst the Jews, Nicodemus was surely imbued with this hope of Israel – that in due time God would send Messiah, who would establish the long-promised Kingdom of Israel – superior to all the kingdoms of the world, and over them all, – to bless all the families of the earth, according to the promise made to Abraham. Not only might we infer that his question pertained to the Kingdom, but our Lord's answer plainly indicates this, for he began at once to talk about the promised Kingdom. [R2421 : page 23]

The great Teacher's explanation respecting the Kingdom-class must have struck Nicodemus as totally new. He had been accustomed to think of all the nation of Israel as being the children of the Kingdom, or, if not the entire nation, at least their most intelligent classes, the scribes, the Doctors of the Law, and their holiness class, the Pharisees. But here was a new thought – none would be in this Kingdom, sharers of its glory and of its work of blessing all the families of the earth, except they should be "*born again*." Nay more, the intimation was that the Kingdom would be an *invisible* Kingdom, that none could even *see* it, except he would be born again. Failing to grasp the thought of begetting and birth to a higher nature, Nicodemus was puzzled to think how a person who had reached maturity could ever be born again according to the flesh: and of course he was right in considering that

an impossibility. The new birth is not to [R2422 : page 23] be a birth according to the flesh: as our Lord explains, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the spirit is spirit." The Master's teaching was not that we should be born again of the flesh, but quite to the contrary, that those who would constitute the Kingdom class must be begotten and born of the spirit of God, the spirit of holiness, the spirit of the truth.

There is a great lesson here for many pre-millennialists, who vainly think, as Nicodemus, that the Kingdom of God will be a fleshly Kingdom, that the Kingdom-class will have what they are pleased to call "glorified flesh." Our Master's plain declarations thoroughly set aside all such expectations: and to us, as well as Nicodemus, he positively declares that none shall enter into the Kingdom except he be born again. The statement that "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit," is so unqualifiedly plain, and proves so emphatically that the spirit-begotten and spirit-born class, the "little flock," which will inherit the Kingdom, will not be flesh-beings in any sense of the word, but spirit beings, that there is no room for controversy or for misunderstanding on the part of those who have no will of their own in the matter, but are seeking to be taught of the Lord.

All recognize the meaning of the expression, "born of the flesh," that it does not mean merely begotten of the flesh, but a birth into independent flesh-life as a result of the begetting and gestation. And precisely the same thought should attach to the expression, "born of the spirit." It does not relate merely to the begetting of the spirit through the word of truth, which occurs during the present life, and at the time of our consecration to the Lord, but on the contrary, it implies and includes a subsequent birth to perfected spirit conditions – the entrance of the spirit existence in the resurrection – *the result* of the present begetting of the truth, and the present period of gestation or development as "new creatures in Christ Jesus."

That this is the proper Scriptural thought to be attached to this word, "born," is manifest from other Scriptures which declare that our Lord Jesus was, at his resurrection, "the first-*born* from the dead," and "the first-*born* amongst many brethren." (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:18.) Our Lord was begotten of the spirit at the time of his baptism, when the holy spirit came upon him. The new nature there begun, in the flesh, developed during the three and a half years of his ministry in proportion as the flesh, the human nature, died. Thus, as the Apostle expresses it, he was dying daily, as the man Christ Jesus, but was being renewed day by day in the inner man, the new creature, the spirit being. – 2 Cor. 4:16.

The complete death of the flesh, with our Lord, was the victory of his new nature, which refused to draw back, refused to save the flesh, which had already been devoted to sacrifice, as our sin-offering. It was because of this faithfulness of our Lord, as the "new creature," in offering up his flesh as a sin-offering, that the Heavenly Father was pleased to resurrect the "new creature" – not the flesh, which was man's ransom price. The resurrection of the "new creature" in a spirit body, glorious, powerful, immortal (1 Cor. 15:42-44), was our Lord's *birth of the spirit*, as the first-born amongst many brethren. As the Head of the Kingdom was thus begotten of the spirit, and in due time born of the spirit, so likewise must it be with those who will be members of that Kingdom. "Flesh and blood [human nature]" shall not inherit the Kingdom of God, – "cannot inherit the Kingdom of God." (1 Cor. 15:50.) Hence, we who would be heirs of the Kingdom must all be changed – made like our spirit-born Head, ere we can either see the Kingdom or share its glorious work as members.

Not only did our Lord clearly state the matter thus, but he gave an illustration which is in absolute harmony with this understanding of his words, but meaningless from any other standpoint. He declared that as the wind comes and goes, but is invisible to men, so will all those be who will be members of the Kingdom, born again. Our Lord illustrated this teaching in his own person, after his resurrection. Altho

he was present forty days, he appeared only a few times to the disciples, in all apparently not more than seven, and even on these occasions he *appeared* in a form of flesh (as angels did during previous dispensations) and communed with them for a few moments, and then vanished out of their sight. As the wind he came, as the wind he went, and they knew not whither. Invisible [R2422 : page 24] as the wind, he was present with them, taking note of all their affairs, during all that forty days, and merely appearing at the proper times to give the needed counsel and directions and assistance. So it will be with all of the Kingdom class, when they are born of the spirit; they will be able to go and come and attend to all the various functions of the Kingdom, without being visible to mankind. They will be as the wind. It will be within their province to appear as men, as the angels have done, if there be necessity for so appearing, altho we incline to think that there will be no such necessity, as God has already provided an *earthly class* as the representatives of the Kingdom amongst men. – Heb. 11:39,40.

We are in no sense denying or objecting to the ordinary thought, that a work of grace takes place in the heart of the Christian when he is adopted into the divine family as a son and prospective heir of God, a "new creature in Christ Jesus:" on the contrary, we are affirming this, as an absolute necessity to a share in the Kingdom, for whoever is not *begotten* of the spirit surely can never hope to be *born* of the spirit. We are merely making the proper distinctions between the begetting of the spirit, which is merely the beginning of the work of grace in us, and the birth of the spirit, which is the completion of that work, when we shall be like the Lord and see him as he is, and behold and share his glory.

We cannot wonder that Nicodemus was astonished when we remember that the holy spirit was not yet given, and that Nicodemus was not a member of the house of sons, but merely of the house of servants. We wonder far more that some who have been begotten of the spirit do not readily comprehend this spiritual teaching: for it is

their privilege to understand "the deep things of God." (1 Cor. 2:10.) As our Lord said to Nicodemus, "Art thou a master in Israel, and knowest not these things?" we may, with much greater point, say to Christians who cavil to-day, Are you begotten of the spirit, and taught of God, and yet ignorant of these things?

Our Lord does not even class this teaching as being specially spiritual, but rather earthly, such as the natural man, in proper harmony with God, should be able to understand and appreciate. He says, "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" Those whose minds are on so gross an earthly plane that they cannot appreciate so simple a matter as this are not in the condition to be inducted into the deeper things of God. They are at most but "babes," and have need to be fed with milk instead of with strong meat. (Heb. 5:12.) Nicodemus, unable (or perhaps we should say, because of prejudice, *unwilling*) to believe this message concerning the spiritual character of the Kingdom, was unprepared for any further teaching along that line – he was unwilling to receive the truth, the only message which Christ had to give, altho he was already persuaded that our Lord was a teacher sent from God. Hence our Lord says, "Ye receive not our witness."

Our Lord's statement, "Except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God," deserves further consideration. We have seen what he meant by the expression, "born of the spirit," *viz.*, born from the dead by the power of God as a spirit being, but what is signified by the expression, "born of water?" It is claimed by a very large number indeed that this refers to water baptism, and that those who are not born out of water will not have part in the Lord's Kingdom. We are willing to admit the truth of this only to a limited extent. We hold that the Lord refers to the true baptism, which is merely symbolized by immersion in water, and the rising out of it. We hold that the real thought is the burial of the old nature, and the rising of the new nature to newness of life, and that this is accomplished through consecration of the will to the will of the

Lord, a burial or immersion of the human will to death, as the necessary step to be taken in connection with the obtaining of the holy spirit, the holy mind, the mind of Christ, the spirit of Christ, which is the beginning in our flesh of the new creature, which must be developed and made ready if it would be born of the spirit in the resurrection.

This same thought seems to be in the mind of the Apostle, when he refers to the *bath of a new birth*, the making new by the holy spirit. (Tit. 3:5.) Cornelius evidently had this bath of the new birth, the making new by the holy spirit, before his baptism in water (which was a symbol of it, and an outward confession to others). And so it is, we believe, with some Christian people to-day. They have had the bath of the new birth, and the making new by the holy spirit, and are thus genuinely new creatures in Christ Jesus, without having had the symbolical immersion in water, – because, being mistaught as a result of the errors of the Dark Ages, they do not discern the beauty of the symbolic baptism in water, and the Scriptural command thereto; and this ignorance and disobedience God evidently has passed over, with many of us, for years. But when, in the abundance of his grace, a knowledge of his will on this subject ultimately reaches us, there should not be one moment's hesitation – there will not be one moment's hesitation, if the will of the flesh is entirely dead, and the mind of Christ fully in control.

The oldest Greek MSS. (the Sinaitic and Vatican) omit the last four words of verse 13, with evident propriety, **[R2423 : page 25]** for, altho our Lord is now in heaven, he was not in heaven at the time he addressed Nicodemus. The words in this verse were intended to remind Nicodemus that he need not look to fellow-human creatures for information respecting heavenly things, as they could not know them, any more than himself; but incidentally this verse teaches us something more, *viz.*, that no man has ever been in heaven except our Lord Jesus. This not only agrees with the statement of Peter, on the day of Pentecost, "David is not ascended into the heavens," but it also

agrees with the Apostle Paul's statement, "Flesh and blood [human nature] cannot inherit the Kingdom of God." – 1 Cor. 15:50; Acts 2:34.

The only ground for hope that any of the fallen race of Adam will ever know anything about the heavenly condition is then stated by our Lord to depend upon his own justifying work on man's behalf. He must be lifted up as the great sin-offering, the antitype of the brazen serpent which Moses lifted up in the wilderness, the antidote for the bites of the fiery serpents, which represented sin.

Our Lord's reference to the results gives the thought of the wideness of God's mercy, and of his provision for our race. Altho now this mercy is confined to the elect Church, "even as many as the Lord our God shall call," it is in due time to be world-wide, and a blessing to "whosoever believeth on him." Then the grand Gospel provision is briefly stated in few words – God's sympathetic love for the world, his provision of the ransom in the person of his Son, and that provision made not merely for an elect class, but for the world of mankind in general – whosoever believeth.

Another thought: God's provision is not to rescue any from the flames of hell, from an eternity of torment; but to rescue them from death, from destruction, from perishing, from nonentity, and to grant to whosoever is willing to have it, on the conditions of the New Covenant, – Everlasting Life.
