

## **“A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF JOHN” SERIES**

### **#5: “Visit from a Ruler of the Jews”**

**SCRIPTURE:** John 3:1-21

#### **INTRO:**

Jesus was, apparently, still in Jerusalem where He had gone to celebrate Passover. John relates in verses 1 and 2:

***3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 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.”***

The wonders that Jesus performed got the attention of a lot of Jews, including this man called Nicodemus. No doubt, this was the purpose of such miracles.

Why, do you think, did this man come to Jesus under the cover of night? Two reasons come to mind: he was a Pharisee, and he was a ruler of the Jews. No such leader could be seen consorting with the likes of Jesus of Nazareth. So, he approached Jesus under the cover of night.

Nicodemus admitted that he believed Jesus to be a teacher come from God, and he based this on Jesus’ ability to perform miracles or “signs.” He addressed Him as “Rabbi,” which is a term of highest respect.

Jesus responded to him with these words:

***“TRULY, TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, UNLESS ONE IS BORN AGAIN HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD.”***

Apparently, Jesus was able to see through Nicodemus' opening remark and determine that he wanted to know about the kingdom of God. So, He gives him a kingdom of God response. "You can't even see God's kingdom unless you've been born again."

Well, Nicodemus reveals his spiritual immaturity. He takes Jesus words rather literally:

***"HOW CAN A MAN BE BORN WHEN HE IS OLD? CAN HE ENTER A SECOND TIME INTO HIS MOTHER'S WOMB AND BE BORN?"***

Have you ever known a "literalist"? You have to be careful when you talk to them. They take everything literally. You don't dare tell them to go jump into the lake. Ha!

Well, Nicodemus took Jesus literally. So, he was very puzzled. He wondered, "How can a man be born when he is old?" He didn't understand the spiritual significance of what Jesus said.

So, Jesus said to him:

***"UNLESS ONE IS BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT, HE CANNOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD."***

A common teaching on this is that "*born of water*" is a reference to physical birth, and "*born of the Spirit*" is a reference to spiritual birth. But there's a problem here: the Greek word translated "*water*" is "HYMAS," the word for h<sub>2</sub>O, while the word for the amniotic fluid of childbirth is an entirely different word.

Historically, certain sects of the Jews practiced baptism for Gentile converts to Judaism during the first

century, so Nicodemus, a devout Jew, would have been familiar with the concept of baptism. But Jesus doesn't mention it. But notice that He states that one cannot see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. This is the subject of the entire conversation: how one is born again, not how one is born the first time, but how a person can be born a second time and get to see the Kingdom of God.

It would have been redundant for Jesus to say that one must be born of the flesh to enter the Kingdom. Nicodemus had already met that condition and didn't need to be told to meet that one. Jesus was referring to his need to be immersed in water so he could receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), but He couldn't reveal that to him at this time (more about this later).

Nowhere in Scripture is natural birth referred to as being born "of water." To claim such is a desperate attempt to deny the simple truth of baptism.

But I have a question for you:

***WHY DIDN'T JESUS EXPLAIN FURTHER WHAT HE SAID TO NICODEMUS?***

Why didn't He explain to him what I've just explained to you?

I suggest to you that there are two reasons that Jesus shrouded in mystery His answer to Nicodemus:

1. Being born of the water and of the Spirit required an understanding that Nicodemus didn't have at the time. He wasn't ready to receive the terms of the New Covenant. It wouldn't be understood until Jesus had been crucified and resurrected.

2. Even though Jesus had set the example in being baptized in the Jordan, the meaning and significance of what He said to Nicodemus had everything to do with something that hadn't taken place yet: His death and resurrection. Being born of the water and the Spirit required water and the Spirit. Baptism into Christ hadn't been declared yet, and the Holy Spirit hadn't arrived. Baptism for the forgiveness of sins was declared and the Holy Spirit arrived on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover, and after Jesus had been crucified and resurrected..

So, Jesus spoke spiritual truth to Nicodemus when he asked, but the practical significance of that truth came along later, when people repented, were baptized, and received the gift of the holy Spirit.

And now,

### ***WHAT DID JESUS MEAN WHEN HE SAID HE MUST BE LIFTED UP?***

In verses 14 and 15, He said:

***"...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."***

He's referring to Moses lifting up a bronze serpent on a pole in the wilderness. Let's review that incident, recorded in Numbers 21:4-9:

***From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of***

***Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So, Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So, Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.***

The truth that Jesus was communicating by this reference is that He would be “lifted up” on a cross, and all who would look to Him in faith will live eternally. Another way of putting it would be to say that just as the bronze serpent was the only cure for the deadly bite of the fiery serpent, so the “lifting up” of the Son of Man is necessary as the only remedy for the deadly bite of sin.

Jesus must be “lifted up” in our lives, in our teaching, and in our preaching, so that people will look on Him in trusting, obedient faith and be saved.

Finally, we come to the most memorized verse in the Bible:

***“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.”***

The rest of this paragraph reads in the English Standard Version:

***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”***

I read somewhere that this 16<sup>th</sup> verse contains the greatest lover: God; the greatest gift: Jesus; and the greatest reward: eternal life.

Another translation of this verse could be: ***“God loved mankind so much that He sacrificed the life of His Son so that believers in Him as God’s Son would not be destroyed but would live forever.”***

The Greek word commonly translated ***“perish”*** is APOLLUMI, which means “to destroy” or “to annihilate.” To destroy or annihilate is to cause to cease to exist. In addition to Jesus’ use of the word here, He uses it in the following passages:

- Luke 13:3 – ***“...unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”***
- John 10:28 – ***“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish...”***

The apostle Paul uses the word in Colossians 2:20-22, where he wrote: ***“If with Christ you died to the elemental***

*spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings?” He uses a form of the word in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:52-54, where he says, “...For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory...’”*

The apostle Peter uses a form of the word in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:18-19, where he wrote: “...*knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ...*” He uses the word perish in 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 2:9, where he wrote: “*The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*”

The word is used by the writer of Hebrews in chapter 1, verses 10-12: “*And, ‘You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed.*”

How does this compute with the traditional idea of “eternal torment”? Will Satan be kept alive so he can be tormented for ever and ever? Will unbelievers be kept alive

to be tormented forever, or will they be eternally destroyed?  
I'll let you chew on that awhile...

### **IN CLOSING TODAY...**

...consider verses 17-21, where we are given the bottom line, so to speak. Jesus says that He didn't come into the world to condemn anybody, but to save those who would believe in Him. He is light, so those whose deeds are evil don't like Him because He reveals their true character. They prefer to live in the dark, where they won't be seen. Only those who do good are willing to live in the light.

A good question for us to end with today is: Am I living in the light?