

LIFE CAN BEGIN ANEW

When Jimmy Carter was running for President the news media made a big deal of the fact that he said that he was a "born again" Christian. There was a period of time when the political cartoonist and the feature writers had a field day in making fun of the term "born again". Every now and then I see it popping up in headlines or even in conversation with the term applied to anything and everything but the Scriptural meaning of the term. As a consequence of the misuse of the term "born again", many people will be confused as to what it really means or the origin of the term. The way it is used in the media, one would think that the term means a second occurrence of the same thing. However, in its original usage it meant a similar happening of a completely new thing. Many Christians are confused about the term even today after having heard sermons on and read commentaries about being born again. We are not surprised that Nicodemus was baffled when he first heard the term.

JOHN 3:1-2 The Jews were called to be a holy people. The word "holy" means to be separated or set apart for a special purpose. The Pharisees saw themselves as being a separated people and were very zealous about it. They were the preservers of traditional Judaism. Their heroes were Moses who had received the Law from God and Ezra who had reinstated an emphasis on the Law after the return of the captives. The Pharisees placed a lot of emphasis on the Law and on the traditions. Nicodemus was an important Pharisee. He is described as a "ruler of the Jews". This means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jewish community. We don't know if Nicodemus came to Jesus as a representative of a group of interested Jews or strictly on his own. We can't tell from the account why Nicodemus came to see Jesus. We are not told. If he had a question, he didn't have a chance to ask it. He started out complimenting Jesus and acknowledging that He (Jesus) came from God. He also acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher. He was informed in that he knew of the miracles that Jesus had done and, being a Pharisee, he was careful to give God the credit for the miracles. Nicodemus was at the point of many people in the world today: they acknowledge that Jesus was a great teacher, that He was sent from God, that He did miracles and that God was with Him; however, they have not come to accept that He is more than all those, He is God.

JOHN 3:3-8 Jesus apparently did not wait for Nicodemus to ask a question about the ministry Jesus was doing or on whose authority or whatever. He answered the question that Nicodemus should have asked and that is "How does one enter the Kingdom of Heaven?" Here is where Jesus introduced the phrase "born again". "Except anyone be born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Obviously, Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant because he started talking about a new physical birth. He was thinking about a second happening of an old thing, while Jesus was talking about a similar happening of a new thing. The "old" has reference to the flesh or physical part of our being and the "new" has reference to the spiritual part of us.

Jesus started with what Nicodemus was familiar – the physical. How does one enter the physical life? By physical birth. How does one enter the spiritual life? By spiritual birth. The origin of our physical birth is our physical parents. Since flesh begets flesh and Spirit begets spirit, we could conclude that the origin of our spiritual birth is the Spirit of God. Most of us tend to be closely tied to the physical world and have trouble relating to the spiritual. Nicodemus naturally thought of the physical and Jesus had come to point us (and move us) into the spiritual realm. This is the realm of the unseen and we should not confuse the spiritual with the physical. However, we can understand it because we deal with the unseen all the time. We can not see the wind, yet we recognize its effects and can experience the benefit or destruction of it. Likewise with the Holy Spirit, even though we cannot see the Spirit we can recognize and experience His effects.

There is a school of thought and teaching that says what Jesus was talking about was change that comes about in a person's life, so drastic that it is *as if* one were a new person. This is a false teaching. The new birth is an actual point-in-time experience. The change in behavior results from the new nature acquired through the new birth. It is real. It is NOT just an idea or an analogy.

JOHN 3:9-13 This was a difficult concept for Nicodemus. "How can these things be?" is a question that many have asked. Jesus was surprised that Nicodemus did not readily grasp the concept since he was a learned Pharisee. He should have known about the triune nature of man: that man is body, soul and spirit, that the spirit of man is that part which "died" when man disobeyed God, that new life is needed for the spirit of man if man is to be restored to fellowship with God and be in a family relationship with God (God is our Heavenly Father and we are the Children of God).

It would appear that Jesus thought the problem in understanding that Nicodemus expressed was somewhat of a *reluctance* to believe rather than genuine confusion. Jesus admonished him that He knew what He was talking about because He had personal experience of spiritual things. The situation with most people today is **not** that they CAN not believe, it is that they WILL not believe. Jesus had talk principles of the Kingdom of God using earthly examples so that people could understand it and the Pharisees had refused to believe what He taught. This was what was behind Jesus statement that He didn't think that it would do any good to tell Nicodemus direct spiritual truths (that would be very hard to understand) when the Pharisees would not believe the simple truths that even a child could understand. If Nicodemus wanted to learn about heavenly things, then he could find no better teacher than Jesus since no one had ever gone up to heaven and came down again to tell what it was like. Jesus had come from Heaven and He knew spiritual things. Where was all this leading? Jesus was essentially giving Nicodemus His credentials as the basis of the authority by which He was speaking so that Nicodemus could have a basis for believing. The central truth that Jesus wanted to convey to Nicodemus about "how this could be" was about to be given.

JOHN 3:14-16 Nicodemus wanted to know "How can this be?" Jesus had the answer. As usual He related the answer to something to which the hearer knew about. Nicodemus was familiar with the incident given in the Old Testament about the plague that struck the Children of Israel and how that people could be saved from the plague by looking on the brass serpent that Moses put up on a pole in the midst of the congregation. That was an act of faith on the part of the people. As they exercised faith, then they were saved from the plague. In a literal sense, Jesus was also to be lifted by on a pole in the midst of the congregation in His crucifixion. In another sense, we are to lift up Jesus in our praise and exultation and in doing so we can help others to believe in Him. Just as in the days of Moses, as those Israelites believed and did not perish, but lived; so it will be in a spiritual sense that those who look by faith to the Cross of Christ believing that He died in their place to pay the penalty for sin and to give them new life will also not perish but live. The motivation for this is simply the love of God – for God so loved the world that He gave. Look to Jesus and lift Him up so that others too may believe.

JOHN 3:17-21 God loved, God gave, God sent. The world was already in a condition of lostness. The coming of Jesus (the Living Word) exposed the lost condition in a way that was more effective than the written word could. He brought light into darkness. Those who were in darkness did not realize their condition until the light came on. Since the light exposed their evil deed, it was not welcomed by the majority of people. Those who were disposed toward God, those who were seekers of truth would recognize the light as helpful and would come to the Light.