



Finding a Better Way



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Implantation

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THERE'S A POWERFUL IMPULSE IN THE HUMAN heart that is eager to connect with a wondrous, virtuous, and transcendent figure. All human beings are God-seekers—those who try to make contact with the divine. There are no exceptions; neither you nor I can escape from this reality.

We can see this reality in the story of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night in search of a connection with the divine, on a quest to find what was missing in his life, even though he was already a religious leader in Israel.

Nicodemus's experience reflects every one of ours, we who try to make sense of our existence on this planet, we who ask, Why do I feel that this is not all there is to life?

We feel that way because, indeed, this is not all that there is.

A FRIENDLY QUEST VS. AN UNFRIENDLY ANSWER

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him’ ” (John 3:1, 2, NKJV).

Nicodemus approaches Jesus with an I-know-what’s-up attitude. Wasting no time, he lets Jesus know that he understands how God works and says to Him: “We know that You are a teacher come from God.” His words are very flattering, and they are meant to butter up Jesus.

However, Nicodemus’s actions reveal his lack of faith. If he really believes that Jesus came from God, why is he coming, unnoticed, in the darkness of night? Wouldn’t it be appropriate to tell everyone that this new and good teacher comes from God? Instead, he is afraid and doubting. He is politically correct but faithfully misguided. He is playing politics. “You are a tremendous teacher, Jesus. Your miracles are genuine. You are a man to be reckoned with, and we want to play ball with you.”

Nicodemus is rich, learned, admired, and part of the cultural elite. And though he seems confident, his posture and wording reveal that he is uneasy. Something smells wrong in his life; he is religious, but not spiritually fulfilled. He believes that by keeping the laws he can gain the respect of the people. Deep inside, though, he remains insecure in his relationship with God. Peace is foreign to

Finding a Better Way

him. This feeling of incompleteness increases bitterness and disillusionment.

Perhaps this Jesus has the answer?

Indeed, he sees in Jesus a political force that will liberate Israel and give the government over to the Jewish people. He is waiting for a free nation. He thinks this liberation from Rome will give him the spiritual fulfillment he lacks. His name pictures his mission. “Nike” means victory—now you know why your shoes bear this name—and “demos” means people. So Nicodemus lives for the “victory of the people.”

What is Jesus’ plan for the victory of the people? Jesus answers, but in a manner that is seemingly unfriendly and certainly unexpected. “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (verse 3, NKJV).

If Jesus is seeking to create a political movement, he would receive Nicodemus’s flattering words as a high compliment. But Jesus is building a spiritual kingdom, not a political one. He is on a divine mission, not a political campaign. Jesus wants to awaken souls, not gain votes.

Often, young people want to transform the world. That’s fine, but first we need to experience transformation ourselves. And this change comes from being born again. Nicodemus needs this transformation as well. He hears Jesus saying, “Neither your honor, position, riches, or wisdom are important here. What matters is your spiritual state.”

Contrary to the teachings of the Pharisees, obedience to

Implantation

a bunch of rules does not open the way for anyone to enter the kingdom of God. Instead, one must be born again.

THINGS SEEN VS. THINGS UNSEEN

“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (verse 4, NKJV).

At this point, despite his towering religious and intellectual status, Nicodemus is clueless as to what Jesus is talking about—which says a lot about his spiritual state. He just can’t picture the new birth. Why? Because he sees things as they appear, not as they really are. He is missing God’s side of the equation. For him, the question of salvation is easy: you obey, and you are saved. Period. What is Jesus talking about, then, with this “born again” stuff?

Jesus doesn’t stop to pamper His visitor’s spiritual vacuity. Instead, He presses His point even further:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (verses 5–8, NKJV).

Jesus announces that a new birth is an act of God upon the human heart. No one can give birth to himself; a birth

Finding a Better Way

depends upon the decision of others. We are the recipients of an action that begins outside of us but ends in us and through us, making us new creatures in God.

Jesus is teaching divine conception; everything in the kingdom of God comes from above. We all need to admit our inability to save ourselves. Our works, our acquired position, our gained knowledge will never give us entrance to the kingdom of God. We must be born through the unseen grace of Jesus. We must be re-created through the unseen Spirit of God.

As Jesus said, what is of flesh will produce flesh; what is of this world will produce more of this world. But if Nicodemus really wants to be part of the kingdom of God, he needs the transformation of the Spirit. Jesus mentions water and Spirit to introduce the idea of being created. Water and Spirit allude to Genesis 1 and the creation of the world. The new birth is something very similar.

The new birth immerses us in a new reality. We are delivered from a life of bondage and moved to a life of freedom, one owned by a loving Father and open to the eternal possibilities of His kingdom. One goes from a life doomed to a life bloomed.

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ ” (verse 9, NKJV).

His words show deeper confusion. Thus Jesus responds, “Are you a teacher and can’t grasp the meaning of this?”

Nicodemus thought he knew a lot. Religion was his supposed specialty, but he was ignorant of the most crucial truths of a saving faith: the need to be converted in the

Implantation

heart and the experience of a new life in God.

“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (verses 7, 8, NKJV). Don’t marvel! Stop being surprised about being born again. The Spirit gives you a new birth, but it is like the wind. You don’t see it, but you experience its effect—a new life in Me.

It doesn’t matter if we can’t understand the process any more than we can understand how and why the wind blows the way it does. All we need is to be open to God’s leading. His Spirit will then come in and change us in ways that we cannot change ourselves. The new birth can’t be completely explained. But it can be completely experienced.

LOST VS. FOUND

Nicodemus quiets for the rest of the night. Jesus takes away his excuses. If someone so honored, praised, obedient, and “righteous” needs a new birth, what about the rest of us? We, too, need to be born again.

What does it mean to be born again?

It’s something radical. Why? Because Jesus teaches that nothing of what Nicodemus has done up to this point has been helpful for entering the kingdom of God. He needs something entirely new, a new start, a new birth.

Christianity is not an addition to what we’ve done so

Finding a Better Way

far. It is a whole new life. It is a new identity. With the new birth, a new personality comes. Your personhood is new and intertwined with that of Jesus. He redefines you. Jesus uses the wind figure to paint the Spirit's work in your life. He is borrowing this from an Old Testament passage: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26, NKJV).

The new birth is an implantation of a new heart through the Spirit of God. The new birth means that God puts His Spirit in you, deep in your heart, so that new desires, new motives, new powers are now at play in you. Peter writes, "Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:23, NKJV). Incorruptible seed. Look what Peter says that the new birth is *not*. Being born again is not something added, reached, or reformed. It is the implantation of a new identity.

Suppose you have an apple tree in your backyard. But you grow tired of eating apples and decide to have mangoes instead. So you prune, change the soil around the apple tree, add more compost, and water it more. What will you get? Mangoes? Not likely. You will get only apples. Why? Because the apple tree will always be an apple tree, not a mango tree. In order to have mangoes, you need to plant a mango seed.

You can't change if you don't change the seed. You may want to reform yourself, but unless you are born again with a new heart and spirit, you will still have apples in your life.

Implantation

After Nicodemus expresses his lack of understanding, Jesus really brings the point home:

“Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:10–15, NKJV).

What is Jesus saying here? God commanded Moses to lift up a bronze serpent in the wilderness, so that when the people would look up to it, they would be healed from deadly snakebites (Numbers 21). Thus, Jesus says to him: I am not merely the teacher you are expecting Me to be. I am the Savior, the Healer of the most damaging problem of human sin. You think you need more teaching. But what you really need is a whole new life. You think I could be an example, a helper, a teacher. But getting a teacher or trying your best won't cause God to grant you eternal life. You are born again only through faith in Me. You need a Savior, not merely a good teacher.

Jesus then says the famous words: “For God so loved the

Finding a Better Way

world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16, NKJV).

Nicodemus waits for a king, a teacher, a politician. But Jesus is our Savior, sent by God to save people from sin and to give them a new birth, one that leads to everlasting life. Sin destroys, but Christ gives life—eternal life. Our only work is to choose which one we want for ourselves.

A GLORIOUS SURRENDER

The conversation is over. Nicodemus leaves without an apparent decision or declaration for a new life. We don’t know what happens with him for the next two years, but the Bible tells us that when Jesus is about to be killed, Nicodemus tries to defend him. Then, on the day that Jesus dies on the cross: “After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight” (John 19:38, 39, NASB).

For two years, we imagine Nicodemus following Jesus at a distance, hesitating, fearing men. Maybe seeing Jesus dead on the cross reminds him of the Master’s words about being “lifted up” (John 12:32, NKJV), causing it all to make sense, to hit home. Because Jesus chooses to take the

Implantation

sinner's crown, Nicodemus is able to receive the gracious crown of Jesus, the Only Begotten Son. At this point, we imagine Nicodemus gloriously surrendering, being born again, and finding what he is looking for.

We, too, need to surrender all. No, we can't give birth to ourselves. But we can, like Nicodemus, look to the cross and see what God has given us in Jesus, and then claim it for ourselves. Only then will that desire for what's missing in life be fulfilled.

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