

Born Again – Again (June 9, 2013)

Good morning. I'll try to keep this short. There's no law against too-long sermons but people don't like them. Like the kindly old lady who once told a preacher his sermon reminded her of God's love. Flattered, the preacher asked her how his sermon reminded her of God's love? "Because it endureth forever."

This is a somewhat revised version of a talk I gave last year, witnessed by very few people, as it turned out. So I'm giving it a fresh airing. It's about being "born again." In reading it over this morning I realized that I sound a bit more sure of myself than I really am; my main purpose this morning is not so much to stake out a position as to raise questions. After all, if we don't raise questions we'll never find the answers.

The scripture is John 3: 1-12. Let me read the passage:

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. ^[a]"

⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit ^[b] gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You ^[c] must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." ^[d]

⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"

In this passage we encounter the only passage in the Bible (except one, of no consequence) using the notion of being "born again" and the statement by Jesus that you can't enter the kingdom of heaven without being "born again." The passage describes Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus. Let's set the stage:

Jesus is in Jerusalem early in his ministry. The story of Nicodemus's night visit comes right after the story of Jesus's expelling the money changers from the Temple.

A little bit about Nicodemus. Nicodemus was what hip people today would call a "heavy dude." He was a Pharisee – the Pharisees were a group of influential lay people, somewhat conservative, a sort of political party (some called it a sect), that were learned in religious matters. Various translations of this passage call Nicodemus a "leader" or a "ruler" of the Jews; in this translation he is "a member of the Jewish ruling council," Apparently, in fact, he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body in Jerusalem. He was wealthy. He certainly was a heavy dude. If a movie were made of this scene, Nicodemus would be played by a well-known actor – and in fact, I understand that in the 1977 Franco Zeffirelli television miniseries "Jesus of Nazareth" Nicodemus was played by none other than Laurence Olivier. That shows you how heavy a dude he was.

John tells us that Nicodemus "came to Jesus by night" and there has been much speculation as to why he did so. Perhaps the reason was trivial – he knew Jesus would be resting so they could have a nice conversation. But if the reason was trivial, John probably wouldn't have called attention to the time of day. (Later on, John refers to Nicodemus as "Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night.") Many think that Nicodemus came by night because he didn't want it to be known that he was seeking Jesus out. Jesus had already offended the powers that be by raising the ruckus in the Temple. For my part, I expect that's why Nicodemus paid a night time visit. (One of the sermons on this passage that I saw was entitled "Nick at Night.")

So here's Jesus, probably "camping out" up on the Mount of Olives, kicking back after a hard day at the Temple, throwing out the moneychangers and all, and up comes Nicodemus. He opens the conversation very respectfully: "Rabbi" – teacher. Nicodemus would not have thrown that word around; he was opening with an unmistakable sign of respect. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God" – more respect – "for no one could perform the signs that you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus skips the small talk. He replies, “Very truly I tell you no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Excuse me? Big jump here. What’s going on? Nicodemus understandably replies: “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Probably a chuckle or two. Sounds reasonable. How one can be born when he’s old and how do you pull it off physically?

Jesus replies by explaining what he means: “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh but the spirit gives birth to spirit.” Well, now we’re getting somewhere; when you’re “born again” in Jesus’s sense you don’t get a new body, you get a new spirit; that’s the part of you that is born again. What about “born of water?” -- Jesus says “born of water and the spirit.” People have assumed that “born of water” refers to the washing away of one’s sins and sinful ways. So when you are born again you are cleansed (“born of water”), then you receive a new spirit (“born of spirit”). And you can’t enter the kingdom of heaven unless this happens to you.

In the conversation, Nicodemus is not faring well. Jesus is doing most of the talking. Nicodemus has one more line. He says, “How can these things be?” Jesus replies, “You’re a teacher of Israel and you don’t understand these things? I speak to you of what I know but you don’t accept my testimony. I’ve spoken to you of earthly things and you don’t believe me, how can you believe if I tell you of heavenly things?”

And that’s the meeting with Nicodemus. The actual ending isn’t described, but presumably Nicodemus thanks Jesus and goes away. (And by the way, without forgetting who the star of the show is, I think Nicodemus comes off the more sympathetic character in this little scene.)

How did Nicodemus react to this conversation? We don’t know, except that we do know he did not become an enemy. John tells us later that when the chief priests and Pharisees are trying to have Jesus arrested and they accuse him of deceiving the people, Nicodemus speaks up in his defense. Then later, following the

crucifixion he assists Joseph of Arimathea, presumably at great personal risk, in preparing the corpse of Jesus for burial. So Nicodemus's being pushed around by Jesus when they met did not turn Nicodemus against him.

That's all we know about Nicodemus; he doesn't appear in any of the other Gospels.

So, what do we think about the idea that you can't get into heaven unless you are "born again?" The phrase "born again" is, of course, widely used today, especially by evangelicals but by others as well, and more and more political candidates seem to think that, regardless of one's status in heaven, you can't win an election unless you say those magic words. Many just look to the Gospel of John and take it as a given that Jesus has told us we cannot see the Kingdom of God unless we are "born again." People who tell us that seem certain that they know what being "born again" is, but it's not so clear what it is, after all. And we should note that Jesus doesn't tell us much. His explanation that being born again is being born by water and the Spirit helps a little but doesn't move the ball very far.

For example, is being "born again" an experience, an event? Or is it just a sort of status?

For Evangelicals, being born again is an experience, in which one more or less suddenly comes to accept Jesus as one's savior or, at least, to "believe in him." The experience may be a conversion, or maybe an emotional renewal, a "rebirth", but it is definitely an experience.

For others, it may just be an event of a certain kind, in which one just accepts Jesus; some mainstream Christians think of baptism this way.

Still others think of it as simply having come, by whatever path, perhaps a slow process, to accept Jesus – but not in any particular moment.

What of a child who has been raised to accept Jesus, never doubts what he or she's been taught, and leads a Christian life; is he or she "born again?" Or just not eligible for heaven?

It's not crystal clear what being born again is, even though countless people think they know what Jesus was referring to. On the other hand, surely it's important to be clear on what it is if you can't get into heaven without it.

But wait -- is it really true that you can't get into heaven without being born again? "Well, yes, Jesus said so." Let's look at that for a minute.

If it's true that you cannot get into heaven without being "born again," that really is pretty important. But the Gospels don't treat it as important. The phrase "born again" is not mentioned in any of the other Gospels, nor by the Apostles except once by Peter just in passing. None of the Gospel writers other than John thought the encounter with Nicodemus was of sufficient importance to record. Without John, we should hardly have known that it was necessary for one to be born again. It's hard for some to wonder whether John's story is authentic.

I think that, at the end of the day, there is little in the story of Nicodemus or the notion of being "born again" to tell us the entrance requirements for Heaven. Maybe a verse that follows the account of Nicodemus, John 3:16, gives us a hint, even though it was written by John and not said by Jesus:

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Maybe this helps us to extract a core message from John's story, shorn of the metaphorical language of "being born again" and so forth, which is simply that unless one comes to believe in Jesus, one cannot go to heaven. Maybe that's the only cash value from this passage that we can take to the bank.

This is a famous verse. One sees billboards with just "John 3:16" written on them and, from looking into the literature, I can testify that preachers LOVE to do sermons on it.

For my part, one striking thing about this verse is that it illustrates the conflicting themes that some have seen in the Christian message. Some argue that the more authentic Christian message is and should be one of God's unconditional love and salvation for all, period, as opposed to the view of some people that only believers will get into heaven. Well, John's verse manages to give us both views in one. "For God so loved the world" – here John doesn't mean that God loved the Rocky Mountains, the Pacific Ocean and the aurora borealis; he didn't mean "the world" in that sense, but rather all of humanity – God loved all of humanity so much "that he gave his only begotten son", and here we'd expect John to go on "that no one in the world would perish but all would have everlasting life". But that's not what we do get; we get "that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." So those who don't believe in Jesus will perish even though God loves them so much that he sacrificed his only son. Millions upon millions of people have never even heard of Jesus, so they can't "believe in" him and they miss their chance at Heaven through no fault of their own. In the end, John 3:16 tells of a wonderful gift -- for the fortunate few.

But that's a topic for another day.

[For reference, the full Lectionary assignment – John 3:1-17]

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. ^[a]”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit ^[b] gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You ^[c] must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” ^[d]

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven —the Son of Man. ^[e] ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ^[f] ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” ^[g]

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Footnotes:

- a. [John 3:3](#) The Greek for *again* also means *from above*; also in verse 7.
- b. [John 3:6](#) Or *but spirit*
- c. [John 3:7](#) The Greek is plural.
- d. [John 3:8](#) The Greek for *Spirit* is the same as that for *wind*.
- e. [John 3:13](#) Some manuscripts *Man, who is in heaven*
- f. [John 3:14](#) The Greek for *lifted up* also means *exalted*.
- g. [John 3:15](#) Some interpreters end the quotation with verse 21.