

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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How Can New Birth Come To Be?

by Dan Trygg

Jesus had just explained to Nicodemus that to perceive or enter the Kingdom of God, a person must be born from above. *In addition to natural physical birth, "out from water", one must also be born "out from" the Spirit.* All that flesh is capable of producing is flesh. It is not capable of producing spiritual life. Spiritual life must be infused or injected into us from the outside from a greater source of spiritual life. Much like seed from a living plant must be deposited in otherwise lifeless ground in order for plants to grow up, so our souls are spiritually lifeless and undiscerning apart from this influx of life from outside ourselves.

Nicodemus' response to Jesus was, "How can these things be?" (vs. 9) His response is not a rejection or dismissal of what Jesus had said. He was sincerely attempting to grasp how a spiritual birth might come to pass.

Jesus seems to softly chide Nicodemus, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?" This question recognizes his stature as a teacher and student of the Bible. This is actually a lead-in for the Bible study Jesus is going to initiate in the next few verses.

Jesus begins verse 11 with, "*Truly, truly, I say to you...*" Again, this is a way to draw solemn attention to what He is about to say. "*...we speak that which we know, and what we have seen we bear witness to...*". Jesus is saying that His teachings are *not* simply from the study of the Scriptures, but *also* from His own observations and personal experiences. **He presents Himself as an eyewitness in a courtroom.** Jesus' use of the word "we" is interesting. Who else is testifying with Jesus? Other people who have tried to testify to these people? "*... and you do not receive our witness.*" **The word for "you" is plural, so Jesus is referring to the larger group of religious leaders of which Nicodemus is a representative. This is a good warning for us. There have been many occasions when theorists and academicians have rejected the observable activity of God, because it did not fit with their "studied opinion".** If they will not believe Jesus when He refers to things that have an obvious earthly parallel in their experience, **how will they believe if He tells them about heavenly things that have no reference point in their personal experience?** Again, this is a practical question, applicable to us. ***It comes down to the reliability of our source.***

Who could possibly tell any of us about "heavenly things"? No one has ever gone *there*, right? "*...no one has ascended into heaven...*" (3:12). [This remark reminds us that prior to Christ's death and resurrection those who were the righteous dead did *not* go to heaven upon their passing. Rather, they went to Hades (Greek) or Sheol (Hebrew), "the grave" or "the nether world", as did the unrighteous who died. There, the two groups were clearly separated and had very different experiences. The righteous dead were gathered in a place of rest and peace, referred to as Abraham's bosom, while the unrighteous dead were in torment (Lk. 16:19-31). Since the time of Christ's victory, those who die in Jesus will immediately "be with Christ" (Phil. 1:20-23; II Cor. 5:1-9), who has taken the righteous with Him to heaven (Eph. 4:8-10). This new arrangement is possible because now the payment for sins has been made, whereas before it was only promised (cf. Rom. 3:24-26).] "*...except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man...*" (vs. 13). The Greek is a little more specific, "except the one coming down (at a point in time) out from the heaven". **In the argument here, Jesus is alluding to the fact that He is the One who came down from heaven. Therefore He is uniquely qualified as a witness to tell us what we could not otherwise know.**

The "Son of Man" is a significant title from the Old Testament. It is by far the most favorite way that Jesus chose to refer to Himself. In fact, it is almost exclusively His title for Himself. Only Stephen, when he is being stoned to death (Acts 7:56), and the apostle John, describing what he sees in the visions in Revelation (1:1:13; 14:14) employ this title for Jesus. All the other 84 occurrences in the New Testament are upon Jesus' lips in reference to Himself. This is already the second time it is recorded upon Jesus' lips in this gospel (cf. 1:51). **The special advantage that this title offered to Jesus was that it could be interpreted in two very different ways. Thus, He could make some very definite claims, and still remain somewhat obscure or detached from them.** It kept people from pinning Him down too easily. They had to listen more to *what* He was saying about this Son of Man in order to really understand what He was getting at. **Other titles, such as "Christ", "Son of David", etc., presented problems to Jesus, in that the people had some very specific preconceived ideas of what they meant.** If Jesus were to openly call Himself by one of these other titles, the common people would tend to suppose that He was going to be a political Messiah, a warrior-king who would conquer the Romans and liberate Israel. This would have plummeted Him into direct conflict with the Roman authorities, and would probably have precipitated an earlier death, before His training of the twelve had opportunity to be completed. (1.) **Part of the background for this title came from the book of Ezekiel, where it was used in reference to the prophet** (almost 90 times in the book). **The thrust of the title from this perspective was in His identity as a true human being.** He is "a man". (2.) **The other place that the title occurred in the Old Testament was**

from the book of Daniel. Here the title takes on a very *powerful, supernatural imagery*. According to Daniel's vision, "One like the Son of Man" will come before God, and will be given dominion, glory, and an everlasting kingdom, one which extends over every nation (Dan. 7:13,14). Another key image from Daniel's vision is that *this Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven. This word picture could not help but be called to mind by Jesus' words here in Jn. 3:13, "the (One) coming down out from heaven, the Son of Man"*.

"*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*" (vs. 14). The word for "as" here has the nuance of "according as", meaning it is a comparison of the way in which Moses lifted up the serpent. **According to the Old Testament account from Numbers 21:4-9, the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people in judgment for their sin.** Many were dying from their poisonous bites, so the people came to Moses, admitting their sin and asking for him to intercede on their behalf. **In response to God's direction, Moses made a bronze serpent and set it upon a standard, or pole, so that if ever anyone was bitten, he might "look upon it, and he shall live".** "...*even so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*" Literally, "in this same manner it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up". "*in order that the one believing in Him may have eternal life*" (vs. 15). ("Eternal life" is literally "age-type life" the "quality of life that belongs to the Kingdom of God". This is first time this phrase actually occurs in the gospel.) **In answer to Nicodemus' question, "How can these things things be?", Jesus cites the miraculous healing that came to those who heard of the provision of God (in the bronze serpent) and looked in hope and faith at this symbol upon the pole for salvation from the serpent's venomous sting.** In similar fashion, God will make provision by "lifting up" the Son of Man in order that the one who trusts in *this* promise of deliverance might look in faith to Him and receive life of the quality of the coming Kingdom of God. **In other words, it would only happen by a gracious, miraculous work of God in the lives of those who put their trust in this Son of Man. Those who hear of God's provision, and trust in Him, will be saved.**

"*For God so loved the world...*" (vs. 16). Literally, the Greek says, "For in this manner God loved the world, with the result that He gave His only Son in order that the one believing in Him might not perish, but he might have age-type life." **God loved everybody enough that He was willing to put His unique Son forward in the likeness of the "snake on the pole" in order that the one believing on Him could escape destruction, lostness, self-ruin and death, and instead might receive, have, and presently-possess life from the age to come.** Many sermons have been preached on this one verse, because there are so many layers and levels of possibility presented here. We have heard this verse in terms of eternal death and destruction, but it is much more. **Ruination and self-destruction of our selves come to those who are narrowly focused on self-fulfillment,** and the attainment of the pleasures and riches of this world (Lk. 9:24,25). **Only by being willing to release ourselves into God's care and live for Jesus will we truly find the life God created us for.** Are you willing to "believe in Him"? The word for "believe" means to "trust in". Are you willing to trust Him enough to *do as He says*? Notice that the verse describes an *ongoing* trust, not a *momentary* decision.

God's purpose in sending His Son is more clearly stated in the following verses. **God did not send Jesus to bring judgment, but to offer a means of salvation, hope, rescue and life** (vs. 17). *He wants the world to be saved* by means of Jesus. **The one believing in Him is not judged, because he has received God's offer of help, ...but the one not believing or trusting in Jesus has been judged already** (vs. 18). To return to the word picture of the snake-bitten person in the wilderness, if he or she chooses to disregard God's offer of salvation, his or her fate is sealed. *Death will come because of the poison of the snakebite,* not because they did not look at the bronze serpent on the pole. **God is not "being a meany" if they refuse to get help.** God has been gracious and kind to offer a way to be healed. If they reject God's offer, the cause was *their sin,* the snakebite, and *their resistance* toward God's grace. The same is true for those who reject Christ. The real problem is not judgment *for* disbelief, but the effect and *consequences of sin* in the heart, as explained in the next couple of verses.

The real problem is that, even though the light has come into the world, people have loved darkness rather than the light (vs. 19). **Why? Because their deeds were evil, and everyone practicing evil hates the light, and does not come to it, lest their deeds be exposed.** At some level, they know that what they are doing is wrong, and they avoid being shown up for what they are. They don't want to stop doing what they are doing, or be accountable for their actions. They hate to be corrected or made responsible for their own sense of morality. As a result, **they tend to dislike and avoid situations or people who make them take a good look at themselves and their actions** (vs. 20). It is interesting that **the light doesn't really change the situation, it just makes visible what is already true.**

By contrast, **the one who consistently lives out the truth, ...who is real, genuine, and unhypocritical in the actions of his or her life, will willingly come again and again to the light** (vs. 21). These people have got everything out of the shadows, and therefore have nothing to hide. They have confidence to "come out into the light". **Instead of hiding from the truth and attempting to ignore their responsibility to God, they desire to give glory to Him by letting others clearly see that it has been His activity in their lives that is behind their actions.**