

Rabbi to Rabbi (# 2)
John 3:1-16
WBC 9-27-09
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Introduction: The Reverend George Whitefield, having occasion to write to Dr. Ben Franklin, in a letter dated August 17, 1752, said, *“I find you grow more and more famous in the learned world. As you have made a pretty considerable progress in the mysteries of electricity, I would now humbly recommend to your diligent, unprejudiced pursuit and study, the mystery of the **New Birth**. It is a most important study; and, when mastered, will richly answer and repay you for all your pains. One, at whose bar we are shortly to appear, hath solemnly declared, without it we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. You will excuse this freedom. I must have something of Christ in all my letters”* (Sweeting p. 192).

Today we look into one of the “church words” that we toss around with people who do not understand the kingdom (*Born Again*). It is a misunderstood word. At times, it has been laughed at. At times, it is disregarded as foolish. For those of us who trust in it, we cherish the opportunity to embrace it. The **New Birth** is the standard of entrance into heaven. It is the basis of the conversation that we shall see Nicodemus and Jesus discourse. It is a simple term. The term New Birth or Born again is self-explanatory, yet the term is as deep as a well. The New Birth is inescapable. You are or you are not Born again.

History of the new birth: To be born from above, born again, or born anew was not a new concept in the days of Christ on earth. The Greeks, mystery religions, Romans, and others all had forms of rebirth, sacrifice, blood forgiveness, and spiritual birthdays, rising from the ruins, etc. To be born anew was not a foreign concept to people in the early life of Jesus or the church.

Born anew describes:

- **New Birth**
- New Creation
- The Kingdom of Heaven.
- Eternal Life
- Adoption

Greek: Born Again- gennao, to bring forth, to be born, procreate, bear, beget, conceive, to be delivered, gender, or spring.

ἄνωθεν, Again: Anothēn- by analogy, from the first, from above, anew, from the beginning, from the top.

This is not a repetition, e.g., reincarnation, but being born into a higher life. An analogous process (This is equivalent to, parallel to, corresponding to, comparable to).

The scriptures speak to this process.

1 Peter 1:3-5

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us **new birth** into a living hope through the **resurrection** of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

NIV

1 Peter 1:22-25

22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. 23 For you have been **born again**, not of **perishable** seed, but of **imperishable**, through the living and enduring word of God. 24 **For,**

"All men are like grass,
 and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
 the grass withers and the flowers fall,
 25 but the word of the Lord stands forever."
 NIV

James 1:18

18 He chose to give us **birth** through the word of truth, that we
 might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.
 NIV

Titus 3:5-6

5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but
 because of his mercy. He saved us through the **washing of rebirth**
 and **renewal** by the Holy Spirit,
 NIV

Rom 6:1-12

6 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace
 may increase? 2 By no means! We **died** to sin; how can we live in
 it any longer? 3 Or don't you know that all of us who were
 baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his **death**? **4 We
 were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in
 order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the
 glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.**

5 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will
 certainly also be united with him in his **resurrection**. 6 For we
 know that our **old self was crucified** with him so that the body of
 sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to
 sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.
**8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live
 with him.** 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the
 dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.

10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the **life** he **lives**, he **lives** to God.

11 **In the same way**, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

NIV

1 Cor 3:1-2

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere **infants** in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.

NIV

2 Cor 5:18

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**; the old has gone, the new has come!

NIV

Eph 4:22-24

22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your **old self**, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 **to be made new** in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the **new self**, created **to be like God** in true righteousness and holiness.

NIV

Heb 5:11-14

11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an **infant**, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

NIV

Context: Jesus had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. In Jerusalem, He saw the wickedness of the Jews in the temple as they sold animals and changed money. He made a whip from cord and cleaned out the temple. John 2:23 tells us that many people saw the miracles that he did and believed in him. The Bible tells us that Jesus would not entrust himself to them. I believe that Nicodemus saw Jesus do miracles, and he saw the Master speak with authority and work with power. The Spirit of God drew Nicodemus to Christ, and he came to see what the “secret” was to the power that Jesus had. I bet Nicodemus wished his cold legalistic heart could feel half the passion that this young Rabbi had. So what does he do? He is moved to come to Jesus at night so that he could get some answers without being interrupted. **The entire book of John is a contrast between the matter of faith and the matter of unbelief.** Nicodemus was about to be challenged with the truths from a spiritual world. The question remains... are you born again?

John 2:23-25 is a transition passage to show the reader the difference between those who are saved in name only and a man who felt the weight of sin and condemnation and genuinely sought relief from Jesus.

RABBI TO RABBI: Who is interviewing who?

I: Nicodemus and His Blindness:

Verse 1: Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council or the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees were strict keepers of the law. The practice of memorizing scripture goes back to the days of Ezra. The Pharisees alleged that the Jews had gone into exile because they did not keep the Torah. They were filled with pride and arrogance. They liked to be recognized and praised. Very religious.

They had taken the law of God and made it into a ritualistic yoke around the necks of the people. Nobody could attempt to even remotely keep the laws in this form. They took the Ten Commandments, the civil, moral, and sacrificial laws and expanded upon God's original plan.

- 613 laws ... 248 pos., 365 neg.
- The Sanhedrin was the top Jewish court system or ruling council. The council had 71 members and the high priest ruled the council.
- The Sanhedrin comprised both major parties, Pharisees and Sadducees, old high priests and family members of the former high priest and scribes.

The Sadducees: The term means council. The aristocrats. Had pride in the fact that they traced their heritage back to Zadok the high priest, in the time of Solomon. The party of the rich. Preserved the past. In opposition to the Pharisees. Materialistic. Held to only the first five books of the Bible and denied oral law. Fought anything that would hinder their power and wealth. Folded under Roman rule. Did not believe in the afterlife, angels, or the resurrection. They were in charge of the temple and its services. They were present at Stephen's stoning, Jesus' execution, and at odds with many Christians.

The Pharisees: The term means separated ones. The righteous ones. They claimed to be separated from the common people but had greater influence over the people than any other group. They came up with the oral law so they could add to the Word and manipulate the people. They hated Jesus because He rejected their oral law. The Pharisees believed in the afterlife, angels, and demons, unlike the Sadducees. They memorized the scriptures.

The Mishnah was the codified Scribal law. The Talmud was the explanatory commentary on the law. The Scribes worked out the

regulations, and the Pharisees tried their best to keep them. This is why Jesus said, “You have heard it said, but I say unto you.”

~ The reason I gave you this background is that it is Nicodemus’ spiritual background and heritage. It tells us how he thought and what he believed. His “spiritual” heritage led to his blindness.

Illustration: You may or may not be able to tie a knot on the Sabbath. A knot must be identified. A sailor who ties a knot or a camel driver who ties a knot may be guilty of breaking the law. A woman may tie her girdle or skirt with a knot or wine skins or some similar type knot. If a man needed water on the Sabbath, he could not tie a bucket to a rope, or he would be breaking the law. He could not let down a bucket into the well without being guilty. However, he could tie a girdle to it and let it down and get him a drink. The same took place with a Sabbath journey and burdens that were carried. This was an awful way to live and a burden that was placed on the Jewish people by the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes wrote out the regulations, and the Pharisees made sure the people kept the law. This is the kind of man that came to Jesus by night.

Verse 2: *** This is the context in which he comes to see Christ.

Why and How Nicodemus Came:

- **Covertly:** He came at night... evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.
- **Respectfully:** He acknowledged Jesus as a Rabbi, a term of respect.
- **Courageously:** Note the word “we.” Could there have been others that did not come for fear of embarrassment? Notice the plural pronouns. Verses 3-4 have singular you. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus personally. Verses 7 11, and 12 change to plural you, y'all. About whom is Jesus referring?

- **Curiously or open mindedly:** Nicodemus had noticed that this Rabbi had something that they did not have. This is how he was drawn. That's the way it is with the truth. Truth has to be revealed. Jesus said that he was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. When God is at work, no amount of *skepticism* will work. The works of God can not be denied.
- **Earnestly:** He really wanted to know the truth. Show me an agnostic or atheist that is desirous of the truth and God will prove Himself.
- **He was spiritually empty or hungry:** He knew what he had was not satisfying.
- **Honestly:** "*We know you are a teacher from God.*" For a Pharisee to admit that is honesty.
- **Empirically:** Notice the word "know" in verse 2. Notice the word "know" in verse 10 and 11. The word "know" in verses 2 and 11 are the same word. Its literal meaning is to have knowledge or observed knowledge. Vines in the Expository Dictionary of Words says that this word *Oida* means that knowledge is based on observation. You come to know or perceive by watching. In verse 10, Jesus uses a different word for **Knowledge** that means to "come to know" or to "know completely." In the NT, it refers to knowledge that is based on the relationship between the "knowing" and the object known. This type of knowledge is not merely obtained by intellectual activity. It is not simply empirical, but is experiential. This knowledge is not just observed on paper but felt and understood in the heart. It is knowledge based on the work of the Holy Spirit prior to conversion.
- **Nicodemus came with observational knowledge, and Jesus told him he had to have an experience.**

Verse 3: Notice John does this again with a word that is equal to the word knowledge, but uses it in the context not of knowledge but of sight.

- The word “**see**” is also a very interesting word. It is used in John 14:17 to describe the work of the Holy Spirit and how the world cannot see or perceive Him.

John 14:16-17

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— 17 *the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.*

NIV

- The word for sight is *blepo* and means physical sight most of the time. The word that Jesus uses is more in line with the meaning of **perceive or understand**. We say today... “Oh, I see.”
- The point is that Jesus tells Nicodemus that he will never **perceive** or **see** the kingdom of heaven unless he spiritually **perceives** and knows God. He saw miracles, but not God. Nicodemus could not **perceive** the kingdom of God until he was **born again**. This is why miracles don’t save people, truth does.
- The term “born again” can, and in my opinion, should be translated **born from above** or from on top. Not just anew or again, but from a different place. Nicodemus even suggested that to be born a second time was strange or impossible. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that unless he was born from above or born anew spiritually that he could not understand spiritual matters. Salvation is prior to spiritual understanding (1 Corinthians 2:14). The lost do not live in our kingdom. Some pastors don’t tell lost people these things, thinking it will help them get saved. The truth is what saves, not empty promises.

- People who do not understand Christianity do not understand why I tithe, serve, love church, fellowship, do missions, make sacrifices... The reason is that they don't have the relational knowledge with God I have. They don't perceive or see the truth. They want to see before they believe. **That's not faith.**
- **Barclay-** *“Nicodemus is up against an eternal problem. The problem of the man who wants to be changed and who can't change himself.”* (In location, p. 125).

How He Came:

- As a man of position
- Aristocrat
- College educated
- Wise and elderly
- Ruler, A Sanhedrin
- One of the richest men of the day
- Cream of the crop of teachers
- A perfect man... religiously?

Here is what I am asking you to understand. No amount of human intellect, riches, fame, fortune, power, education, religion, or cleverness will get you to heaven. You must be born from above.

This is not a physical matter; this is a spiritual matter.

II. Nicodemus and his Bewilderment: 4-13

Verse 4:

- Notice that Nicodemus asked **“How” not “Why”** The word why is argumentative; the word how is inquisitive. Don't think that bewilderment is a bad thing. That just means you are confused but trying to understand. The skeptic is the person that's in trouble. His pride makes him think he is

smarter than God. The scripture says that the fool has said in his heart that there is no God. Paul says that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men.

- How “can” he do it or **δυναμει** (power and ability). How does a man get the **power** to be born again?

John 1:12-13

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, **he gave (Grace)** the **right** to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but **born of God.**”

NIV

Greek: “Right,” εξουσια. Means right, power, authority, or privilege, superhuman competency.

Quote: Malcolm Muggeridge: “One of the peculiar sins of the twentieth century which we've developed to a very high level is the sin of credulity (too ready to believe, or gullibility). It has been said that when human beings stop believing in God, they believe in nothing. The truth is much worse: they believe in anything.”

- Nicodemus is just confused about this *born again* thing and asks a great question. Do I have to go into the womb a second time? Then Jesus answers him in a unique way, looking at the world of the spirit and at the world of the flesh. ***He is at a critical juncture in his life. He will believe the truth or begin to believe anything.***

Verse 5:

The word “water” has caused many theologians to lose sleep at night. I would just as soon skip it, but someone would ask me after

the message what it means, so here goes. The word water is represented in these ways in the scripture.

1. Water = HS cleansing
2. Water = Baptism
3. Water = Natural birth
4. Water = The Word of God
5. Water = Repentance

~ Titus 3:5; Eph. 5:26; 1 Pt. 1:23, 3:21 must be read to make a proper decision.

- My opinion is this... we are talking about birth. The context is about birth. Jesus is simply saying you are firstborn in water during human birth. Then you are born of the spirit at conversion. It fits the context well. It also answers Nicodemus' question. This view does not harm. This view is also Dr. Gray Allison's view, and that puts me in pretty good company.

Jesus is clearly saying to Nicodemus that his way of getting to heaven just will not work.

Verse 6: This answers the question in verse 4.

- The physical cannot produce the spiritual. The Christian life is not born from the flesh or from works of our own.
- In Gal 5:16ff Paul tells us that the works of the flesh are sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, jealousy, discord, fits of rage, selfishness, ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. **HOW CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME FROM THIS?** How could anyone think that the flesh could produce salvation?

Quote: Dr. Rogers:

- Education makes a lost person a wise devil
- Legislation makes a person a powerful devil
- Religion makes people a deceived devil
- **If any man ever had reason to boast of his fleshly success it was Paul and Nicodemus. We know what Jesus told Nicodemus... look what Paul says about his fleshly success...**

Philippians 3:3-9

*3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who **put no confidence in the flesh**— 4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. 7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. **I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ** 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, **but that which is through faith in Christ** — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.*

NIV

Verse 7:

- The “you” in this passage is plural. Jesus was not just speaking to Nicodemus.
- Do not be surprised at this. Another way to say this is... “Don’t be surprised- you know who and what you are, Nicodemus, just

accept the fact that you are empty and need this new birth.
Admit it.

Verse 8

- Phillips tells us that it is no accident that Jesus uses the word wind with spirit. In Hebrew and Greek, the words for spirit are alike. Just as the wind gives away its presence by the moving of the trees, so does the spirit in the life of the saved man by his deeds and actions. **Both the wind and the spirit are invisible, but their effects can be seen.** Just as a person cannot tell when the wind will come or go, likewise, the lost man does not know when the spirit will come into his life or when it will leave. You need to respond to the gospel today. The spirit world cannot be seen. Only the effects of it. The physical world, obviously, is visible. Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus understand that there are two worlds that exist.

1 Corinthians 2:14-15

14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 The spiritual man makes judgments about all things,
NIV

Blowin' In The Wind Bob Dylan

How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannon balls fly
Before they're forever banned?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

How many years can a mountain exist
Before it's washed to the sea?
Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head,
Pretending he just doesn't see?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

How many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?
Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows
That too many people have died?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Verse 9

- Nicodemus asked *How* again.

Verse 10

- Nicodemus is “**the**” teacher in Israel. Education in the scriptures or in theology will not get you closer to God. Being a Sunday school teacher will not get you points with God. He failed at the very point of his expertise. His job was to understand and have knowledge. The primary teacher is ignorant of spiritual things. The leader in the temple does not know God. **How ironic?**

Illustration: A man dies and goes to heaven and asked if he could get in. The Lord asked him what he had done in this life. He said, well I was a deacon. You get 1 point for that. I taught Sunday school. You get one point for that. I gave lots of money to the church. You get one point for that. I have a Bible degree. You get one point for that. How many points does it take to get in? You can't even calculate the number it's so big. We start at a trillion trillion. Well, nobody will ever get in unless it's by the grace of God..... now, you got it!

Verse 11

- Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must choose his crowd. Believe the one who has a testimony or believe the one who has all the intellectual arguments.
- The point is... listen to your heart, not your head, if God is speaking to you.
- Notice the words **“we know”** again. Assurance will come as you **see/perceive** the truth. Notice also the words **“have seen”** (**οραω, horao**). Jesus puts the two concepts together that I spoke about earlier. Jesus says, in fact, I am telling you, Nicodemus, about what I know (that which I have observed) and I am telling you about what I have seen (experienced).
- Listen carefully. I am not asking you to base your salvation and eternity on feelings or observation. If you take a step of faith, God will confirm that faith with experiential knowledge that proves what I am telling you. Once you trust Him by faith, He enters the heart by the new birth, and you will experience not only a new birth but a new existence.

Verse 12:

- The heavenly requires **Faith**. We all have trouble believing earthly matters. If we can't understand the earthly, how will we understand the heavenly.
- Listen to me, Mr. Agnostic and Skeptic. You are trusting your eternity to your earthly knowledge? If Jesus tells us we cannot understand the earthly, why would you suppose that you have the heavenly figured out?
- The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God... they are foolishness to him, neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned.

Verse 13

- Where would you rather get your spiritual truth from, a spirit guide, a lost philosopher, a psychic, or some satanic source, secular humanism, atheism, or from the one who came from heaven. The one who came from heaven knows more about it than anyone else because it is his home.

III. Nicodemus and His Belief: 14-16**Verse 14-15**

The Illustration of Faith. Numbers 21:1-9 The looking up to a serpent on a pole was folly to reason, but it was life to faith... John Phillips.

Numbers 21:4-9

4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food! 6 Then the

LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then, when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

NIV

Verse 16: The greatest verse in the Bible

- Exegete the verse
 - Explain the word “believe”
- 1. *Pistis...* Not just credence to something or belief in something, but reliance upon. The word means that you have confidence in something or persuasion because of it.

Illustration: Wheel Barrow Illustration. Crossing a ravine on a wire. Do you believe that I can do that again? Then get into the wheelbarrow. That’s faith. You go with me.

2. The word for eternal life means *“Life that comes at the end of this age gained by faith which can’t be destroyed and is a present possession of the one who believes”* (Rienecker).
3. The word believe has a grammatical construction that indicates in the tense of the verb that the one who **is believing is taking an active part in the belief and that the belief is ongoing.**
4. In response to those who say that God sends people to HELL, I want you to know that the word perish reveals that the person that goes to hell plays a part in the designated place of eternity. (Middle, Subjunctive)

Closing:

#1 Henry Morehouse talked D. L. Moody into letting him preach in his church. He took the great preacher up on an earlier invite if he ever came to Chicago. The reluctant Moody let him, and he preached on John 3:16. He preached about the love of God. Moody was so impressed that he let him continue for a week on the same subject. The last night he closed by saying that he could go into heaven on Jacob's ladder and look up Gabriel the herald angel and ask him how much does God love the world? He would say... "For God so loved the world..." Morehouse was known as the man who moved the man that moved millions.

- **John 3:16. That's the way to end an interview with a Rabbi.**