

JOHN 2:23-3:21 "JESUS THE RIDDLER"

Resurrection Makes Jesus Greater Than The Temple, 2:13-25

**A) 2:23-3:1 BELIEF BECAUSE OF JESUS' SIGNS: IMAGERY OF LIGHT AND DARK.**

2:23 Now when he (Jesus) was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, 1/3 In Jn., Quest Narrative: Seeker  
 many **BELIEVED IN HIM** when they saw they signs which he did; Believed His Miracles, 2:18, 23; 3:2b,  
 24 but Jesus did not trust himself to them, Skeptical, He Did Not Believe Their Believing  
 25 because he knew all men 3 // Negative Statements About Us, Rev. 13:11-14 (Ambiguity)  
 and needed no one to bear witness to man; *Mekhilta* On Ex. 15:32, We Do Not Surprise Him  
 for he himself knew what was in man. Divine Attribute, Knows The Heart! Darkness, vv.19-21  
 He Knows Us; What Will It Take For Us To Know Him?

3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. New Character Introduced

2a This man came to Jesus **BY NIGHT** 1:5 Prologue, Double Meaning: Out Of Darkness To Light  
 Official Judaism, Preventive Grace At Work: A Magnet

**B. 3:2-15 THREE ROUNDS OF DIALOG BETWEEN NICODEMUS AND JESUS.**

To See God In Jesus Requires A New Affinity

**1) vv.2a-3 STATEMENT & ANSWER: JESUS AS TEACHER/ HEALER.**

2b and said to him, Nicodemus As Exemplar Of 2:18, 23b, 3:2 = Sign Faith  
 No Recognition Of Ambiguity Of Power, Rev. 13:11-14  
 "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; Partly Right, TENTATIVE FAITH  
 for no one can do the signs that you do, unless God is with him." //2:23b, MIRACLE BASED  
 3 Jesus answered him, Presumes Question: How Enter The Kingdom?  
 Intro **"TRULY, TRUTH, (Amen, Amen) I SAY TO YOU,** No Reciprocal Flattery! Solemn Intro  
 Condition unless one is born (Gk. *anōthen* = from above/anew-again), Double Meaning, Radical Rebirth  
 Goal he cannot see the kingdom of God." 18:36, Presumes Epistemology = *Like Is Known By Like*  
 Now Or Ultimately, See And Enter, 1 Jn. 2:29, Titus 3:5, 1 Pt. 1:3

**2) vv.4-8 Q & A: THE HOLY SPIRIT'S MINISTRY.**

Conversion Of Cyprian Of Carthage, *Epistle to Donatus* 1:3-4

4 Nicodemus said to him, Reduce Claim To Absurdity: Tactic, Takes *Anōthen* As Again, Second Time  
 "How can a man be born when he is old? Earthbound Nicodemus, MISUNDERSTANDING  
 Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" TWO LEVELS OF SPEECH  
 5 Jesus answered him, Jesus Retains Control Of The Dialog  
 a **"TRULY, TRULY, I SAY TO YOU,** Same Answer With Variation, Clarify *Anōthen* As Above  
 unless one is born of water-and-the-Spirit, *Of-Water-Which-Is-Spirit*, Titus 3:5, 4:7-14, 7:37-39  
 he cannot enter the kingdom of God." a. BORN  
 6 b That which is born of flesh is flesh, Dualism: 2 Realms  
 and that which is born of Spirit is spirit. b. SPIRIT  
 7 a' Do not marvel that I say to you, Rebirth Caused By Heavenly Power  
 'You must be born (*anōthen* = from above/ anew-again).' a' BORN  
 8 b' 'The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it,  
 but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes;' Maxim/Proverb  
 so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." b' SPIRIT  
 Mysterious Power: Invisible, Known By Effects

**3) vv.9-12 Q & A: INCARNATION AND CROSS/RESURRECTION.**

Jesus' Authority Not Signs But Resurrection And New Birth

9 Nicodemus said to him, How Can This Reality Be Accessed?  
 "How can this be?" Through Descent/Ascent Of Son Of Man  
 10 Jesus said to him, Sarcasm, Nicodemus Rebuked  
 "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?  
 11 **TRULY, TRULY, I SAY TO YOU,** we speak of what we know, Jesus Is Witness From Above = We  
 and bear witness to what we have seen; KNOW/SEE  
 but you do not receive *our* testimony. NOT RECEIVE  
 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, Lesser to Greater, Parable Of v.8  
 how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? v.12 Dialog Ends, NOT BELIEVE  
 Must Participate In Heavenly World First!

**A') vv.13-21 BELIEF BECAUSE OF NEW BIRTH IN THE SPIRIT: IMAGERY OF LIGHT AND DARK.**

**Thesis:** No Mystical Journey Upward To New Birth, Ascent (v.13a, v.14-15); Descent (v.13b, vv. 16-21)

13 1 No one has ascended into heaven Origins/Revelation: Theological Monolog Begins, God Has Come Down: Incarnation  
 2 but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. Dan. 7:13, Unique, Great Coming Down! KNOW/SEE  
**Exposition:** See Kingdom = Enter Kingdom = Have Eternal Life  
 14 1' And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, Use Of O.T. Analogy  
 15 so must the Son of man be lifted up, Cross And Resurrection, 8:28; 12:32, 34  
 so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Typological Interpretation: Num. 21:7-9  
 New Birth Is Not By One's Own Mystical Ascent  
 16\* 2' For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,/ Father's Motive, Son's Mission, Our Response  
 that whoever **BELIEVES IN HIM** should not perish but have eternal life. = *Go On Believing/Having*  
 17 For God sent the Son into the world,/ Beneficent Intent, *m. Berakoth* 5:5 On Ambassador  
 not to condemn the world,/ but that the world might be saved through him. Judgment As A Byproduct  
 18 He who believes in him is not condemned; One Is Born Again By Trusting Jesus' Death/Resurrection  
 God's Alternative To Judgment  
 he who does not believe is condemned already Pass Judgment On Ourselves  
 because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. Reject God's Self-Revelation  
 Not Mystical Ascent, But Descent/Ascent Of Son Of Man  
 19 And this is the judgment, that light has come into the world,/ Light Exposes Darkness  
 and men (and women) loved **DARKNESS** rather than light,/ because their deeds were evil. Love  
 20 For every one who does evil (pettiness) hates the light,/ Human Decision Reflects Human Nature  
 and does not come to the light,/ lest his deeds should be exposed. Nicodemus Came To Light  
 21 But he who is true comes to the light, / To Believe In Jesus' Name Is Virtuous  
 that it may be clearly seen/ that his deeds have been wrought in God. *Deeds* (3x), 19:38-42

## JESUS THE RIDDLER

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....”*

The God who takes the initiative in high-cost loving.

J O H N 3 : 1 6

**F**ill in the blanks with me. I give the first phase, you give the second.

“The Lord is my shepherd, \_\_\_\_\_.”

“Our Father who art in heaven, \_\_\_\_\_.”

“For God so loved the world \_\_\_\_\_.”

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the Lord’s Prayer, and John 3:16: they are perhaps the only fragments of Scripture that remain part of common culture, and it is last of the three that claims our attention this morning. It’s been called *the gospel in miniature*, John 3:16:

“For God	(the greatest lover)
so loved the world	(the greatest audience)
that he gave his only Son,	(the greatest gift)
that whoever believes in him	(the greatest invitation)
should not perish	(the greatest rescue)
but have eternal life	(the greatest future).” <sup>1</sup>

The verse is so overly-familiar its world-shaking message is lost. I’ve driven from the parsonage to the church so many times I do it like a robot. I’ve been hypnotized by repetition. Same with this verse. Rote memory guides our recitation and bypasses the brain. The lips move, but the heart and mind are not moved.

One way to recapture the edge is to retranslate it from Greek in a way that ignores good English style. Here’s how my teacher Dr. Charles Talbert lays it out:

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<sup>1</sup> One of several versions (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/robertcrosby/> 2012/05).

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“For in this manner God loved *the world* (i.e. humanity mobilized in defiance of divine purpose), with the result that he gave his only Son with the purpose that everyone who goes on believing in him (present tense) may not perish but may go on having eternal life (present tense).”<sup>2</sup>

In this awkward translation we learn that our *world* is not the peaceful creation of Eden but the world as it now is, our current location of alienation and hostility East of Eden, and that God loves it anyway, a love so intense God comes into the world in the flesh of Jesus to open a new way, and in doing so pays a high price. We call it *the incarnation*– the enfleshment of God the Son, and we celebrate it every Christmas. God invades the fallen world to win it back, or at least as much of it as will currently cooperate in the great rescue. With the aid of a maid Mary, God the Son is dropped behind enemy lines as a newborn, hiding in our midst as a village guy, a sleeper cell of one waiting three decades for a signal of activation from above.

In this re-translation we also see that faith is not just a one time event in the past but an ongoing relationship of trust and that eternal life is not just future but present. The open invitation is to let God create in me a trust for Jesus based on real evidence with the result I am rescued in the here-and-now and in the then-and-there. I will not perish under the weight of God’s wrath when it is revealed. I know and have deep assurance *now* that I am already accepted because a new life that outlasts death has already been planted within me. Eternal life does not begin at death but in the present by trust in Jesus Christ. Listen again for new meaning:

“For in this manner God loved *the world* (i.e. humanity mobilized in defiance of divine purpose), with the result that he gave his only Son with the purpose that everyone who goes on believing in him (present tense) may not perish but may go on having eternal life (present tense).”

### TURNING TO THE TEXT

#### The Interview (2:23-3:12)

A second way to refresh the meaning of John 3:16 is to read the story that surrounds it. It’s spring in Jerusalem and the greatest of Jewish festivals. It’s Passover, the yearly celebration of the ancient rescue from Egypt, the event that makes the Jews

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<sup>2</sup> *Reading John* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 102.

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God's people, and Jesus is in the city keeping festival. But he stands out from the crowds for good reason. Around him unusual things are happening. In the power of the Spirit and as a display of the Father's kingdom, Jesus performs miracles on hurting people, the healings and exorcisms we read about in the gospels. Bodies and souls are freed from the immediate effects of disease and disability, sin and evil. People and their pain matter to God; Jesus spend lots of time face-to-face with desperate people. Two or three in a day wear me out, but in Jesus there was a well of love and wisdom that was only constrained by his human limits: the need for food and sleep, space to think and pray. These deeds of mercy are called *signs* by John, meaning they point beyond themselves to the kingdom of God which is future and to the God of the kingdom who is present in Jesus. In Jesus the full Trinitarian reality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is present and active within the limits of history. This is the teaching of the church based on Scripture and long reflection as summarized in the Creeds. To meet Jesus is to do personal business with the Living God.

To us Jesus looks like an independent agent, a heroic figure full of initiative and assertiveness, *a man on the move*, but appearances are deceiving. Jesus lived out of an invisible partnership with the Father and the Spirit, the depths of which we can't imagine and the psychology of which we have no model for. What's clear is that he *heard* what we do not hear, *saw* what we do not see, *knew* what we do not know.<sup>3</sup> He was an otherworldly mystic and— at the same time— the most realistic person who ever lived. He was, as some have said, *supernaturally natural*. On his own he can do nothing more than we can, just stand there and be sinless and perfect because in him is not an smidgen of rebellion against God, but in obedience to and dependence on the Father and the Spirit he does *powerful signs* that point beyond themselves to a new reality that's already having effects at ground level. The full storm is not yet upon us in all its force, but the winds are already picking up, ruffling people's hair and making trees sway as signs something big is on the way. You can feel and even see it when you are around him. At his word and touch things happen that are good for people. Jesus lives in two worlds simultaneously, our everyday visible world and an invisible world just beyond sight. When we receive gifts of the Holy Spirit to serve others, and when we receive occasional divine guidance, and when a verse of Scripture lights up the page, when we follow a holy hunch that leads to loving action, we are being touched by that same invisible world of light, only at a much lower voltage if you want to use an electrical analogy. Or— for a water analogy— what for us is an occasional drip from the faucet was for Jesus a constant flow. His human

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<sup>3</sup> See John 5:19-30, 15:1-8.

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faculties of perception were much sharper than ours since he was unimpaired by the blinding and debilitating effects of sin; he used more of his brain than any of us. He saw and perceived as no human had since Adam in his innocent perfection. And when you add to this human precision his unlimited access to immediate divine revelation from above, you see what an amazing thing it was to have a conversation with Jesus. Warmly human, amazing depth, knowing what you did not know about yourself because, as John said, *he knew what was in man*. I don't know your heart; he does, all the crud, all the hidden potential, all the crazy dreams, all our capacity for self-deception and evil, all the good that would come if you followed him.

It's no surprise that when Jesus performed signs as a demonstration of God's mercy people trusted him. John says so, "Now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, *many believed in him* when they saw the signs which he did...." He was different from other traveling rabbis. Is this the Messiah? "Solomon, go get your uncle Amos. His eyes are clouded, and Dr. Jesus does cataracts! At a minimum they saw him as a dispenser of healing and wanted to get in on it while the gettin' was good. It's natural to want relief from pain and torment. Many did not make it to Jesus, but we have no record he turned away anyone who was brought to him, and some he touched at a distance. In his presence life was made whole again.

But John doesn't leave us with a miracle report only. He records that they *believed in him* but that he *did not believe in them*. It wasn't reciprocal. They had partial faith in Jesus based on powerful benefits, but Jesus did not have much trust in them. Why? Because he knew them, and knew what was in them. We are naive about ourselves, but he is not naive about us: "...but Jesus did not trust himself to them," writes John, "because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness to man; for he himself knew what was in man." Our capacity for deceit may surprise us; it never surprises him. He's faithful; we're fickle. Miracles draw crowd and may spark trust, but they do not necessarily bring allegiance or transformed character. Jesus will not quit loving us, but he also knows too much about us to trust us very far.

It is out of this mix that Nicodemus emerges. Picture a dark stage with a single bright circle of illumination. In the center of the spotlight stands Jesus. We hear the sound of footfalls as a figure approaches. He stops and stands at the rim of the circle. We see an outline; his face is shadowed. He's being pulled towards the light but is not yet able to enter it, a learned man with a hungry heart. He's heard reports and perhaps interviewed some of the people Jesus touched, but he comes to Jesus under cover of night. He doesn't want the risk of open association, and yet he's pulled

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toward the light. But the darkness that is *outside* in the night is also *inside* Nicodemus. “Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus *by night*.” Learned in the Scriptures. Observant. Esteemed. Powerful. And also fearful of public association. That’s Nicodemus, a man of real but inadequate faith. The magnetic grace of God is tugging at his soul, and to his credit he responds and arranges a confidential conversation. Jesus knows him well, but what will it take for Nicodemus to know who Jesus really is?<sup>4</sup> Not simply more information or a bit more clarification of theological details, nothing so small as that. It will take a new birth *from above*. And so with Jesus in the light and Nicodemus at the edge of the shadows the conversation begins, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher from God; for no one can do the signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Nicodemus offers Jesus a respectful title, *Rabbi*, and acknowledges he is a miracle worker sent from God. Nicodemus understands Jesus within the current categories of Jewish tradition which had slots for teachers, prophets, and sometimes even miracle workers. Jesus is the latest in a long line, one more messenger for the tradition to incorporate, one more prophet to be respected from a safe distance. Nicodemus is a thoughtful theologian, but he still inhabits of the lower world.

Jesus neither agrees nor disagrees with Nicodemus but passes over his confession and does not flatter him in return as if they are equals because they are not. Instead, he speaks a challenge and a riddle and prefaces it with a solemn introduction. “Amen, Amen (Truly, truly) I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nick wants to exchange courtesies; Jesus wants to open him to a new world in the midst of the old.

Born *anew*. The RSV translators chose the word *anew* because it’s ambiguous. The Greek word *anōthen* can mean either *from above* or it can mean *again* (i.e. as in a second time). And that’s the riddle. Jesus said *born anew* meaning *born from above*; Nicodemus heard *born again a second time in the normal way*. Jesus speaks vertically from above; Nicodemus hears horizontally because it’s where he lives, down below in darkness. The double meaning keeps the conversation going and exposes Nicodemus’ ignorance. For our friend to see and hear what Jesus sees and hears—the communications of the invisible kingdom of God working at ground level—he must enter Jesus’ world, and the only way to do that is to be invited in by God

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<sup>4</sup> The question is from Talbert, *Reading John*, 97.

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through an experience so radical that it can only be pictured as a new birth into a new realm. Like is only known by like, and despite his great learning, Nicodemus is fundamentally *unlike* Jesus. An analogy is helpful here. Phillip Yancey writes:

“Every animal on earth has a set of correspondences with the environment around it, and some of those correspondences far exceed ours. Humans can perceive only thirty percent of the range of the sun's light and 1/70th of the spectrum of electromagnetic energy. Many animals exceed our abilities. Bats detect insects by sonar; pigeons navigate by magnetic fields; bloodhounds perceive a world of smell unavailable to us. Perhaps the spiritual or ‘unseen’ world requires an inbuilt set of correspondences activated only through some sort of spiritual quickening. ‘No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,’ said Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

Morality and obedience are important but not enough. Learning is preferable to ignorance, but it's not enough either. Being a faithful member of a church is an asset, but insufficient. For Nicodemus to see what Jesus sees, the same Spirit must be *in Nicodemus* that is *in Jesus*. There must be an internal correspondence since like is only known by like. To have the Holy Spirit wash you inwardly like water and blow through your life like an unexpected breeze is the equivalent of entering a new world, like being born a second time even as an old man. It is profoundly experiential and not under Nicodemus' control. He cannot attain it by human effort. It's not a reward for a job well done. It's not a matter of effort but of trust in Jesus and finally a miracle. And if and when it happens, he will know it. The light that is in and around Jesus will be turned on within his soul. The children are right, “It takes one to know one,” and at this point Nicodemus is still an outsider. He doesn't get it, and he can't. “That's silly,” he says to Jesus, “I'm too big to crawl back in my mother's womb and start over.” He accuses Jesus of speaking foolishness.

It could have ended there. But Jesus saw the Spirit's work in the midst of Nicodemus' mental frustration, and so he offered two analogies, the first from water, the second from wind. Jesus appeals to Nicodemus' imagination. It is a genuine give-and-take with Nicodemus' answer shaping Jesus' next response. Nothing canned about it. The earlier phrase *born anew* is changed by Jesus in the second exchange to *born-of-water-and-the-Spirit* which means *born-of-water-which-is-*

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Yancey, "Seeing the Invisible God," *Books & Culture* (May/June 2000), 8

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*Spirit*<sup>6</sup> The earlier image of *seeing the kingdom* is now modified to *entering the kingdom*. Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one of born of water-and-the-Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus blind spot is that he assumes because he and Jesus occupy the same piece of real estate they are living in and out of the same world, which they are not. Nicodemus is a man; Jesus is a man. Nicodemus is a Jew; Jesus is a Jew. Nicodemus reads Scripture; Jesus reads Scripture. Nicodemus is a Jewish teacher; Jesus is a Jewish teacher. Nicodemus prays and attends Passover; Jesus prays and attends Passover. Their profiles are similar, but they operate out of two different worlds, as Jesus makes clear, “That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is Spirit.” A lower world of darkness and an upper world of light, and you only leave one and enter the other by the narrow passage of a new birth. “Do not marvel that I say to you because this is the way it is, ‘You must be born anew.’”

Jesus then reasons with Nicodemus’ imagination with a second analogy. Wind is an invisible power with visible effects. It blows your hair about and blows in great storms. You don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. It’s not under your control, Nicodemus, and neither is the new birth. It happens with your full participation, but not under your control. You will not understand until *after* it happens. Only God can place you in a new world while leaving you in the same spot, and he does it through trusting in the One he sent. A new birth, a new world: water that washes you clean inside and wind that exerts force within. And you, Nicodemus, need both purification and empowerment. The light needs to be turned on and the place swept clean. “So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

For a third time now Nicodemus speaks to Jesus. He’s been pared down from two longer questions to one short one, “How can this be?” In other words, “What is the technique? *How* is this to happen?”

But the real question is not a *human how* but a *divine who*. Despite our long American history of invitation hymns, altar calls, mourner’s benches, and formulaic sinner’s prayers, there is no *how-to* technology to get people born again. Any *how* question puts the burden on our side of the equation, which is the wrong side. This is something only God can do, and he rarely does it the same way twice. Nicodemus wanted the steps laid out 1-2-3 so that he could follow them 1-2-3 and get results. I

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<sup>6</sup> On the analysis of this hendiadys, see Talbert, *Reading John*, 99.

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may pray that you be born again, and you may deeply desire it, but unless God does something, nothing happens, no matter how many times we jump through the religious hoops. If you prayed a sinner's prayer and nothing changed in your life, guess what? Nothing happened in your life. And if you know and love Jesus Christ and have no idea of when or where it happened, guess what? You've been born from above. The issue is not this or that technique or this or that programmable experience like the one someone else had. The issue is new light and new life in the soul. Forgiveness and assurance. Hope in God that life cannot quench. Love for one another. A growing appetite for Holy Scripture and Holy Communion. A heart that hears from God and yearns for justice and takes risks. And if it's there, you've been born again; and if it isn't, then you haven't. It's a new experiential and experimental reality. And you will not get it from any *human how* but only from a *divine who*. It means doing business with God on God's terms and at God's unpredictable timing.

Dr Francis Collins headed the Human Genome Project before serving as the Director of the National Institutes of Health. He has credentials! In 2007 he wrote a best-seller— *The Language of God*— which weaves together his scientific work and his journey from atheism to Christ.

Interestingly, although Collins is thoroughly committed to rational inquiry and the scientific method, God also used people and nature to lead him to Christ. As a gifted medical student, Collins thought it was "convenient to not have to deal with God." But after one of his patients told Collins about her faith, she asked, "What about you? What do you believe?"

In Collin's own words, "I stuttered and stammered and felt the color rising in my face, and I said, 'Well, I don't think I believe in anything.' But it suddenly seemed like a very thin answer. And that was unsettling." After a long period of searching, which included grilling a pastor and reading C.S. Lewis, Collins finally came to Christ. Here is his description:

“I had to make a choice. A full year had passed since I decided to believe in some sort of God. On a beautiful fall day, as I was hiking in the Cascade Mountains... the majesty and beauty of God's creation overwhelmed my resistance. As I rounded a corner and saw a beautiful frozen waterfall, hundreds of feet high, I knew the search was over. The next morning, I knelt in the dewy grass as the sun rose and surrendered to Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2007), 225.

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A new birth. Born from above. New eyes, entering a new world amidst the old. A Father above and new life from Jesus on the inside through the presence of the Spirit. The same man, Francis Collins, but a new identity. The lights are now on and accompanied by a new set of impulses and possibilities. The same man, the same place, but now a whole new world to explore.

It's here in the third exchange that Jesus' tactics shift. He's challenged Nicodemus and explained with analogies, but now he shifts to mockery, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?" This rebuke is from the Holy Spirit. You see, something about Nick still loves the darkness. Coming to the light means exposure; his deeds would be known. Even the best have things to hide. Jesus is from the upper realm of light, Nicodemus from the lower realm of darkness. He's pulled towards the light of Jesus, but the darkness has been his companion for so long it feels like home; it's all he knows. The light is just too bright.

He's not yet ready, and so the conversation ends with the question, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Nicodemus fades back into the darkness without a word. His freedom is respected. Jesus lets him go. He appears twice more in John's Gospel in a favorable light,<sup>8</sup> but we do not know whether he was ever born from above. He appears and then disappears as a seeker. George Taylor wrote, "Coming to the Lord is a shedding off process. Sometimes being *born again* takes a long pregnancy."<sup>9</sup>

I once sat down in Georgetown with a casual friend who was a long-term, hard-core reprobate. Highly intelligent, an artist and craftsman, but sodden in liquor and marinated in disappointment for way too long. We laugh and talk. I pray inwardly and look for openings, but there is a deadness in his soul that is deep and resistant. Stubborn. Hard. There's no psychological and pastoral technique in my pastor's bag of tricks to give this man what he needs which is a deep drink of the love of God pouring through his inner being like a raging river. I listen and pray, but it's out of my hands. I leave his presence a bit depressed and say to myself as I walk away, "He needs what Nicodemus needed and what happened to me. A new birth followed by a new life. I know you love him, Lord. Is there anything I should do?"

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<sup>8</sup> John 7:50-51, 19:38-42.

<sup>9</sup> *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 8.

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**John's Theological Commentary On The Interview (v.13-21)**

If there is an answer to the *how question*, it's given in verses 13 through 21 which most scholars take to be John's commentary on the Nicodemus story and not part of the story itself. The conversation ends with verse 12; what follows is in the third, not the first person. John is speaking with us *about* Jesus and his significance rather than having Jesus speaking directly with Nicodemus. Think of it as you would a reporter's comments after running the video clip of an interview.

How does the new birth happen? Not because of a mystical journey to heaven, "No one has *ascended* into heaven...." It is not because we *go up* but because he *came down*, "No one has ascended into heaven but he who *descended* from heaven, the Son of man." Jesus the Son came down from God into order to be lifted up again on a cross as a display before Israel and all world just how far God's love goes and how much love endures to win us back.

This is the setting for John 3:16, at the end of a dialog with a seeker. Nicodemus was the first *whoever* of John 3:16. We can have a new birth because Jesus came. After the resurrection he sends his Spirit to indwell those who trust him. He did not come to condemn but to save, though one day all who have turned away from him will utterly perish. Jesus is the shape of God's future; what is not aligned with him will not survive.

There are many objections to what the church teaches about Jesus Christ. Some parade as genuine intellectual challenges, but when John wanted to lay before us what blocks people from the full benefits of faith he does not point to intellectual but to moral problems of bad behavior. Behind most intellectual defenses I look for moral resistance. People know following Jesus means deep change, and they at present find their sins rather comfortable, verses 19 and 20: "And this is the judgment, that light has come into the world, *and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil*. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

The arms of the Lord are open. What are you hiding for fear of exposure? What is Satan and your pride using to keep you away from coming into the light?

**CONCLUSION**

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In his book *Something Beautiful for God*, journalist Malcolm Muggeridge tells how he met Mother Teresa while filming a BBC documentary. He was captivated by her compassion for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta's slums. But he, an unbeliever, could not accept her faith. What especially kept him back was that he could not join the church, such an imperfect, flawed institution.

Once, while Mother Teresa visited London, she and Muggeridge took a walk. Muggeridge reports, "I took up my well-prepared defensive position about the church, whose deficiencies... I expatiated upon, with little effect."

After she left, she wrote Muggeridge a letter and enclosed a devotional book. The letter is model of how to share your faith lovingly:

"I think I understand you better now. I don't know why, but you to me are like Nicodemus.... I'm sure you will understand beautifully everything if you would only become a little child in God's hands. Your longing for God is so deep, and yet he keeps himself away from you. He must be forcing himself to do so, because he loves you so much, as to give Jesus to die for you and for me. Christ is longing to be your food... The personal love Christ has for you is infinite. The small difficulty you have regarding his church is finite. Overcome the finite with the infinite.... I know what you feel, terrible longing with dark emptiness, and yet he is the one in love with you."

God' love through Mother Teresa's kept working on Muggeridge. Just 8 years before he died– in 1990– he finally overcame his objections and publicly joined the Christian church.”

What I preach I cannot deliver. To be born anew is the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Born anew is not self-improvement. It's not a little more knowledge added to what you know. It's not trying hard. It's the gift of new life and light. “You must be born from above to see the kingdom of God, now and later.” It's something he wants for each of us. It's why he came and paid such a price.

“For God	(the greatest lover)
so loved the world	(the greatest audience)
that he gave his only Son,	(the greatest gift)
that whoever believes in him	(the greatest invitation)
should not perish	(the greatest rescue)
but have eternal life	(the greatest future).”

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**John 2:23-3:21** ..... **13**

