Nicodemus by Night

Bible Stories Anthology — John 3:1-21; 7:50-52; 19:38-42

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

A Visitor After Dark

It was Passover in Jerusalem, and the city was crowded with pilgrims. The young teacher from Galilee had just overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple courts and driven out the sellers of cattle and sheep. He had done signs that people were talking about. The rulers were watching him.

One of those rulers came to find him — at night.

He was not a fisherman or a tax collector. He was a Pharisee, a member of the highest council of the nation, a man Jesus himself called *the* teacher of Israel. He had spent his life studying the law of God. He came politely, with a compliment: *We know you are a teacher come from God*.

Jesus did not return the compliment. He went straight to the heart of the matter: *Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*.

The learned teacher had no idea what he meant.

That conversation, held in the dark, gave the world its most famous verse — **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son"** — and the words *born again*. And the man who came by night would one day come out into the open, in the darkest hour of all.

This is the story of Nicodemus.

The Setting

When. At the first Passover of Jesus' public ministry, about A.D. 28 by the reckoning this series uses. It came soon after the wedding at Cana (story 41) and the short stay in Capernaum. John says, **"Now when**

he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did" (John 2:23). The very next words are, **"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus"** (3:1).

Where. Jerusalem, during the feast, at night. John does not say where they met. Jesus may have been staying with friends in the city or on the Mount of Olives, as he did later (Luke 21:37).

The temple just before. Just before this, Jesus had made **"a scourge of small cords"** and driven the traders out of the temple, saying, **"make not my Father's house an house of merchandise"** (John 2:15-16). When the leaders demanded a sign, he said, **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"** — speaking, John explains, **"of the temple of his body"** (2:19, 21). Nicodemus would have heard about all of it, and perhaps seen it.

Who.

- **Jesus**, about thirty years old, newly come to Jerusalem.
- **Nicodemus**, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and a teacher of Israel.
- (Unseen) **the "we"** for whom Nicodemus speaks: other leaders who had seen the signs and wondered.

The administration. The **Christ administration**, under the Law of Moses. Jesus spoke of the new birth to Nicodemus, but it was not yet available: **"for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified"** (John 7:39). The new birth Jesus spoke of would become available on the day of Pentecost, when the administration of grace began (Acts 2; story 54).

The Story, Told Faithfully

A Ruler of the Jews

> **John 3:1** *There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:*
> **John 3:2** *The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.*

"A man of the Pharisees." The Pharisees were the strictest religious party among the Jews. The name probably means "separated ones." They gave themselves to keeping the law of Moses in every detail, and to keeping the many traditions their teachers had built around it — the washing of hands and cups (Mark 7:3-4), tithing even garden herbs (Matthew 23:23), careful rules for the sabbath. The Jewish historian Josephus, who was himself a Pharisee in his youth, says they were the most influential party among the common people. Many Pharisees opposed Jesus fiercely. But not all of them were the same, and some, like Nicodemus, were honestly searching.

"Named Nicodemus." His name is Greek, and means *conqueror of the people* or *victor among the people* (*nikē*, victory; *dēmos*, people). Greek names were common among Jews in that day. Some have suggested he is the Nakdimon ben Gurion named in later Jewish writings as one of the richest men of Jerusalem, but that cannot be proved, and this series does not build on it.

"A ruler of the Jews." He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of seventy elders, with the high priest presiding, that governed the religious and civil life of the Jews under Rome. Later he spoke up in

that very council (John 7:50-51). He was rich: at Jesus' burial he brought a hundred pounds of costly spices (John 19:39).

"The same came to Jesus by night." Why at night? John does not say. Several reasons have been suggested:

- **Fear.** John later writes that **"among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God"** (John 12:42-43).
- **Privacy.** In the daytime Jesus was surrounded by crowds; at night a man could talk with him quietly, at length.
- **Custom.** Some rabbis were known to study the law late into the night.

Whatever the reason, John remembers it. When Nicodemus appears again, John adds, **"he that came to Jesus by night"** (7:50; 19:39). And in John's Gospel, night is more than the time of day. It stands for the darkness of a world that does not know God. When Judas went out to betray Jesus, John wrote, **"and it was night"** (13:30). At the end of this very conversation Jesus speaks of men who love **"darkness rather than light"** (3:19). Nicodemus came out of the night to the one who is the light. This is something many readers have noticed; John does not explain it, but he plainly meant his readers to remember the night.

"Rabbi." A Hebrew title meaning *my great one*, *my teacher*. For a ruler and a teacher of Israel to call a carpenter from Nazareth "Rabbi" was a mark of real respect. Jesus had no rabbinic training (John 7:15).

"We know that thou art a teacher come from God." "We" — Nicodemus speaks not only for himself but for others among the leaders who had seen the signs and drawn the same conclusion. He comes with a compliment, and a sincere one. He has worked it out: *No one could do what you are doing unless God were with him.* He is right. Peter would later say the same: **"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him"** (Acts 10:38).

But Nicodemus had placed Jesus in a category he understood: *a teacher*. A great one, sent from God, like the prophets of old. He had not yet understood who Jesus truly was — or what he himself needed.

"Ye Must Be Born Again"

> **John 3:3** *Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

Nicodemus had not asked a question. Jesus answered him anyway — he answered the question behind the compliment, the question of every honest seeker: *How can I belong to the kingdom of God?*

"Verily, verily." In Greek, *amēn, amēn* — the Hebrew word *amen*, which means *firm*, *sure*, *true*. Others said "amen" at the end of a prayer or a statement, to agree with it. Jesus alone began his own statements with it, and only in John's Gospel is it doubled: *Truly, truly*. It marks what follows as solemn and certain. It is the figure of speech called **epizeuxis**, or *doubling*: the same word said twice in a row for emphasis.

"Except a man be born again." "Except" means *unless*. There is no other way. **"A man"** — Greek *tis*, *anyone*: not only Gentiles or sinners, but anyone at all, a Pharisee and a teacher of Israel included.

"Born again." The Greek word *anōthen* can mean *again*, *anew*, or *from above*. John uses the same word a few verses later: **"He that cometh from above is above all"** (John 3:31), and of the coat of Jesus at the cross, **"without seam, woven from the top"** (*anōthen*, John 19:23). Nicodemus heard it as *again* — a second birth. But Jesus meant a birth that comes *from above*, from God. Both meanings belong to it: it is a second birth, and it is a birth from God. John wrote in his opening: **"But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"** (John 1:12-13).

"He cannot see the kingdom of God." To *see* here is to *experience*, to have a part in, as we say "see better days." The kingdom of God was what every faithful Jew longed for — the rule of God over His people and over the earth, promised by the prophets (Daniel 2:44; 7:14). Nicodemus would have expected that being a son of Abraham, keeping the law and being a teacher in Israel would give him a place in it. Jesus said that none of that was enough. A man must be born from above.

"How Can a Man Be Born When He Is Old?"

> **John 3:4** *Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?*

Nicodemus took the words in their most literal sense — or he pressed them to show how impossible they seemed. **"When he is old"** — perhaps he was speaking of himself. He was no young man. *How can a man my age start over? Can he go back into his mother's womb?*

The idea of a new birth was not entirely unknown to the Jewish teachers. In later rabbinic writings a Gentile who became a Jew, a *proselyte*, was said to be **"like a child newly born"** — his old life and old ties were counted as past. But that was for Gentiles coming into Israel from outside. Nicodemus was already a Jew, already a Pharisee, already a teacher of the law. That *he* should need to be born again must have astonished him. (The rabbinic saying comes from writings later than the New Testament, and this series gives it as background, not as proof of what Nicodemus thought.)

Born of Water and of the Spirit

> **John 3:5** *Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*
>
> **John 3:6** *That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

"Born of water and of the Spirit." This phrase has been read in several ways.

- **Water as natural birth.** A child is born out of the water of the womb. Verse 6 sets the two births side by side: **"born of the flesh"** and **"born of the Spirit."** On this reading Jesus answers Nicodemus's own words about the mother's womb: a man must be born physically (water) and also spiritually (spirit).
- **Water as John's baptism.** John the Baptist was baptizing in water at this very time (John 3:23), and he had said, **"I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost"** (Mark 1:8). On this reading Jesus speaks of repentance (water) and the gift of spirit.
- **Water and spirit together, as in the prophets.** In Ezekiel, God promised Israel a day of cleansing and a new heart: **"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you"** (Ezekiel 36:25-26). Water and spirit belong together there: God's own cleansing and God's own spirit given within.

The third reading has strong support from the conversation itself. Jesus goes on to say, **"Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?"** (John 3:10). He expected Nicodemus to recognise what he was saying from the scriptures he taught. Ezekiel 36 is exactly such a passage: a promise to Israel of cleansing and a new spirit from God. Read this way, "water and spirit" is one new birth described in two words, the figure called **hendiadys** (*one through two*) — a birth of cleansing and of spirit, both from God. This series understands it this way, while recognising that the other readings are held by careful students. What none of the readings does is make the new birth depend on a ceremony. In verse 6 there are only two kinds of birth: of the flesh and of the spirit.

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Like produces like. A human birth produces a human being, with human life, which ends in death. No amount of religious effort can turn flesh into spirit. Paul wrote, **"flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God"** (1 Corinthians 15:50).

"And that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." A birth from God's spirit produces spirit: God's own life given to a man, something he did not have before and cannot make for himself. Peter wrote of it: **"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever"** (1 Peter 1:23). Human seed produces a life that dies; God's seed produces a life that cannot.

Notice the two words "Spirit" and "spirit" in this verse. The first is God, who **"is a Spirit"** (John 4:24), the Giver. The second is what He gives: spirit, His own life and nature, the gift born within the believer. The King James translators used capital letters to show the difference as they understood it, but there were no capital letters in the Greek manuscripts. The reader can see the distinction in the verse itself: God, who is Spirit, gives birth to spirit.

The Wind Bloweth Where It Listeth

> **John 3:7** *Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.*
> **John 3:8** *The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

"Marvel not." *Do not be amazed*. What astonished Nicodemus was, to Jesus, plain truth.

"Ye must be born again." Notice the change: **"ye,"** plural. In verse 3 Jesus said *a man*; now he says *you all*. It was not only Nicodemus who needed this. The whole nation did — the "we" he spoke for, the Pharisees and rulers, Israel itself. **"Must"** is the Greek *dei*, the word of necessity, used of things that have to happen because God has ordained them.

"The wind bloweth where it listeth." "Listeth" is old English for *wishes*, *pleases*. Here is one of the most beautiful plays on words in the Bible. The Greek word for *wind* and the word for *spirit* are the same word: *pneuma*. (The Hebrew *ruach* is the same: wind, breath, spirit.) Perhaps, as they sat talking in the night, the wind moved through the streets of Jerusalem. Jesus said: *The wind blows where it wants to. You hear it, but you cannot see where it came from or where it is going. That is how it is with everyone born of the spirit.*

You cannot see the wind. You can only see what it does — the leaves moving, the dust rising, the sound in the trees. So it is with the new birth. No one can see God's spirit enter a man, or see the moment he is born again. But the effects can be seen and heard. This is the figure of speech called **paronomasia**, a play on words that sound alike or are the same — here *pneuma* as wind and *pneuma* as spirit — joined with a **simile**, a comparison: *so is every one.*

The new birth is God's work. A man does not decide the wind; he cannot command it or produce it. The new birth comes from God, as freely as the wind.

"How Can These Things Be?"

> **John 3:9** *Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?*
>
> **John 3:10** *Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?*

"How can these things be?" These are the last words Nicodemus speaks in this conversation. His first was a confident *We know*. His last is a bewildered *How?* The man who came as a teacher has become a learner.

"Art thou a master of Israel?" The Greek says *the* teacher of Israel — *ho didaskalos*. Nicodemus was not just any teacher. He was a leading teacher, perhaps the most respected in Jerusalem. Jesus' words are not mockery, but they are a gentle rebuke: *You, the teacher of Israel, do not know these things?* He expected Nicodemus to know them, because they were in the scriptures he had studied all his life — the new heart and new spirit of Ezekiel 36, and Jeremiah's new covenant: **"I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people"** (Jeremiah 31:33). The prophets had promised a day when God would do something new inside His people. Nicodemus knew the words. He had not understood what they meant.

Earthly Things and Heavenly Things

> **John 3:11** *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.*
>
> **John 3:12** *If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?*
>
> **John 3:13** *And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.*

"We speak that we do know." Nicodemus had said, *We know* (3:2). Jesus answers with his own *we know*. Who is Jesus' "we"? Perhaps himself together with John the Baptist and the prophets who bore witness before him; perhaps the plural that answers Nicodemus's plural. Either way, Jesus speaks as an eyewitness of what God has shown him: **"I speak that which I have seen with my Father"** (John 8:38).

"And ye receive not our witness." Again *ye*, plural. Nicodemus's party as a whole was not receiving it.

"Earthly things … heavenly things." The new birth was an "earthly thing" in this sense: something God does in men here on earth, which can be illustrated with earthly pictures like birth and the wind. If they would not believe that, how would they believe the "heavenly things" — God's eternal purpose, His plan of redemption, the things only God can reveal?

"No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven." At that time, no man had ever gone up into heaven to learn God's secrets and come back to tell them. Peter said the same of David on the day of Pentecost: **"For David is not ascended into the heavens"** (Acts 2:34). This series has followed that plain statement in the story of Enoch (story 04): no one before Christ ascended into heaven. Only one could speak of heavenly things from the knowledge God had given him: the one **"that came down from heaven."**

What does “came down from heaven” mean? In John’s Gospel, to be “from heaven” means to come from God, with God as one’s source and authority. John the Baptist was **“a man sent from God”** (John 1:6). When Jesus asked the leaders whether John’s baptism was **“from heaven, or of men”** (Matthew 21:25), he meant, *Did it come from God?* Jesus came from God: he was conceived by God’s own creative act (Luke 1:35; story 38), sent by God, and taught by God. This series understands “came down from heaven” in that sense, as it did in the story of the manna (story 15).

“Even the Son of man which is in heaven.” The words **“which is in heaven”** are found in many later Greek manuscripts, and so in the King James Version, but they are missing from the oldest copies. If they belong, they may be John’s own words, written after the ascension, when the Son of man *was* in heaven; or they may describe Jesus’ close union with God even while on earth. Many modern translations leave them out.

“The Son of man.” This was the title Jesus used of himself more than any other. It comes from Daniel’s vision: **“one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days … And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom”** (Daniel 7:13-14). It speaks of him as a true man, and as the man to whom God would give the kingdom.

As Moses Lifted Up the Serpent

> **John 3:14** *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:*
>
> **John 3:15** *That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

Now Jesus turned to a story every teacher of Israel knew by heart.

In the wilderness, when the people spoke against God and Moses, fiery serpents came among them, and many died. God told Moses to make a serpent of brass and set it on a pole: **“and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live”** (Numbers 21:8). Whoever looked, lived (story 16).

“Even so must the Son of man be lifted up.” *Must — dei* again, God’s necessity. As the serpent was lifted up on a pole, so the Son of man must be lifted up. The Greek word *hupsoō* means *to lift up* and also *to exalt*. John uses it again: **“When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he”** (8:28), and **“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die”** (12:32-33). He would be lifted up on a cross. And he would be lifted up in exaltation: **“Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted”** (Acts 2:33). The same word holds both, the cross and the throne. This is the figure called **amphibologia**, a word deliberately used with two meanings at once.

In the wilderness the people were not healed by doing anything except looking. They did not fight the serpents or make medicine or offer sacrifices. They looked at what God had provided and lived. So it is with the Son of man: **“whosoever believeth in him.”**

“Should not perish, but have eternal life.” Here for the first time in John’s Gospel is the phrase *eternal life* — the life of the age to come, life that does not end. The people in the wilderness who looked were saved from physical death. Those who believe in the Son are saved from perishing for ever.

For God So Loved the World

> **John 3:16** *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*
>
> **John 3:17** *For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

Some students believe Jesus' words to Nicodemus end at verse 15, and that verses 16-21 are John's own reflection on them. Greek had no quotation marks, and John often adds his own comments (as in John 2:21, **"But he spake of the temple of his body"**). Others hold that Jesus speaks through verse 21. Either way, these words stand as Scripture, and they explain everything that came before.

"For God so loved the world." Here is the source of it all. The new birth, the lifted-up Son, eternal life — all of it comes from God's love. **"The world"** — not Israel only, but all mankind, every nation, the whole human race, though it had turned away from Him. This was startling to a Pharisee, who would have expected God to love Israel and judge the Gentiles.

"That he gave his only begotten Son." The greatest gift God could give was His own Son. **"Only begotten"** translates *monogenēs*, *one of a kind*, *unique*, *the only one*. The writer to the Hebrews uses the same word of Isaac: **"By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son"** (Hebrews 11:17). Abraham had another son, Ishmael, but Isaac was the unique son of promise, the beloved one (story 08). So Jesus is God's unique Son — the one Son God Himself brought into being in Mary's womb (Luke 1:35), loved above all. God *gave* him — gave him to the world, and gave him up to death: **"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"** (Romans 8:32).

Notice the order: God loved, God gave, God sent. God is the Giver; His Son is the gift. John 3:16 does not say that God gave Himself, but that He gave His Son.

"That whosoever believeth in him." *Whosoever* — anyone at all. Nicodemus the ruler, the Samaritan woman at the well (story 43), the thief on the cross, the tax collector and the harlot. Not *whosoever keeps the law*, but *whosoever believes*.

"Should not perish, but have everlasting life." "Perish" is *to be destroyed*, *to be lost*. "Everlasting life" is the same life as in verse 15. These are the only two outcomes Jesus names: to perish, or to live for ever.

"For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world." Many expected the Messiah to come as a judge, to destroy the wicked nations. But God's first purpose in sending His Son was not judgment but rescue: **"but that the world through him might be saved."** Paul wrote, **"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"** (1 Timothy 1:15).

Light Has Come into the World

> **John 3:18** *He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*
>
> **John 3:19** *And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*
>
> **John 3:20** *For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.*

> **John 3:21** *But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.*

"He that believeth on him is not condemned." The believer's case is closed. **"But he that believeth not is condemned already."** Not because God was waiting to condemn him, but because he has turned away from the only rescue God provided. A drowning man who refuses the rope is already lost.

"Light is come into the world." John had written of Jesus at the beginning of his Gospel: **"In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not"** (John 1:4-5). Jesus would say, **"I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life"** (John 8:12).

"And men loved darkness rather than light." Here is the real reason people reject the light: not that the evidence is lacking, but that they love the darkness. **"Because their deeds were evil."** Light shows things as they are, and those who do evil do not want to be seen.

"But he that doeth truth cometh to the light." In the middle of the night a man had come to the light. Whether John meant these words to point to Nicodemus, he does not say; but the reader who remembers that Nicodemus came **"by night"** can hardly miss the contrast. He came out of the darkness to Jesus. The question was whether he would come all the way into the light.

The Rest of His Story

John tells us no more of that night. We do not know how Nicodemus left, or what he thought as he walked home through the dark streets. But John does not leave him there. He appears twice more.

In the council. Some years later, at the feast of tabernacles in the last autumn of Jesus' ministry, the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest Jesus. They came back empty-handed: **"Never man spake like this man."** The Pharisees scorned them: **"Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?"** Then one ruler spoke up:

> **John 7:50** *Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,)*
> **John 7:51** *Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?*

It was a small, careful step — an appeal to fairness under the law. They turned on him at once: **"Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet"** (7:52). But Nicodemus had spoken up for Jesus in front of the very men he once feared.

At the cross. When Jesus had died, and most of his disciples had fled, two rulers of the Jews came forward. Joseph of Arimathea, **"a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews,"** went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body. And with him came Nicodemus:

> **John 19:39** *And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.*

A hundred Roman pounds is about seventy-five of our pounds — an enormous amount, the kind of spices used for the burial of a king. Together the two men took down the body, wrapped it in linen with the spices, and laid it in Joseph's new tomb (19:40-42). They did it openly, in daylight, as the sabbath of the feast drew near, when the cost to their reputations was greatest.

The man who came by night now stood in the open at the cross. He had seen the Son of man *lifted up*, just as Jesus had told him that night. And three days and three nights later the tomb where he had laid the body was empty.

Scripture does not tell us what happened to Nicodemus after that. But a man who brought a king's burial to a crucified teacher had, it seems, come to the light.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The Son lifted up. Jesus told Nicodemus that the Son of man *must* be lifted up, as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness. Isaiah had foretold it: **"Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high"** (Isaiah 52:13), and then went on to describe his suffering: **"he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities"** (53:5). He was lifted up on the cross, raised from the dead, and lifted up to God's right hand: **"Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him"** (Philippians 2:9). That is the full meaning of *lifted up*: the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension.

The serpent and the Saviour. The bronze serpent was made in the likeness of the very thing that was killing the people. Paul wrote of Christ, **"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him"** (2 Corinthians 5:21), and **"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree"** (Galatians 3:13). The one who never sinned was lifted up bearing sin, so that all who look to him might live.

God's gift. John 3:16 puts the Son exactly where all of Scripture puts him: as God's gift, the Son whom God loved and gave and sent. **"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"** (1 John 4:10). The Father is the Giver; Jesus Christ is the gift.

The light of the world. Nicodemus came by night to the one who would say, **"I am the light of the world"** (John 8:12). The prophets had promised it: **"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light"** (Isaiah 9:2).

To the Grace Administration

The new birth is now available. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, the new birth was a promise. **"The Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified"** (John 7:39). After Jesus was raised and ascended, God poured out the gift of holy spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33). Since that day, anyone can be born again.

How a man is born again. Not by ritual, not by keeping the law, not by being a good person, but by believing: **"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"** (Romans 10:9-10). **"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast"** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Born of incorruptible seed. What is born is God's own spirit within: **"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible"** (1 Peter 1:23). Paul calls it a new creation: **"Therefore if any man**

be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God **"saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour"** (Titus 3:5-6) — Ezekiel's water and spirit, now poured out.

Sons of God. To be born of God is to be His son: **"Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God"** (1 John 3:1). **"And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father"** (Galatians 4:6).

Sealed. The new birth cannot be undone, any more than a natural birth can. **"In whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance"** (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Delivered from darkness. Nicodemus came out of the night. The believer has been brought out of the darkness for good: **"Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son"** (Colossians 1:13). **"For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light"** (Ephesians 5:8).

Come out into the open. Nicodemus began in secret. Paul wrote, **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth"** (Romans 1:16).

To the Topic of the New Birth

- **Religion is not enough.** Nicodemus had religion, learning, position and respect. He still needed to be born again.
- **The new birth is from above** — God's work, not man's.
- **There are only two births:** of the flesh, and of the spirit.
- **It is like the wind** — unseen in itself, known by its effects.
- **It was promised by the prophets** (Ezekiel 36:25-27; Jeremiah 31:33).
- **It comes by believing** — looking to the one God lifted up.
- **It flows from God's love** — "For God so loved the world."
- **It is for whosoever** — anyone at all.
- **It brings a man out of darkness into light.**

The Main Takeaway

At the first Passover of Jesus' ministry, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews and the teacher of Israel, came to Jesus by night and said, "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God"; Jesus answered the need behind the compliment: "Except a man be born again" — born from above — "he cannot see the kingdom of God"; when Nicodemus asked how an old man could be born a second time, Jesus said a man must be born of water and of the spirit, as Ezekiel had promised Israel cleansing and a new spirit from God, for "that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," and like the wind, unseen but known by its effects, so is everyone born of the spirit; he gently rebuked the teacher of Israel for not knowing these things, and told him that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life; "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son." Nicodemus went away still asking "How?"; later he spoke up for Jesus in the

council, and at the cross he came out into the open to give the lifted-up Son a king's burial. Since Pentecost the new birth he heard of that night is available to anyone who believes that God raised Jesus from the dead and confesses him as Lord.

- **You must be born again** — no amount of religion can replace it.
- **The new birth is God's work,** a birth from above.
- **Look to the one God lifted up** — believe, and live.
- **God loved the world and gave His Son** — the Giver and the gift.
- **Come out of the darkness into the light.**
- **Honest questions lead somewhere** — Nicodemus kept coming.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Jesus.** The Son of God, about thirty, at the first Passover of his ministry; the Son of man who must be lifted up.
- **Nicodemus.** A Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, "the" teacher of Israel; came by night, later defended Jesus in council (7:50-51) and helped bury him (19:39).
- **Moses.** Lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness (Numbers 21:8-9).
- **Joseph of Arimathea.** A secret disciple and member of the council, who buried Jesus with Nicodemus (19:38).
- **The Pharisees and rulers.** The "we" and "ye" of the conversation; many saw the signs but would not confess him.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **The Pharisees** — the strictest party, devoted to the law and to the traditions of the elders.
- **The Sanhedrin** — the council of seventy elders under the high priest; "a ruler of the Jews."
- **"Rabbi"** — "my great one," a title of honour for a teacher.
- **Meeting at night** — for privacy, or from fear, or for unhurried study.
- **The new birth of a proselyte** — later rabbis said a Gentile convert was like a newborn child.
- **The wind (pneuma, ruach)** — the same word as spirit and breath.
- **The bronze serpent on a pole** — a story every teacher of Israel knew.
- **Spices for burial** — myrrh and aloes wrapped with the linen; a hundred pounds was a royal amount.
- **The Roman pound (litra)** — about three-quarters of our pound.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Epizeuxis (doubling)** — "Verily, verily" (3:3, 5, 11): the same word twice for emphasis.

- **Amphibologia (double meaning)** — "born again" (*anōthen*, again and from above, 3:3); "lifted up" (*hupsoō*, on the cross and in exaltation, 3:14).
- **Metaphor** — "born" (3:3-8): the new life from God pictured as a birth.
- **Hendiadys (one through two)** — "water and … the Spirit" (3:5), one birth of cleansing and spirit, as this series understands it.
- **Antithesis (setting opposites against each other)** — "flesh … spirit" (3:6); "earthly … heavenly" (3:12); "perish … everlasting life" (3:16); "light … darkness" (3:19-21).
- **Paronomasia (play on words)** — *pneuma*, wind and spirit (3:8).
- **Simile** — "so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (3:8).
- **Erotesis (questions for effect)** — "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" (3:10); "how shall ye believe …?" (3:12).
- **Synecdoche (a part for the whole)** — "the world" (3:16-17) for mankind.
- **Metaphor** — "light" (3:19) for Christ and the truth he brings; "darkness" for the world's ignorance and evil.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and "the" teacher of Israel.**
- **He came to Jesus by night;** John does not say why.
- **Jesus said a man must be born again** — *anōthen*, also "from above" — to see the kingdom of God.
- **Jesus said "ye must be born again,"** plural — the whole nation needed it.
- **Born of the flesh is flesh; born of the spirit is spirit.**
- **The wind and spirit are the same word,** and the new birth is like the wind.
- **Jesus expected the teacher of Israel to know these things from the scriptures.**
- **No man had ascended to heaven** at that time but the one who came from God.
- **The Son of man must be lifted up** as the serpent was.
- **God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.**
- **God sent His Son not to condemn the world but to save it.**
- **Men love darkness because their deeds are evil.**
- **Nicodemus later defended Jesus (7:50-51) and helped bury him (19:39).**
- **The Bible does not say Nicodemus was born again that night,** or what became of him later.

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants every person born again** — born from above, into His family.
- **God does the new birth Himself;** it is His gift, not man's achievement.
- **God promised it through the prophets** and made it available through His Son.
- **God loved the world and gave His Son** — the greatest gift He could give.
- **God's purpose in sending His Son was to save, not to condemn.**
- **God lifted up His Son** — on the cross, from the grave, and to His right hand.

- **God calls people out of darkness into light,** and patiently draws those who come to Him with honest questions.