

BaptistWay: You must be born again

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- *The BaptistWay lesson for Dec. 14 focuses on John 3:1-21.*

At the height of his worldwide fame, rock musician Alice Cooper drank a bottle of whiskey a day, but the bottle almost destroyed his marriage to Sheryl, his wife of nearly 30 years. In an effort to save their relationship, he began attending church with her and felt as if God spoke to him every time.

Now a believer, Cooper speaks to curious fellow musicians about the change in his life. “I have talked to some big stars about this, some really horrific characters, and you’d be surprised,” he said. “The ones that you would think are the farthest gone are the ones that are the most apt to listen.”

Nicodemus probably wasn’t as far gone as Alice Cooper or the musicians he describes, but he was an unlikely individual to seek personal conversation with Jesus.

A visit in the night

As a member of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish ruling council in social and religious matters (v. 1)—Nicodemus was a well-known community member. Some scholars speculate being seen with Jesus would place his honored position at risk. So, he chose to visit Christ in the dark of night. Or perhaps he couldn’t sleep as he pondered Jesus’ teachings and actions and sought resolution. Regardless of the reason, in a snippet of a conversation that probably lasted many hours, John shares the crux of Jesus’ message to Nicodemus—rebirth.

While Nicodemus fully recognized God's power and blessing on the influential yet controversial Nazarene rabbi (v. 2), his positive impressions lacked explanation. He sought answers. Rather than focusing on his identity or miraculous signs, though, Jesus wanted to deal with Nicodemus' soul. Pharisees were teachers and interpreters of the Jewish law (the Ten Commandments and other regulations regarding behavior), and they had thoroughly codified all aspects of life. Therefore, Nicodemus knew how to act, but moral living is not a means to an end, nor can it provide abiding fulfillment.

Jesus explained citizenship in God's kingdom doesn't come by natural means but rather by supernatural effect—we must be "born again" (v. 3). We must experience a spiritual rebirth through a relationship with God that transforms human nature (Romans 12:2).

A surprising question

Nicodemus' question in verse 4 is surprising. As a religious authority, surely he knew the prophets spoke about spiritual rebirth (see Ezekiel 36:25-27; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Joel 2:28-32). Clearly, he didn't understand this concept adequately. However, because Jesus challenged his assumptions and much of what he'd always believed to be true, it's possible Nicodemus' question was sarcastic.

Regardless, Jesus responded: People must be born of water and the Spirit (v. 5). Although scholars and denominations interpret this phrase differently, its simplest understanding is entering God's kingdom requires a physical birth—from a mother's womb—and spiritual birth—by inviting the Holy Spirit to control one's life.

Another interpretation is that because John the Baptist baptized people for repentance (Mark 1:4), perhaps Jesus referenced water, since Nicodemus probably knew about John's ministry. Jesus' focus, though, is on the change

brought about by the Spirit. Flesh—either the human body or carnal human nature—produces flesh; likewise, the Holy Spirit replicates itself (v. 6), making new spiritual creations (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In verse 8, Jesus used the Greek word *pneuma*, interchangeably interpreted as “wind” and “spirit,” in a witty play-on-words. By comparing the two, Jesus illustrated a nonbeliever, when placed in contact with the Spirit, doesn’t understand the new life and purposes brought about by his work. Furthermore, as the effect of the wind can be observed but not controlled, the Holy Spirit works in his own way to accomplish his purposes. We cannot control him.

A question or a challenge?

Nicodemus then asked, “How can this be?” (v. 9). While he may have been stuck in literal thought, such a question is characteristic of one looking to challenge truth or denounce the gospel’s claims, rather than pursue genuine, thoughtful conversation. Jesus’ response was to point out what Nicodemus, as an administrator of the law, should know.

Christ challenged him toward humility—acknowledge truth or deny he’s as knowledgeable as he’d like to believe (v. 10). Using the law with which Nicodemus ordered his life and the prophets in whom he was well-versed, God intended to point his people to the Messiah. Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets (Luke 24:44). Why then, Jesus asked, as one who taught these ancient truths, did Nicodemus not know about spiritual rebirth or recognize their fulfillment in the testimony and life of Christ (v. 10)?

The problem, Jesus explained, was although Nicodemus had seen Jesus’ miracles firsthand, heard his message and practical illustrations, he still did not believe (v. 11), because he did not accept Jesus’ authority to instruct in spiritual matters (v. 12). Thus, in verses 13-15, Jesus chose to identify himself more clearly—the Son of Man (Jesus’ favorite self-description

referring to his true humanity); who came to earth from heaven (acknowledging his full deity); who would be lifted up for the purpose of bringing eternal life to all who believe in him.

Drawing upon Nicodemus' familiarity with Jewish Scriptures, Jesus referenced the snake Moses raised up on a standard in the wilderness which, when viewed by those bitten by fiery serpents, saved them from death (Numbers 21:4-9). This analogy is a beautiful parallel for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross by which God offers eternal life to all who put their trust and confidence in Christ. Why? Because of love—not an emotional feeling, but a passionate commitment—demonstrated by giving his only Son to die (v. 16; Genesis 22:2).

Those who believe Christ's life and death cleanse them from their sin are saved from the condemnation (v. 17; Romans 8:1) brought by the consequences of that sin and from an eternity apart from God (v. 18).

Jesus' conclusion

Jesus concluded his defense to Nicodemus with this verdict: "Light has come into the world" (v. 19; John 1:4-12), but his perfection exposes evil deeds, and people hate convicting exposure of their wrongs (v. 20). Yet those who live by the truth live in the light (v. 21). This is a poignant message for a man who came to him in the night (v. 2).

Will Nicodemus step out of the shadows and confess his faith in Christ in the dawn of the light? Will he be reborn, made into a new creation? Will we? What we do reflect who we are and what we believe. If we claim our spirits have been reborn, then our lives should give evidence to the Holy Spirit's fruits (Galatians 5:22-23).

Eternity in heaven is a desirable objective, but eternal life begins when we are reborn. We are saved from guilt and condemnation. Live like you're free today.