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The Holy Trinity

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Text: John 3:1–17

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Nicodemus first appears in John 3. We don't know much about him except that he's a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and very interested in the teachings of Jesus. Being a ruler of the Jews indicates that he had some political respect and power. Most likely, he had a good measure of material wealth. Being a Pharisee meant he was a very religious laymen as the Pharisees were committed to studying the Old Testament writings, the teachings of the Jewish fathers, and living a pious life according to both. The Pharisees fasted often, gave a tithe (or 10%) on everything, even things like the herbs from their gardens (Matt. 23:23)! They prayed all the time and believed the entire OT to be the Word of God, not just parts of it like the Sadducees. Nicodemus was a very religious, pious man. A success by every standard.

This very successful Nicodemus went to Jesus by night to discuss theology. The conversation begins with high praise from this leading Pharisees, "Rabbi, we know that you are teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (vs. 2). Nicodemus believes Jesus is a teacher of God.

But the Lord Jesus isn't impressed by Nicodemus' success or his courtesy. Jesus abruptly says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (vs. 3). The startling implication is that Nicodemus with all his success, piety, good works, wealth, etc. isn't prepared for the kingdom of God! To put it bluntly...Nicodemus, you are not a child of God! All your good works and merits amount to nothing when it comes to whether or not you will see God's kingdom. Instead, he must be born again.

Nicodemus is confused, and rightly so. He's a student and teacher of God's Word. It seems absurd to suggest Nicodemus might not be rightly prepared to see God's kingdom. By all appearances, he's one of the most likely candidates to enter God's heavenly kingdom. And what's this strange idea about being born again! How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (vs. 4). All of this is most unexpected.

Pay close attention to Jesus' answer. Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (vs. 5). Our Lord is saying that to be born again so that one can see and enter God's kingdom means to be born of water and Spirit. In other words, to know God rightly one must be baptized. Christian baptism gives the new birth of the Spirit. The apostle Paul also calls water baptism a "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" in Titus 3:5. To receive Christian baptism is nothing less than to receive a new birth of water and the Spirit.

Nicodemus rightly understands the birth he received from his mother. It's the birth we all understand. Nine months after conception, I was born! In our culture, we celebrate our natural birth with quite a bit of pomp and circumstance: a birthday cake, gifts are often shared, and there is the expected song, Happy Birthday.

But there is another birth that must happen if Nicodemus wants to participate in the most important thing in eternity: the kingdom of God. He must receive a totally different birth. One that is of water and the Spirit. The first, natural birth is a great gift of God. But we sinners need a spiritual birth. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (vs. 6). The new birth of water and the Spirit comes through baptism, Trinitarian baptism with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Only through this new birth can anyone enter God's kingdom.

Now some might conclude that baptism is just another work we do; Nicodemus thought like that, "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (vs. 4) Notice Nicodemus' question assumes the person must do something to enter God's kingdom. That's the big, big mistake. To be born again is to be born of the Spirit through Holy Baptism. Baptism is the Lord's doing, for it is done "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." With the water and the Word, the Triune God Himself puts His name on us and thereby gives us the new birth into His family. We never say, "I decided to be born" (referring to our natural birth). Why should we say, "I decided to be born again into God's kingdom."? It's God's gift from beginning to end.

As you might guess, Nicodemus is complete flabbergasted. Verse 9, "Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'" In answer, Jesus gives a gentle rebuke. "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (vs. 10) Then Jesus answers Nicodemus' question using the Old Testament. The Bible passage is from

Numbers 21 when the children of Israel were afflicted by poisonous snakes. God's means of salvation from the snakes was for a bronze serpent to be constructed and lifted up on a pole. Anyone bitten by a snake only had to look at the bronze serpent and he would be healed. Listen to how Jesus uses that incident to teach about His own death and resurrection, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (vs. 14–15). The new birth of salvation in water and Spirit is made possible because of Jesus' death on the cross; He is God's salvation lifted up on the pole of the cross for the salvation of the world. Baptism gives us the Spirit because baptism connects us to Jesus' cross and the love He shows to us there.

The very next words our Lord speaks are probably the most well-known from the Bible. John 3:16-17, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Maybe we can understand that divine love better as we hear them in light of our Lord's teaching to Nicodemus and the necessity of being born again of the water and Spirit, that is, being born again through Christian baptism.

The glorious truth about Christianity is that it's not about what we do for God, our works, our piety, our successes!! It's about God's love revealed to us in what Jesus does for us in His life, death, and resurrection. You know that God loves you because of what Jesus did on the cross. You know God loves you because of what He does for you through the new birth of water and Spirit. Your simple water baptism, which most of you, like your physical birth, don't remember, is God the Father's promise that He forgives you, loves you, and claims you as His own. For in that gift, the Father incorporates you into the death and resurrection of His Son. And, He fills you with the Holy Spirit. You don't work your way into to being a Christian. You're born into God's family. It's a new birth of water and the Holy Spirit.

Never let go of God's promises given to you in your Christian baptism. In that gift, you received the true name of God, the one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And in this regard, do not be led astray by the befuddled thinking of our day. The only true God is the Trinitarian God. The God of Christianity, and of Judaism, and of Islam are not the same. In that regard, the God of Mormonism or of the Jehovah's Witnesses is not the Trinitarian God of the Bible. Only Biblical Christianity says that Jesus is the eternal Son of God the Father Almighty who was anointed by the Holy Spirit without measure to be the Savior of the world.

Nicodemus came to Jesus to discuss theology with Jesus. He got more from Jesus than He ever could have expected. He heard about who God is, about His love, about the new birth of the water and the Spirit. Nicodemus learned that eternal life is God's work in believers from beginning to end. Let this teaching make you bold in your confession of faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let it give you courage to live in faith and devotion in all of life. For you bear the family name, that blessed name given to you when you received the new birth of water and the Holy Spirit. For the Lord who has begun a good work in you will complete it (Phil. 1:6).

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To him be glory forever....

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.