

'The Dark Night of Nicodemus' Ch. 3:1-8

by Charles Alexander

The sermon explores Nicodemus' nocturnal visit to Jesus as a profound representation of Israel's spiritual darkness and the necessity of being born again to enter the Kingdom of God.

Scripture: Genesis 6:3, Psalm 51:5, Ezekiel 36:25, John 3:2, Romans 7:5, 2 Peter 3:10

Topics: "Spiritual Rebirth", "Divine Judgment"

Description

Charles Alexander preaches a profound sermon on the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, highlighting the spiritual significance of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. The nocturnal visit symbolizes Israel's night of spiritual ignorance and unbelief, representing the darkness shrouding both Nicodemus and the nation. Jesus' declaration that one must be born again of water and the Spirit emphasizes the necessity of a new creation by the Holy Spirit to enter the kingdom of God, contrasting the fallen nature of the flesh with the spiritual rebirth. The sermon warns against the impending judgment on the corrupt and wicked world, urging all to heed the divine truth and prepare for the final battle between good and evil.

Transcript

It is a doubtful exegesis which teaches that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because of fear of the Jewish Council (of which he was a member). His interview with Christ took place too early in the ministry of the Saviour for that. John the Baptist was not yet cast into prison. The envy and the enmity of the rulers in Jerusalem had not been roused. It is true that during this visit to Jerusalem, the first Cleansing of the Temple had taken place (the other took place at the end of the Lord's Judean ministry), but there is no reason to suppose that this had brought Jewish resentment to such a pitch that it had become dangerous for anyone to be known as an associate of the Galilean. Moreover, the eminence of Nicodemus, one of the leading and most wealthy citizens of Jerusalem would have protected him from any dangerous reactions, as indeed he was so protected at a much later date when he spoke up in the Council against the plot to destroy the Saviour (John 7: 45-53).

There are several reasons which could be adduced in explanation of the nocturnal visit, and cowardice is not one of them. Neither at the Jewish Council of John 7, nor at the burial of the Saviour (John 19: 39-42) did this noble man exhibit the slightest symptoms of fear.

William Hendriksen canvasses several opinions but settles at last (in his commentary on John) for the non-committal, "We just do not know why he came by night". This is hardly good enough since the modern

commentator ought to know there is a profound and prophetic reason for the careful recording of all these details in the Gospel of John. In this case there is an important reason advanced by Augustine, which Hendriksen ought to have known, seeing it has been with the Christian Church for fifteen centuries.

We have no difficulty in finding the reason for the coming by night where Augustine found it namely, in the prophetic nature of the action. The dark night through which Nicodemus passed on his way to the interview was the emblem of Israel's night of spiritual ignorance and unbelief. It enwrapped not only the soul of Nicodemus but the soul of the nation of which he was so important and distinguished a sign. John 13:30 records that after receiving the sop in Judas the traitor "went out immediately, AND IT WAS NIGHT". Hendriksen allows, in this case, "It was night outside; NIGHT ALSO IN THE HEART OF JUDAS." Why did he not also perceive that it was night in the heart of Nicodemus -- until the Saviour at that, most potent of interviews lifted the dark veil from the heart of the great Pharisee?

Augustine's observation is much more acute. Speaking of the visit of Nicodemus by night he says, "Came to the Lord and came by night; came to the light and came in the darkness. But what do they that are born again of water and of the Spirit hear from the apostle? 'Ye were once darkness, but now light in the Lord; walk as children of light;' and again, 'But we who are of the day, let us be sober.' Therefore they who are born again WERE of the night, and ARE of the day; were darkness and are light....not in darkness do they seek the day."

Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg refers in this connection to the words of Christ in John 9: 4 "I must work the works of him that sent me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work. As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world," and observes:

"The night here corresponds in the original to Sheol (the grave). Accordingly it appears to be no other than the night of death towards which Christ was traveling with hasty steps. The day would be the time of His stay on earth."

Again Dr. Hengstenberg quotes the words of Christ in John 11: 9-10, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any man walk in the day he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world. But if a man walk in the night he stumbleth because there is no light in him" and comments,

"Light is in the scripture the ordinary image of salvation; night, of an unsaved state. Now the Lord says the time of salvation is not quite run out (i.e. for Israel) ... but a time will come when it shall have run out and then danger will ensue."

Of the night into which the traitor Judas went out from the Upper Room Hengstenberg says,

"There can be no question that the words have something mysterious in them; that the external night is to John here the symbol of spiritual night, when the light of the sun ceased to shine, when therefore the power of darkness began and the hour came for successful assault upon the people of God."

Hengstenberg also adduces from the writings of John, the passages in Rev. 21:25 and 22:5, where it is said of the kingdom of glory, "And there shall be no night there."

Our readers will now see clearly that there is every reason to conclude from the general practice of the inspired John that the night through which Nicodemus passed was a symbol of the night which lay heavily upon his own soul, and upon the nation he represented, and had naught to do with an imaginary cowardice. Our commentators past and present are all too ready to attribute cowardice to the great

personages of Bible history, rather than by a more profound exegesis to perceive the unfolding of a divine drama of vital consequence to the soul of man.

NOT ACTING FOR HIMSELF

So important is the dialogue with Nicodemus in the true history of redemption that it is impossible to conceive of the circumstances surrounding it as being other than a deliberate arrangement of divine providence and sovereign wisdom. In the gospel of John especially we are taught to expect in details otherwise commonplace a divine purpose of transcending importance. John 3 contains the fullest and clearest statement in Holy Scripture on the subject of regeneration and we may not shroud it in exegetical trivialities.

Nicodemus therefore was not acting for himself alone when he came to Jesus by night. He illustrated the darkness of the nation he represented and the complete falsity of their Messianic conceptions. This falseness still dominates not only the thought of official Jewry, but likewise much of the thinking of evangelical people. A true understanding of the third chapter of John would dispel much of the misconception which has, during the last century and a half created a spurious Dispensationalism and dried up the springs of true expository preaching.

The peculiar significance of Nicodemus as representing his nation is emphasised by the Lord Himself in the course of this great interview:

"Art thou a master (Greek, the master) of

Israel and knowest not these things?" (verse 10).

The use of the Greek article before "master" is of special importance. We know that the Lord did not speak in Greek but the inspired John who fully grasped the Lord's meaning set down in that most exact of languages the Lord's innermost thought. In Greek the article has a wider and more powerful signification than in English. It denotes in this case the 'species', and as applied to Nicodemus makes him the symbol and representative of the teaching faculty of Israel - the embodiment of the nation's theology, summarising in himself the nation's conception concerning the expected kingdom of the Messiah.

The Lord's words, "and knowest not" are in sharp contrast with the words already spoken by Nicodemus, "Rabbi, we know ..." The dialogue quickly led to the disclosure of the elementary principle of the kingdom of Messiah, namely that it was founded not upon natural birth but upon a new creation. To paraphrase the Saviour's words:

"If thou, the master and representative of all that Israel is now taught to believe knowest not the most elementary fact of theology, how can you begin to understand divine things?"

Step by step this master-Pharisee was led to see his own ignorance and incompetence in divine things, until the glory of the true light rose upon his darkened soul and he saw before him the only begotten Son, soon to be lifted up as a healing object of faith as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (verses 15-16).

JOEL'S PROPHECY OF "THE TEACHER COME FROM GOD"

The great interview begins with the formal, and no doubt respectful observation by Nicodemus, "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."

This is a perfectly natural approach by Nicodemus to the problem which troubled him. He had unquestioned evidence from the miracles lately performed in Jerusalem (see chapter 2, verses 23-25), that before him stood "a teacher come from God."

Whether intentionally or not Nicodemus uses words which can only have come from a prophetic source. We refer to the prophecy of Joel:

"Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God: for he hath given you a TEACHER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS (AV margin) and he will cause to come down for you the former rain and the latter rain in the first month" (Joel 2: 23).

The Authorised version properly translates the words 'the former rain moderately' and also properly places in the margin its equivalent, "a teacher of righteousness." Those unacquainted with the Hebrew language may well be confused that two such interpretations may be allowed for one phrase, and the two be apparently so unrelated. The explanation lies in the remarkable intensity of primitive languages which, because of the limited nature of their vocabulary, made up for lack of words by the intensity of meaning. The Lord of the inspired word was pleased to use this peculiarity of language both to conceal and to reveal truth, that what was hidden from the wise and prudent might be revealed unto babes.

Ignorance of this principle has sent many of our evangelical preachers and teachers today, hotfoot to Palestine on errands of meteorological research, measuring rainfall and enthusiastically proclaiming their findings as being the fulfillment in our time of a prophecy in Joel which, when rightly understood, began to be fulfilled 2,000 years ago in that nocturnal interview with Nicodemus - and the gentle rain of the Word, appropriate to the seasons of divine visitation, has been falling ever since.

The occasion is worthy of a full examination of the words of Joel as they apply to the observation of Nicodemus - "We know that thou art a teacher come from God."

Concealed in Joel's prophecy therefore is the promise of Messiah as the holy wisdom of God, who should come down upon His people like rain upon the mown grass, and as showers that water the earth (Psalm 72:6). The fact that the words in Joel are followed quickly by the proclamation of the pentecostal outpouring (Joel 2:28-32, quoted by Peter, Acts 2:17-21) should have warned our preachers, overmuch obsessed as they are by the opinions of the rabbis, against their meteorological excursions.

"The former rain" (Moreh in the Hebrew) derives from a verb which has its basic meaning 'to cast forth' and is so used whether of the sending forth of rain or of instruction. There is a remarkable use of it in Isaiah 9:14 where the Lord threatens to cut off from Israel, head and tail, branch (moreh) and rush, in one day; verses 15-16 go on to explain that the ancient and honourable are the 'head' and the prophet who teaches lies is the 'tail' and that these false teachers and leaders 'cause the people to err.'

Hosea, a contemporary of Joel gives a clear definition of the prophetic intent in this use of the Hebrew language, in his words (6. verse 3), "Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord: his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth." (Note, Hosea uses here the word from which 'moreh' is taken as a derivative). Samuel Lee, one

time Regius professor of Hebrew at Cambridge observes at this point, that the idea of teaching "is perhaps also intended, BY A PLAY ON THE WORD NOT UNUSUAL WITH THE PROPHETS."

Returning to our text in Joel 2, verse 23, we now note that the word 'moderately' is given in the margin of the AV as 'according to righteousness'. This extension of meaning, surprising enough to those who have not made a study of Hebrew prophetic usage, derives from the important Hebrew word 'tzadic' everywhere translated 'righteousness', or justice, justification, etc. Its feminine form (the form used by Joel) is 'tz.dakah' and carries the sense here of 'a suitable time or quantity' (Lee) and therefore appropriately rain in moderate or suitable quantities, but containing in concealed form, as often with the prophets, the meaning of a conferred righteousness: hence the full marginal translation, "the Lord has given you a teacher of righteousness, or, according to righteousness".

We cannot over-emphasise the importance of exegesis in the understanding of the prophets: it is because of the perfunctory heaping together of texts without attention to these deep and concealed quantities, that it has become possible for the present Jewish interpretations to prevail so widely and for so long amongst the true people of God. Weather reports from the Middle East are a poor substitute for that labour in prophetic interpretation which succeeds at the last in establishing the gospel on the ruins of Jewish pretension and boasting (as Paul so effectively did). All too often our preachers and prophetic 'interpreters' with their popular theories of Jewish restorationism, are to be found in the shoes of Nicodemus, with his earthy views of Messiah's kingdom before he had quite learned that except a man be born from above he would never see, perceive or understand the Kingdom of God but would remain shrouded in the Jewish night through which that great man passed to learn again, as a child would learn, which be the first principles of the oracles of God.

Our concluding sentence at this stage must therefore be that Joel 2:23 is entirely messianic in its nature, and under the figure of the rain presents Christ in the gospel coming forth to establish His mystic kingdom of truth and grace for the elect children of Zion. These children of Zion do not rejoice over showers of rain at convenient seasons but in showers of spiritual blessing. This heavenly rain is the preaching of the Word which first began to be spoken by the Lord, the true Teacher of Righteousness (that is, the proclamation of the gospel).

DR. GILL'S COMMENT

In confirmation and amplification of our exposition of the passage from Joel we are happy to quote that very profound expositor, Dr. Gill, who in his commentary on Joel writes,

"For he hath given you the former rain moderately" - or rather "for he hath given you the teacher of righteousness" to which agrees the TARGUM "for he hath returned to you your teacher in righteousness". Rabbi Japhet says that the word MOREH signifies a prophet that should teach them in the way of righteousness..... the King Messiah (as Abarbinel interprets it), who is the teacher sent from God and giver by him, as his presence with him and the miracles done by him sufficiently prove (John 3:2) for which he was abundantly gratified, being the omniscient God; and the Son of God that lay in the bosom of his Father; is the wisdom of God, as Mediator; had the Spirit of wisdom on him, and the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hid in him; and who is able to make his teaching; effectual and to qualify others for such work.

"And he will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month"; alluding to the two seasons of the year in which rain was given to the Jews ... this rain spiritually

designates the doctrine of the gospel which is sometimes compared to rain (Deut. 32:2; Isa. 55:10-11); because as rain it comes from God, descends from heaven, is a divine gift, both as to the ministry and experience of it; it tarries not for man, neither for his desires nor deserts; falling according to divine direction, sometimes here, sometimes there; is a great blessing and brings many (blessings) with it, revives, refreshes, and is fruitful. Jerome interprets these two rains of the first susception of doctrine, and of a more perfect knowledge of it; as also of the two testaments, the Old and the New V.24. "and the floors shall be full of wheat" - the Churches of Christ ... which are his floors (Matt. 3:12) and which will be set up everywhere through the preaching of the gospel, the descent of the former and the latter rain; these will be full of precious souls gathered in, compared to wheat, and of the choice and excellent doctrines of the gospel and of all spiritual provisions Matt. 13:30; Jer. 23:28.

"And the fats shall overflow with wine and oil" - with the wine of gospel doctrine and the oil of true grace; there shall be a ... redundancy of these, both in the Ministers of the Word and private Christians in whom the grace of God shall abound and super-abound" (Rom. 5:20); (1Tim.1'24).

(John Gill, Commentary on Joel)

THE PHARISEE SHATTERED

The reply of our Lord to the opening words of Nicodemus is peremptory and destroys at once, and in a sentence, the entire edifice of pharisaism and Jewish interpretations of prophecy. The theories of pharisaism are built upon a false view of human nature and human righteousness. From the days of Cain this philosophy has plagued the world and is the basis of all false ecclesiasticism to this day. It believes in a structure of human righteousness built upon outward conformity to ritual observance or accepted codes of conduct, and believes thoroughly in human ability to achieve virtue and earn divine favour. To quote Dr. Hengstenberg here,

"It is the very characteristic of pharisaism that it knows no regeneration, but only the sanctity appropriated by fragments in which only man has the primary part, and God in the main only the regarding and the rewarding thereof. It was pharisaism which had made the temple in a spiritual sense a house of merchandise (see John 2:16) in which a profitable trade was carried on with God. Josephus says that according to the doctrine of the Pharisees it is for the most part in the power of man to do right or wrong; and they taught further that it depends on man's will to act virtuously or criminally. They enveloped themselves entirely in a self-made holiness".

Nicodemus has come so far as to recognise in this Galilean some of the marks of the promised Messiah, though, like the Jews of today, he knew little or nothing of the true purpose of Messiah's appearing. He might already have discerned in Joel's prophecy that Messiah was to be a "teacher of righteousness". What then, additional to his pharisaic concept of righteousness would such a teacher proclaim? He had been a witness of the miracles which the Lord performed in Jerusalem, and he was convinced thereby that here was one sent from God. The openness of his mind to receive further information must be readily conceded, though this was matched only by his incapacity at first to understand what the Lord would say.

It must have struck Nicodemus like a thunderbolt to hear the Saviour declare (with all the solemnity of one speaking from the throne of God, "Amen, amen, I say unto thee, except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." The basis of all his righteousness and all his hope, was shattered in one terrific sentence.

John is the only gospel writer to use the double "verily" or "amen", He uses it with great frequency. The double Amen declares that the one who speaks is Himself the Amen, the conclusion of all things, the only truth, the possessor of all wisdom, the full and final authority who speaks from above.

"Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

This one sentence destroys the entire edifice of man's righteousness. It also destroys all exclusive Jewish claims to the prophecies and the promises. "Born again" may be rendered "born from above" (AV margin). Our translators chose "born again" for the text as being more suitable to the reply of Nicodemus, "How can a man be born when he is old?" They placed the alternative translation in the margin to denote the divine source and heavenly nature of the work. "From above" places the work of regeneration outside the sphere of man's ability. It presents the regeneration of the soul as a divine operation, and this is made clear in subsequent verses in the use of the words, "born of the Spirit," an expression which occurs three times in four verses, (5-8).

The doctrine of regeneration and its absolute necessity for entrance into or 'seeing' the kingdom of God destroys at once the Judaic theology of birth privilege, which confines the inheritance of the Abrahamic promises to those who can trace their ancestry back to the great patriarch. To the Jew, the kingdom of God was the kingdom which Messiah was to establish in the earth with the Jews as its privileged and exclusive citizens. They (the Jews) expected (and this is their expectation still), to be the elite of the earth, to whom all other peoples must be subject.

John the Baptist had already laid the axe to the root of that tree when he warned, "Think not to say within yourselves, we have Abraham to our father"

Now the Lord Himself is found declaring to Nicodemus that there is no entrance to the kingdom of God except by a new and divine birth "from above" and without this new birth no-one, Jew or gentile, will ever see or enter into that kingdom.

This is the key to prophecy.

THE TWO COVENANTS

Christ thus proclaims the corruption of human nature, no longer fitted (because of sin) to raise itself to participation in the kingdom of God. Hence this teaching of Christ contains within itself the doctrine of the Two Covenants - the first, the covenant of works, under which the human, race fell in the human nature of Adam; the second, the covenant of grace, by which a new and sinless creation is inaugurated in Christ through His atoning death and glorious conquest of sin and death. Regeneration is the implanting of this new principle of holy and everlasting life in the soul of man by the Holy Spirit whereby the soul lives again in 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost' as a new creation, a new beginning, through the Spirit of God. This is the kingdom of God (see Romans 14:17). Paul enlarges on this in Colossians 1:13, when he speaks of those who were "delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son."

Peter puts it in other words (2 Pet. 1:4):

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption which is in the world through lust."

Regeneration is not to be considered apart from the atoning sacrifice of Christ and His glorious resurrection, as is clear from this foundational passage in John 3 wherein Christ foretells to Nicodemus His atoning death in the terms, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Hence also Paul writes to the Colossians, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:14); and Peter links together election, sanctification, forgiveness, redemption by blood, and the evidences of the new birth in one great verse, "Elect, according to the foreknowledge of God, through sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience and, sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." (1 Pet. 1:2), Again in verse three of the same chapter he tells us that God has "begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Paul's notable words are, "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the Beloved; in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:5-7).

CHRIST COMMENCES WITH REGENERATION

A verse by verse comment on the text is called for at this stage of our exposition.

Verse 3: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Hengstenberg's comment on this verse is superb:

"Why does the Lord commence directly with regeneration? Chiefly because opposition to the view held by Nicodemus led to this: It is not, as thou supposest, a question of some new fruits, but of new roots of life; not moral reformation but a fundamental renovation, a new sphere of existence. But also because the doctrine of human depravity, and the consequent necessity for regeneration forms the basis for all other doctrines which Christ, as the teacher come from God, had to communicate.

"Not until the need for redemption has been called forth by this doctrine is there the proper receptivity for the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, of His atonement, and of the signification of faith.

"The strong asseveration, Verily, verily (Amen, amen) presupposes ignorance of this great truth and resistance to its acknowledgment as was fully discerned (in Nicodemus) by Him who knew what was in man. It is a deeply humbling truth. When it is accepted, all boasting is excluded.

The entire edifice of imagined excellence falls into ruins. Man is thrown back at once to the point at which he first entered into life. If we specially regard Nicodemus, this point was for him a truly tragical one. There was nothing left of him. The Jew who as such already supposed himself to have a share in the kingdom of God (the Talmud in the Tract Sanhedrin adduces this very proposition: all Israel has a part in the future world) - the Pharisee who regarded himself as better than other people - the member of the Chief Council - the reputation of being a particularly virtuous man - all seemed to be suddenly consumed to a small heap of ashes. He must be born over again; it is as though he had not yet been born at all. Here the Word of God proves itself to be sharper than any two-edged sword".

Verse 4: "How Can a man be born when he, is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

There is no reason to suppose that so intelligent and serious-minded a man as Nicodemus could, in this sentence, have shown a mere stupidity. "The word of Christ has indeed raised a doubt on the surface of his heart but in its inmost depths has strengthened his conviction. It has pierced like a flash of lightning into the night of his soul; it has found an ally in his conscience, which loudly assures him that this seemingly impossible thing must yet be, if he will see the kingdom of God" (Hengstenberg)

WATER AND THE SPIRIT

Verse 5: "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".

This is the second "Amen, amen" of the dialogue, announcing a divine fiat, a decree from the eternal throne of God, and in it we must find a great prophetic depth.

We dismiss at once the tiresome debate as to whether "water" here means the water of baptism, with all its dangerous overtones of a sacramental regeneration. Behind this appalling error stares the equally dangerous and subsversive error of a sacramental atonement in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, and the attendant superstition which examines that bread and wine with the microscope of Judaism to see whether it was baked in a Jewish oven or poured out of a Jewish vat.

The error runs even further, and we now have to contend with a form of "apostolic succession" which demands that the baptiser-in-water shall be a "recognised" person who himself derived his office from an unbroken succession of "recognised" persons stretching back to the apostles, just as the priests of the Old Covenant must have a father-and-son pedigree going right back to Aaron.

There are those also who would apply to the "administrators" at the Lord's Table the same sacerdotal and papistical requirements without which the rite is invalid - and this in areas rooted in historical Protestantism. It is not surprising that in such places the Glorious Reformation is almost an irrelevancy, if not an encumbrance, on the page of history.

For ourselves we are content to have one High Priest after the order of Melchizedek - a priest who has no predecessor or successor, who is eternal, who is with His church now and who ordains and sends forth with the immediate and valid ordination of His own nail-pierced hands, those who, "recognised" by men or not, are appointed according to His Spirit, to preach the Word of God. The "ordinances" of baptism and the Lord's Supper are the signs and outward pledges of the gospel privileges, blessings and promises given to those with a valid faith and repentance, deriving nothing from the presence or the action of men, whether in a special category, or historical, succession or otherwise. Our blessings and privileges come from One only - CHRIST - between whom and our souls stands no man or system or historical theory.

Christ rules by His word and Spirit and woe to those who separate the Spirit from that written WORD which He, the Spirit of truth has inspired and sent forth from the beginning and Which, carried to all places by preaching (or printing) is the only vehicle of divine grace and truth.

Without that written Word there is no Christ known and no saving truths to be apprehended. Let men beware of separating Christ from the Bible and His Spirit from that written Word which is our only rule of faith and practice and the only standard and testing ground of truth.

This is no longer a statement which can be "taken for granted" even among so-called Calvinists, supposedly basking in the full glory and light of Reformation liberty. As we may presently see, there are

disquieting doctrines abroad concerning regeneration, which divorce the work of the Spirit of truth from the Written truth which He has inspired.

We address ourselves now to the meaning of the words, "born of water and of the Spirit".

We exclude from this text the idea of "baptismal" water because, for the reason stated above, such an interpretation is a capital error and a fatal heresy. It is also inadmissible that in such a dialogue as that which the Lord conducted with Nicodemus, He should make Christian baptism a subject of His "Amen, amen" before that baptism had been formally instituted and certainly before it could have any meaning or relevance to a man in the situation of Nicodemus. We must look deeper than this.

John has little to say about baptismal water in any of his writings, but a great deal to say about water in a much deeper, redemptive and prophetic sense.

The Water of Cana (John 2) which was changed to wine; the water promised to the woman of Samaria (John 4:10); the water of the Spirit described in John 7: 38-39 ("He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water; but this spake He of the Spirit ...") and the water from Christ's pierced body (John 19:34-35, compare 1 John 5:6-8) - these highly significant passages should caution us against "surface" meanings in the understanding of John's writings.

In fact, the roots, of this paying to Nicodemus under that awe inspiring "Amen, amen", are to be found not in the baptism practised by John the Baptist, nor yet in the Christian ordinance of baptism not yet formally instituted, but in the prophetic depths of the Old Testament scriptures where water is always the symbol of the cleansing, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the Soul of Man.. It is in this sense only that our verse could have relevance or meaning to Nicodemus, the great Pharisee and ruler in Israel.

We refer our readers to what we have already pointed out in our exposition of the water changed to wine at the marriage in Cana (John 2). That water was taken from the "waterpots of stone" symbolising in their number six the ordering of the Old Covenant and was fixed in its meaning by the words "after the manner of the purifying, of the Jews". Changed to wine it foreshadowed the change of the Covenants, from Law to Grace through the atoning work of the Saviour.

We now go back to the Old Testament itself, the prophecy of Ezekiel 36: 25-26:

"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean. From all your filthiness and, all your idols will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them...."

Ah Nicodemus! Seest thou not now, how thou art fixed and held by these words, "born of water and the Spirit"! That expectation of Messiah's kingdom was proudly held by thee as thy natural inheritance by reason of thy Jewish birth-certificate; seest thou not now the meaning of thy Lord's "Amen, amen I say unto thee, Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"? Is it not ignorance of the words of the prophets prophesying of the nature and coming of the kingdom of God that causeth thee to ask "How can a man be born when he is old?" Hear now, O man, the words of Ezekiel, well known indeed to thee but never understood by thee until now. Ezekiel tells thee that Israel is polluted, degenerate, un sanctified, lost, and incapable of entering into the kingdom of God. Thou art the fitting representative and symbol of that Israel "Except thou be born of water and the Spirit" (the same water and the same

Spirit spoken of by Ezekiel) thou canst not be saved.

The Amen; and the Amen, is the One who spoke through Ezekiel and the very Lord God who through Ezekiel said: I will sanctify my great name which ye have profaned among the heathen: the heathen shall know that I am the Lord; when T shall be sanctified in you before their eyes: I will sprinkle clean water upon you and give you a new heart and a new spirit, and I will put my Spirit within, you and cause you to walk in obedience and holiness ...

Standing now before Christ is a shattered man. His false shelter of Judaistic pride and boasting has been torn from him and he trembles before his God, a confused and baffled soul. His old covenant is no longer his life but his death. His piteous "How can these things be?" is the confession of his ignorance and blight, Is there not also therein a plaintive cry from his wretched and helpless soul, for deliverance from his condemned and ruined state?

Speak, O Saviour, to this poor man (and to our trembling soul likewise)! Delay not to speak and to work, that he (and we) may know at once and for ever, how these things may be for us all.

The Saviour is not yet ready, however, to pronounce that Word to Nicodemus. The Man must sink yet more deeply into the awareness of his own darkness and helplessness, as the Saviour rends from him the last rag and shred of Jewish pride:

"Art thou a master in Israel and knowest not these things?"

Nicodemus must positively know who it is who speaks to him so that the authoritative "Amen, amen" might enter fully into his soul and complete the work already begun, till the prophetic word be fulfilled, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you and I will put my Spirit within you".

"Thou, O Nicodemus, must hear me speak yet to thee of earthly and heavenly things (John 3, verse 12), of who I AM who ascendeth to heaven, and cometh down therefrom (v.13) and of how I must be 'lifted up' for sin, even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (v.14) and THEN, shalt thou know that the saving word is for thee and not for thee only but for all the world, for not the Jew only, but WHOSOEVER believeth in me shall have everlasting life and shall never perish" (vv. 15 and 16).

This is the meaning of the words "born of water and of the Spirit".

HENDRIKSEN OR HENGSTENBERG?

Yet William Hendriksen, our latest Calvinistic expositor of John's gospel can only say, "The evident meaning is this: being baptised with water is not sufficient. The sign is valuable indeed. It is of great importance both as a pictorial representation and as a seal, But the sign should be accompanied by the thing signified - the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit".

So near, and yet so far!

More perspicuous by far, despite that contemporary Lutheranism from which he cannot quite extricate himself, is Dr. Hengstenberg, who nobly rises out of his Germanic preoccupation with ambiguous sacramentalism to say the following:

"The water here has a symbolical character and typifies the forgiveness of sins. Water, as here used, is not to be distinguished from the water in a whole series of passages in the Psalms and prophets, in which it

signifies the forgiveness of sins, which was already typified in the symbolism of the Mosaic law by material purification. David says (Ps. 51:2): Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity..... (See also verse 7, Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow). As here (in John) so there (in Ps. 51) water and the Spirit are in close connection with each other ('renew a right Spirit within me..... take not thy holy Spirit from me uphold me with thy free Spirit')".

"In Isaiah 52: 15" (continues Dr. Hengstenberg) "we have 'So shall he sprinkle many nations' - where the sprinkling has the signification of absolution from sin.

"In Ezekiel 36:25, it is said, then will I sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean. To this first benefit is added (in v.26) A new heart will I give you. Here also water in the sense of forgiveness, and the impartation of the Spirit, go hand in hand. In Zech. 13:1 it is said, In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness. It is evident that here also water signifies the forgiveness of sins."

This is not to hide the fact that this greatest of German Old Testament expositors returns again and again to his Lutheran dogmas of water baptism; to indicate that despite this fact, his expository acumen could not fail to grasp the true prophetic ground in which the word of Christ to Nicodemus is rooted.

John Calvin is far more explicit than Hengstenberg. He writes: "Spirit and water mean the same thing, and this ought not to be regarded as a harsh or forced interpretation, for it is a frequent and common way of speaking in Scripture when the Spirit is mentioned, to add the word Water or Fire, expressing His power. Christ baptises with the Holy Ghost and with fire (Matt. 3:11) where fire means nothing different from the Spirit, but only shows what is His efficacy in us. As to the word 'water' being placed first, it is of consequence; or rather, this mode of speaking flows more naturally than the other, because the metaphor is followed by a plain and direct statement, as if Christ had said that no man is a Son of God until he has been renewed by water, and that this water is the Spirit who cleanseth us anew, and who, by spreading His energy over us, imparts to us the vigour of the heavenly life, though by nature we are utterly dry. Most properly does Christ, in order to reprove Nicodemus for his ignorance, employ a form of expression which is common in Scripture; for Nicodemus ought at length to have acknowledged that what Christ had said was taken from the ordinary doctrine of the prophets".

Mr. Hendriksen appears to have been as ignorant of his spiritual father (Calvin) as of the foremost Old Testament expositor of the age (Hengstenberg). The former is actually listed by Hendriksen in his bibliography, though to what extent he has made Calvin's "John" an object of study is exceedingly doubtful. Hengstenberg might not exist at all in the acquaintance of Mr. Hendriksen for he lists him not at all, nor yet that other consummate theologian, contemporary of the great Berlin professor, Rudolf Stier, whom even Alford cannot ignore.

We apologise to our readers for any offence in making these comparisons but our complaint is, as always, the degeneracy of exposition in our time and our concern that readers who are called and qualified for the task, should not go for help where help will not be found.

CALVIN IN LATIN!

It is baffling to us that the only quotations we can discover to be made by Hendriksen from Calvin's Writings, are IN LATIN - as though Calvin were still locked up in the mouldy garments of a dead language which no-one understands but an exclusive circle of students. For whom then was Hendriksen writing - for

a tiny circle of Gradgrinds and Dryasdusts, or for contemporary Christians? To what purpose was the task devoted, more than a century ago, of presenting to the English reader a complete translation of almost everything John Calvin ever composed?

FLESH AND SPIRIT

Verses 6 and 7: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again."

There is more in this statement than the mere intimation that flesh is one thing (weak and mortal) and spirit another (immaterial and immortal). There would be nothing in the statement of so elementary a fact of universal knowledge to have warranted any confusion in the mind of Nicodemus as to require the succeeding statement - "Marvel not"

The weakness of the flesh lies not merely in its frailty and mortality, but in that which subjects it to death and decay -- sin. It is clear both from Old Testament and New that "flesh", by its association with sin, is frequently to be taken to mean that principle of sin which "works in our members to bring forth fruit unto death" (Romans 7:5). Hence, "flesh" becomes synonymous with the old Adamic nature, ruined and depraved by the Fall and rising up in opposition against all that is spiritual.

"I know" (writes Paul in Romans 7) "that in me, (that is in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing ... I delight in the law of God after the inward man (i.e. the regenerate nature implanted within as a new creation of the Spirit), but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

Paul makes extensive use of the figurative term "the flesh", denoting the old Adamic nature. In chapter 8 of Romans, he describes the regenerate as those who walk "not after the flesh but after the Spirit" (verses 1 - 4). The law is weak "through the flesh" and Christ came "in the likeness of sinful flesh". They that are "after the flesh" mind the things of the flesh (5). . To be carnally (fleshly) minded is death (6). The carnal (fleshly) mind is enmity against God and they who are in the flesh cannot please God (7-8). The regenerate are "not in the flesh" (9) despite the fact that they are in the physical body while in this world. See also verses 12 and 13, where we are told to "mortify" the "deeds of the body".

In Ephesians 2: 1-3 Paul writes of the deliverance of the soul from its sinful state ("dead in trespasses and in sins") and describes that state as being one in which "we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others".

In Galatians 5: 13-26 Paul enters a final indictment upon our fallen nature, "the flesh": "Use not liberty as an occasion to the flesh ... Walk in the Spirit and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh ... the flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other so that ye cannot do the things that ye would ... the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, etc."

Lest the reader should imagine that fleshly lust refers only to those practices which pollute the lower part of our nature, Paul describes as "works of the flesh" those sins "of the mind", idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, and heresies.

The whole of our human nature is sinful, ruined and fallen, not only in its more revolting manifestations, but in those equally dangerous and defiling propensities of the intellect, pride, envy, hate, error and heresy.

WARNING TO THE BIBLE CRITIC

Let the Bible critic beware, contemptuous as he is of the supernatural nature of divine revelation in the Written Word, eagerly seeking by "New Translations", by attacks upon the authenticity of the "Received Text" of Holy Scripture (preserved through divine Providence from the beginning) and by piecemeal denial of the divine origin, preservation and supreme authority thereof. These men may or may not pollute themselves in the ungodly and disgusting practices of other men, but they are equally depraved in the sight of God by reason of those other "sins of the flesh and of the mind" which show themselves in an inveterate enmity to all truth. That enmity no less reprobated by the righteous Judge of all because it comes in the scholar's robe of "candour" and "honest inquiry", and in its imposing and subtle suggestiveness: "We must not be afraid of new truth and new light" meaning thereby that "old truth" is already discredited and ancient landmarks are tokens of obscurity.

Strip off that hood and scholar's gown and there stands revealed the enemy of souls, sworn from the beginning to deny that God is true and determined in his own depraved being to pollute in man that divine image which he hates and to hold the soul of man in error, darkness and fear.

The laughter which echoes through the "divinity" classrooms at that sentence is the measure of Satan's success in his last climactic onslaught on truth (now upon us): for these are the days of final deception, the last battle, the devil's "little season" (Revelation 20:3).

"I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me", wrote the inspired and deeply penitent David in Psalm 51:5, tracing back the origin of his own personal fall to that depravity of nature inherited by all men from their first parents.

The first occurrence of the term "flesh" in the Bible is in Genesis 6:3 where the Lord says, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh", and again the same chapter, verse 13: "God said, unto Noah: The end of all flesh is come before me, for the earth is filled with violence through them". In this chapter, man is purposely described as "flesh" in association with his great wickedness "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart being only evil continually" (verse 5).

A period of 120 years was set until the judgment of the flood should purge the earth of that abandoned generation and prepare the way for a restricted existence of man on the earth, when the prolonged lifetime allowed to man before the Flood (averaging close on 1,000 years) should be rapidly cut down to those proportions which now are normal. "Flesh" could no longer be permitted by great longevity to develop its evil to the same colossal extent as in the antediluvian world. Human history could not exist for long if such monsters as Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Pope Alexander VI, Hitler or Stalin had had centuries of active life before them. The quick removal of our generations has been a providential safeguard against the increases of evil to the awful heights of Genesis 6.

THE IMPENDING JUDGMENT

Reserved for our day, perhaps, is the reproduction at last of those dreadful times when gigantic men, gigantic in their wickedness as well as in stature, strode the earth and threatened the foundations of

human society. The modern techniques of electronic communications, photography and printing harnessed to an atheistic philosophy which is just as regnant in Western society as it is in the so called Communist world, is rapidly building up to a state of affairs which, despite the brevity of individual human life, is promoting wickedness and crime at a gigantic speed and to a gigantic level. Incredible crimes are filling men's minds with fear. Old standards and conventions are fighting a losing battle for survival. "All flesh is corrupting his way on the earth" and shortly the righteous Governor of creation may pronounce the end of man's probation with the dreadful words "The end of all flesh is come before me: for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth".

Not now by the unexampled and irresistible waters of the Deluge, but by the fiery release of those confined energies which are latent in every atom of creation, the great Creator will, abolish in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, the heavens and the earth which now appear: they will pass away with a great noise and the elements will melt with fervent heat; the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up (2 Pet. 3:10).

The sin of man must have an end and when sin rises to its full height then the 'Righteous Lord will pour out His vengeance - as with Sodom, as with the Amorites, and as with Jerusalem.

There is every reason to believe that the ultimate phase of Satan's unloosing is upon us. The infidelity which began in Great Britain with the deistical philosophers who sprang up as contemporaries of the Puritans in the seventeenth century, grew slowly but surely to the massive proportions of 19th century "enlightenment", with the scientific heresy of "evolution" as its stable companion. Mounted on that runaway steed, the mind of man traveled fast and far into the territory of atheistic determinism. The churches, doubtful of their Bible, fell an early victim to the curse of events, the theological halls became enthusiastic forcing grounds of infidelity. Young men entering with only sketchy ideas of religion, were promptly turned into pious atheists to whom a settled faith in anything except themselves was a sign of obscurantism. We are now reaping the fruits of three centuries of "rationalism". The churches have fallen. Protestantism is dismantled. The Reformation is over and its triumphs are now forgotten or impugned.

In the evangelical world, post-millennialism is an irrelevant dream cherished by a dwindling constituency of good men who have no wish to waken up to reality, while the pre-millennialist nourishes himself complacently on the exciting prospect of a melodramatic antichrist whom he will never (according to his own dispensational fantasies) be obliged to meet.

The stage is therefore set for Satan's final act of universal deception and the "Little Season" of his retributive "Liberty" is upon us. He raises up for the last time the atheistic, heathenish forces of his doomed empire (as they are now risen up) to menace and destroy the last remnants of divine testimony amongst men (as they new endeavour so to do) but at the last moment - the world's last moment of truth - these forces are robbed of their triumph as the fire of God falls from heaven to devour them.

Flesh is flesh and remains flesh, in opposition to the Spirit, till God summons the world to judgment. Beware then, all proud philosophers and rulers, atheistic and evolutionary scientists, blind theological moles in dens of false scholarship who burrow their way through the pages of the Bible to cast out, destroy and banish the Word of God. Beware also all politicians and educationists, and all rulers and chief citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah who intend to bring back the ancient filthiness of the cities of the plain to destroy all that is moral and upright and pure and of good report: to discredit the righteous and blame the good, in order to justify those who live in the way of lust and pleasure and defiance of God's holy law. Let them all

beware of the fiery indignation which must surely in the end come down from heaven to devour when the omnipotence of God rises up to destroy the wicked and establish the glory of the Redeemer.

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