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## REGENERATION AND THE KINGDOM

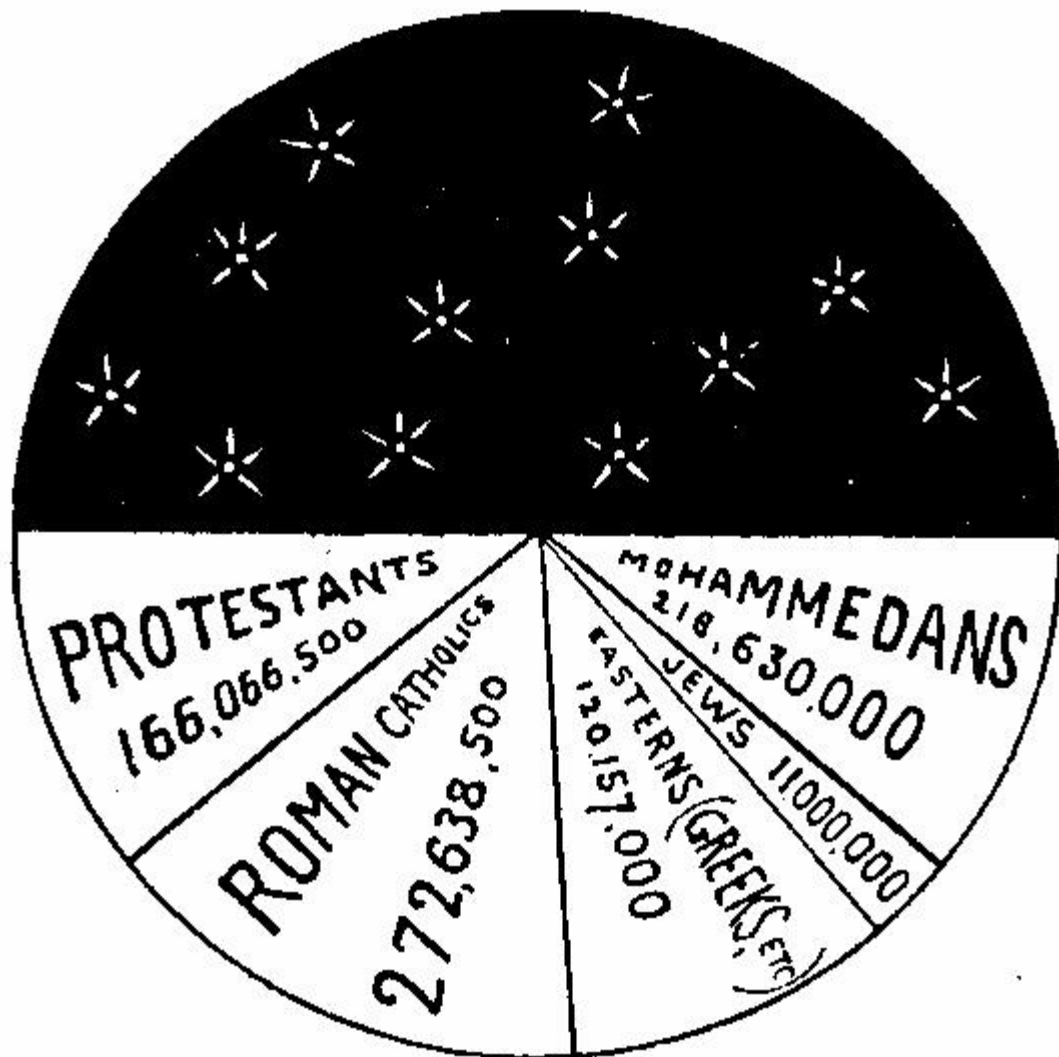
***- JOHN 3:1-21. - FEBRUARY 2. -***

**Golden Text: – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have everlasting life." – John 3:16.**

THIS lesson well illustrates the wrong, unscriptural trend of thought and of Biblical interpretation which has come to prevail so generally throughout Christendom. The peculiar, the strange thing connected with the matter is that people of apparent capacity for reasoning on other subjects seem to abandon all logic in the study of God's Word. The usual interpretation of this lesson is that Jesus taught Nicodemus that he was about to establish a Church, which he called the Kingdom of God, without its having any likeness to the Kingdom or bearing any rule in the world. It is claimed that our Lord meant Nicodemus to understand that his Church was to be considered the Kingdom because eventually it would so prevail throughout the earth that God's will should be done on earth even as it is done in heaven. Then, to make this interpretation the more absurd, they acknowledge that our Lord here declared that no one could appreciate this Kingdom or enter into it except he were first begotten of the holy Spirit. Now note the absurdity of all this: –

After nearly nineteen centuries the total number of both Catholics and Protestants in the world is about four hundred millions, including the ring-streaked, the speckled and the black – the rough, the scuff, the tough of all civilized lands – improperly styled Christendom. The remainder of the race, twelve hundred millions, either never have heard of the Lord Jesus at [R4124 : page 28] all or, having heard, repudiated him. The number of the heathen, therefore, today is many times as large as the entire

population of the earth at the time when the Lord conversed with Nicodemus. If the world is the Kingdom is it conquering itself in any sense of the word? Surely not! But now let us look at the four hundred millions called "Christendom," and judge as best we may be able who and what they really are, aside from their profession. How many of them make the slightest profession of having been born again, begotten again, born from above, and to have the renewing of the holy Spirit? Practically none – surely, as in our Lord's day, only a "Little Flock."



## **DIAGRAM SHOWING PROPORTION OF HEATHEN TO VARIOUS RELIGIONS TODAY**

If any one is in doubt on this subject let him inquire amongst his Christian friends and neighbors on the subject of the new birth, the begetting of the holy Spirit. Let him explain what he means by a full consecration or devotion of time, strength and all that we possess to God and his service, and the change of heart signified by the begetting and anointing of the holy Spirit, and then ask how many of his friends and neighbors have either made the consecration involved or have received the holy Spirit. He will not have gone far into this inquiry until he be fully convinced that there is a great mistake in this ordinary view of the Kingdom – that it is thoroughly untenable and cannot be our Lord's meaning.

Thus satisfied that the general concept of this lesson is radically wrong, let us note carefully and prayerfully every word of our lesson with untrammelled minds, that we may know the truth and the truth may make us free from error, from superstition, and may bring to us light, joy and assistance.

### **NICODEMUS AND THE GREAT TEACHER**

Nicodemus, an influential man amongst the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, and widely known as a professor of holiness – of full consecration to God – a Pharisee, came to Jesus by night; not necessarily from fear, possibly wisdom guided him, a prudent recognition of the interests of others as well as of his own. Possibly he came by night because then he might have a better opportunity for private conversation with the Master. In any event we find him very reverential and courteous. He addressed our Lord as Rabbi, or Teacher, and declared his belief that he was from God, a servant of God, in whom God evidently delighted, as manifested by his miracles. Only a mere portion of the conversation of the evening is given. We may reasonably

presume that Nicodemus came to ask questions respecting the Kingdom of God, which he knew John and his disciples had been preaching, and which Jesus and his disciples subsequently also preached. As a student of the Scriptures he knew to expect the Kingdom, and that it was God's provision for the blessing and uplifting of Israel and ultimately the fulfilment of a promise to Abraham, "In thy Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Having confidence in Jesus he wished to learn particulars respecting this Kingdom, for neither John the Baptist nor Jesus had manifested anything to indicate how the Kingdom was to be brought about – where the soldiers were to be obtained, how drilled and officered, where the implements of warfare were to come from and the large amount of money necessary to equip and provide for an army. Such a question is implied by our Lord's statement, "Verily, verily I say unto you, except a man be born again [anew] he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

We can imagine the perplexity of Nicodemus, who was looking for a King and a glorious retinue, more grand than any monarch of the past, inasmuch as the Messiah King expected was to represent heavenly authority and power amongst men. Judge now of his perplexity on being told that no one could see this Kingdom unless he were born again – born over. The chaos of his thoughts is shown by his rejoinder, How can a full-grown man, advanced in years, be born again? With our Lord's answer he began to get a little light on the subject: Jesus said, "I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of Spirit is spirit."\*

\*We have quoted this correctly, for the article "the" does not appear in the Greek text.

Nicodemus got some very "strong meat" in very few words. From this statement he would understand that the Kingdom

would not be a fleshly or earthly one, but a spirit Kingdom, a heavenly Kingdom. He could perceive that the natural birth of the flesh is a figure or symbol illustrative of a new birth, a spirit birth, and that our Lord meant that the Kingdom of God would be on a higher plane than any earthly Kingdom – it would be a spirit Kingdom which mankind in general could not see and could not enter into or become members of. The only ones who would really see the spiritual Kingdom or enter into it would be those begotten of Spirit and born of Spirit. But our Lord added, "Born of water and of Spirit." The reference to water would probably, in the mind of Nicodemus, recall the water baptism for the remission of sins, and as a sign of repentance which John the Baptist and his disciples had been preaching.

To us who live since Pentecost – and who may, therefore, have a clear conception of the deep things of **[R4125 : page 29]** God under the guidance and instruction of the holy Spirit – our Lord's mention of water may have a still fuller significance. We see that symbolical water represents Truth, and that our begetting of the holy Spirit is said by the Apostle to be also a begetting "through the Word of truth." (Jas. 1:18.) We remember also that the same thought is expressed by the Apostle Paul, who declares (Titus 3:3-5), "his mercy saved us through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the holy Spirit." Putting these matters together we have the thought that our regeneration or begetting again of the holy Spirit and our renewing by it come to us in conjunction with the washing or cleansing which is effected in us by the operation of the Truth – the divine message. This is beautifully symbolized in Israel's Tabernacle service, in which the priests, before entering the Holy and thus typically becoming New Creatures, first washed at the laver which represented the Word of God, the Truth, the water of regeneration, by which we come into that condition of consecration to the Lord in which he is pleased to accept us, to grant us the spirit of adoption into his heavenly or spiritual family.

## **"SO IS EVERY ONE THAT IS BORN"**

Nicodemus was astonished at such a presentation of the Kingdom and of the methods and conditions upon which it could be seen and entered into. Our Lord rejoined, Marvel not at the words, Ye must be born again. Then he gave him an illustration of what one would be like who would be born of the Spirit. He drew his attention to the invisibility of spirit beings and yet their reality. He took as an illustration the wind – invisible, we know not whence it comes, we know not whither it goes; but we do know of its power, we can hear the sound, can see its effects. This, our Lord declared, would give Nicodemus an illustration of those born of the Spirit; they would be intangible, invisible, while present and powerful. Such would be the Kingdom when it should be established. We must notice very carefully our Lord's language, else ere long these erroneous thoughts will bring us into confusion. We must not allow any of them to twist and turn the Scriptures, and to say that our Lord said something here that he did not say. We must repel the suggestion that he meant that the Spirit of which we would be begotten is invisible, for although that is true enough it is not what our Lord is saying. Neither must we allow our minds to be misled into supposing that the Lord means that the holy Spirit passes hither and thither throughout the world, begetting some and passing others by, and that we know not who may be begotten of the Spirit and who not. All this is confusing and wholly out of accord with what is written. Whoever would have clear, proper conceptions of the Master's teaching must give strict heed to the Word. We have been in darkness long enough through our inattention and through our allowing other people to read into the Word of God what is in no sense of the word there. We are neither to add to nor to take from the Word of God, and whoever does so adds to his own confusion, and is as well an unfaithful minister of the Truth, and an unfaithful ambassador, spokesman, for the Lord.

Astounded at what he had heard, Nicodemus exclaimed, "How can these things be?" Is it possible that those who have been studying the Law and the Prophets for centuries have erred so egregiously? Our Lord replied that as a master in Israel he should be able to discern these matters when once they were brought to his attention. As a thoughtful student of the Law and the Prophets Nicodemus should have seen that there were insurmountable difficulties connected with the prevailing thought that God's Kingdom would be an earthly one. He therefore should have been quite prepared for the announcement that the Kingdom of God would be a spiritual one which, as the Lord on another occasion explained, would come not with outward show, and of which the people would not declare, "Lo, here it is," or "Lo, there it is," but it would be in the midst of mankind, invisible but all-powerful.

We have elsewhere shown\* that there is a particular fitness to our Lord's words in this connection when he declares that that which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of Spirit is spirit. As there cannot be any birth of the flesh without first a begetting of the flesh, so there can be no birth of the spirit without first a begetting of the Spirit. The begetting of the Spirit comes in connection with the washing of regeneration through the Word, and belongs to this present life. As New Creatures we develop spiritually until we reach the quickening stage of activity in the Lord's service; and those thus begotten and quickened, in whom the new will remains faithful unto death, in the resurrection are born of the Spirit – raised from the dead spirit beings. Thus our Lord was begotten of the holy Spirit at the time of his baptism, but in his resurrection he was born of the Spirit – the first-born from the dead – the first-born from among many brethren. Similarly his brethren and joint-heirs in the Kingdom are now begotten of the holy Spirit at the time of their washing of regeneration and begetting, and their birth, if faithful, will be in the resurrection change, when that which is sown in weakness



will be raised in power, sown an animal body, raised a spiritual body – sharers with our Lord in the First Resurrection to spirit nature, glory, honor, immortality. It is proper to notice here that confusion has come to many because of their failure to notice that the same Greek word *gennao* is used in referring to both the begetting and the birth.

**\*DAWN-STUDIES, Vol. V., pp. 189; 192.**  
**"WE SPEAK THAT WE DO KNOW"**

In answer to Nicodemus' doubts our Lord assured him that this testimony respecting the Kingdom, that it would be a spirit Kingdom, was no idle speculation – that he knew what he testified to be true, that the trouble with Nicodemus was that he was not ready to be taught. He had called our Lord Master, Teacher, and declared that he believed him to be sent of God, [R4125 : page 30] and yet he was so bound to his preconceptions that he was unready to receive the testimony of the only one who was capable of giving him the instruction. Our Lord intimated that he could tell much more about the heavenly Kingdom, but it would not be proper to do so, since his hearers were not in a condition to appreciate spiritual things. "If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how could you believe if I explained to you heavenly things?" In the light of the Apostle Paul's exhortation we see that our Master's words were not chiding, but rather a declaration of facts, because, as the Apostle declares, it is impossible for the natural man not begotten of the holy Spirit to understand spiritual things. The most, therefore, that Jesus was able to teach either to his disciples or others during his ministry were earthly things. He left the explanation of the deeper things of the divine plan until after his followers at Pentecost received the begetting of the holy Spirit and were thus fitted and qualified, prepared, enabled to understand the spiritual things, the heavenly things. – I Cor. 2:14.



Undoubtedly this is the trouble with the great majority of the people today also – they have not been begotten of the holy Spirit, they have not been begotten again, and hence are unable to understand spiritual things. We reiterate, therefore, our recommendation, frequently made, that when any are found who have not the hearing ear for the Truth we should not seek to pound it into them, but rather should take a different tack and seek their consecration – present to them the reasonableness of a full consecration to the Lord and his service in view of what they have already seen and are able to grasp. If they make the consecration and receive the begetting of the holy Spirit the deep things of the Lord will then be for them and may be understood by them. Hence the wisdom of not casting the pearls of divine Truth, the deeper, spiritual things before the unregenerate – the wisdom, on the contrary, of preaching merely the outlines of the divine plan of the ages to the world in general, of exhorting them to receive not the grace of God in vain, and assuring them that wisdom from on high and an ability to appreciate the deeper things come only to and are only for those who have come into the spiritual covenant relationship of the sons of God as New Creatures.

### **"NO MAN HATH ASCENDED UP TO HEAVEN"**

This statement by our Lord would cause no particular surprise to Nicodemus, for nothing in the Law or in the prophets or in the teachings of orthodox Judaism ever held to the idea prevalent amongst the heathen that the dead were alive – more alive than ever before. They knew that the dead were dead and that the hope for them lay in the resurrection, when Messiah should come forth for the banishing of the curse and the establishment of the Kingdom of heaven amongst men for their uplift and reconciliation to God. But today the heathen error, Plato's philosophy, that the dead are more alive than the living, with all the absurdity that is implied in such a statement, has fastened itself upon Christendom. People otherwise sane and

logical will tell us that they believe in the resurrection of the dead, and in the same breath tell us that the dead are not dead. They fail to tell us how the dead could be resurrected if none is dead. Let all who study this lesson with a desire to learn from the Master rather than to instruct him, take heed to the words, "No man hath ascended up to heaven." (The last four words of this verse 13, "which is in heaven," are not found in ancient Greek MSS., and evidently were no part of this conversation.)

### **"THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS"**

The remainder of this lesson, in our judgment, was not spoken to Nicodemus, but combined various of our Lord's teachings which the writer here brought together conveniently. **[R4126 : page 30]**

The reference of verse 14 to the lifting up of the brazen serpent in the wilderness and the declaration that it was intended to be a type of the crucifixion of our Lord is a very important item. We remember the story of the Israelites bitten by the fiery serpents because of sin, and how they were suffering great pain and were dying in large numbers until Moses by divine direction erected on a pole a serpent made of brass. Thenceforth every Israelite, looking toward that serpent, by faith was healed. The antitype of this we see. The whole world has been bitten by sin, and, as the Apostle declares, all are groaning and travailing in pain, all are dying. (Rom. 8:22.) Eighteen centuries ago Jesus the Son of man was lifted up on Calvary, he was treated as a sinner, our sins were laid upon him that he might thus have the right to impute his righteousness to all who desire it, and to grant them healing and life eternal.

Our Lord, in explaining the matter, declared that the Son of man would be lifted up, to the intent that everyone believing on him should not perish but have eternal life. Only the few have yet had the opportunity of believing in him – the great mass in our

Lord's time and ever since have been in utter ignorance of the Redeemer and his sacrifice, and of the blessings secured by looking to him. But will they never see? Will they never know? Will they never gain eternal life? Will only the Church, the specially favored of this Gospel Age, the Elect, have this great opportunity? Surely not! In due time God will cause the knowledge of his grace to reach every member of the race. Surely this is the import of our Master's words following, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have everlasting life." (v. 16.) Ah, yes! This is a blessed assurance. We are glad that by the grace of God Jesus "tasted death for every man." (Heb. 2:9.) We are glad that he was a propitiation for our sins, the Church's sins, but we are also glad that he is a propitiation for the sins of the whole world (I John 2:2), and that eventually the whole world shall have the privilege, opportunity, of having their eyes and ears opened that they also may see and understand the riches of God's grace in Christ.

With what pleasure we read that "God sent not his **[R4126 : page 31]** Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." The world had already been condemned, for it had shared in Father Adam's condemnation as his race. It needed no more condemnation but it did need salvation from the Adamic condemnation resting upon it; – it did need to be delivered from the bondage of corruption, mental, moral and physical, and it was this that Jesus came to accomplish. How different the story as the Master gives it from the way in which it is told in the creeds. The theory claimed during the "dark ages" was that all who were not of the Elect Church were condemned to eternal torment. It was recognized that the race as a whole had as yet received none of God's grace, nor opportunity for the same, because of blindness and ignorance and superstition; and it was claimed that it never would have favor – that God never meant the world to be saved, and that Christ did

not die for the world but for the Church, the Elect. How glorious the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of divine love and wisdom as now displayed through the divine Word in this harvest time! – showing us that the election of the Church is merely the prelude to the great work of blessing and enlightening, uplifting and restoring the world in general – all who will – "in due time." Nevertheless there is a measure of increased condemnation in proportion as the light is seen by any one and rejected; as our Lord said, "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19.) The meaning is evident: Our Lord's first advent was not with a view to increasing the Adamic condemnation but the reverse of this, to effect the sacrifice by which it might ultimately be canceled. Nevertheless his presence then in the world, and the light which then shone and which has since shone through his followers, has carried with it a measure of responsibility – a measure of condemnation to all who have resisted the light.

This condemnation, however, is quite separate and distinct from the Adamic condemnation, which was inherited, and which because of Christ's sacrifice for our sins will ultimately be completely canceled; this condemnation, resulting from an intelligent rejection of light, bears an individual penalty, which will bring the unfaithful one stripes either in the present or in the future. In the giving of these stripes we are assured that full allowance will be made for inherited weaknesses, temptations, etc. – everything that can be justly charged up to the Adamic fall will be canceled through the merit of the sacrifice of Christ. The stripes merely represent the individual's own perversity, and should the opposition to the light of Truth be persisted in to the full degree, the penalty would be the Second Death.

## **THE SELECTIVE PROCESS**

From the foregoing we perceive that wherever the light of the Gospel shines there is proportionately responsibility and more or less of a selective condition. As our Lord declares, all who do evil intentionally, in the light, thereby manifest their hatred of the light, and such will avoid the light, realizing that it makes manifest the error, the sin with which they are identified and which, to some extent, at least, they love. They hate and avoid the light because it reproves their darkness, their error, their sin. On the contrary (v. 21), all who would serve the Truth, the light, are glad to come to more and more light as they may discern it. They desire that their course in life shall become manifest, that all shall know that to the extent of their ability they are seeking to do the Lord's will. And if, perchance, something contrary to God's will may be exposed in their own conduct or theories, they are glad of this also that they may have an opportunity for correcting the same.

This selective, separative work is not going on amongst the heathen but in Christendom, nor is it specially going on amongst the masses of Christendom, but chiefly amongst those who have professed to be God's people, who profess to have turned from darkness to light, as did the Jews of our Lord's day. Realizing the true situation, let us be very zealous for every ray of light which can be shed upon the divine plan or upon our own hearts and lives. Let us more and more desire to know the Truth, that it may make us free from every bondage and bring us more and more into captivity to the will of God in Christ. Children of the Light, we can have no fellowship with any of the unfruitful works of darkness, doctrinal or otherwise! Let us maintain our stand more and more loyally as the divine Word increasingly clarifies our vision and distinguishes for us between light and darkness, truth and error, righteousness and sin!

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