

Nicodemus – from fear to faith

It was already dark when I left my house. The streets of Jerusalem were empty of people as they were at home celebrating the Feast of Unleavened bread during the Passover week. I was able to make my way to my destination without anyone recognizing me. I knocked at the door and told that I had come to see the Rabbi. No questions were asked. I was led up the outside stairs to the guest room and there I met the young Rabbi from Nazareth.

As is normal in our culture I began with complimentary words *“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”* His response left me totally surprised and confused. *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”* I was surprised because without my telling it he was already answering the question that I had come to ask him. Of course it was not an unusual question. It was the burning question on the lips of all Jews, *“How can we be part of God’s kingdom, how can we see the hated Romans cast out and a true son of David become king?”*

Yet I was confused by his answer to me. I asked *“How can a man be born when he is old?”*. *“Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”*

His response did not help me much at first *“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’* In true rabbinic style he was challenging me to work out what he was saying. But I was still confused and sat thinking about his words.

The evening breeze was blowing outside and for a moment caught my attention. The Rabbi commented *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”* True enough this was a difficult matter to work out. What did it mean to be born again; to be born of water and the Spirit? I had to admit I did not understand and asked *“How can this be?”*

The Rabbi was not going to let me off with an easy explanation, instead he challenged me to think ¹⁰*“You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.”* Would I trust him that he knew the truth? Was I willing to submit to his teaching and seek to learn from him or would I hang on to the preconceived ideas I had of the kingdom of God?

His final words showed me how much I had to learn ¹²*I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*

I understood that our discussion was over. Now it was time for me to go and work with what the Rabbi had given me. I thanked him and took my leave. As I walked home through the empty streets I thought about his words. Then I remembered what John the Baptist had been so recently proclaiming – that he baptized with water but the one who was coming would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. It was already a shocking idea that Jews did not automatically have a place in the kingdom but must repent and wash in water before they could be ready for it. Now the Rabbi was telling that even this water baptism was not enough, a Spirit baptism was needed also. Did this then mean that he was the one who would give that baptism, that he was the Messiah the prophet Malachi told about? *Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,*” says the LORD Almighty. ²*But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.* ³*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.*

The walk was beginning to make me a bit breathless but now my old heart began to beat with excitement at the insights I was getting. Only those who had repented and had a spiritual change could be part of the kingdom, even an old man like me. Truly this spiritual rebirth was a mysterious process but the effects would be visible. The rabbi’s words started to make some sense for me.

Much else remained puzzling. What did he mean about coming down from heaven and about the snake and the Son of Man being lifted up? Whatever this meant I understood enough now to know that even though I was a respected teacher in Israel I need to humble myself and be baptized and I needed to become of follower of this rabbi from Nazareth.

Not many days later I heard that the Rabbi and his disciples were baptizing people in the Jordan and I went to them and was baptized. The Rabbi smiled when he saw me coming. Joy filled my heart that I had taken the first step towards entering the kingdom.

I did not see the Rabbi after that for some months. Then to my dismay I found out that some of my fellow Pharisees had sent guards to have him arrested during one of his visits to Jerusalem. They came back empty handed, overwhelmed by his words just as I had been. *“No one ever spoke the way this man does,” the guards declared.* The contemptuous words of the Pharisees that only the common people believed Jesus raised up anger in me and I protested, *“Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?”* They dismissed my protest as the words of an old fool *“Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”* I realized that by siding with the Rabbi I had lost my position of respect and influence amongst my fellow leaders. But I decided in my heart, whatever the cost I would be faithful to him. They would see the truth when he started the kingdom.

Two years had passed during which time the Rabbi was mainly in the north of the country preaching and healing and gathering followers and I did not see him.

Just before Passover he rode into Jerusalem at the head of a huge crowd of people and I shared their excitement that the time for the starting of the kingdom had come. I waited excitedly for his announcement but it did not come. He just continued preaching and debating in the temple as he had done before. I wondered what he was waiting for.

A few days later after enjoying the Passover meal with my family I went to bed but I was not allowed to sleep for long. I was awoken in the early hours of the morning by an urgent call to a gathering of the council, the Sanhedrin. Had the kingdom been declared I wondered as I hurried to the gathering? My excitement turned to horror when I found my beloved rabbi, bound and bruised and on trial for his life. I remember the way the whole company gasped when he said *“But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”* Then I remembered his words about coming down from heaven and going back to heaven. I understood that he was not just a man anointed by God to lead the nation but he was much more. He had truly come down from heaven. But if he was divine being, how could he let all these terrible things happen to him?

While I was puzzling about this most of the rest of the Sanhedrin were crying out for his death. My protests and those of my colleague Joseph of Arimathea were ignored and the Rabbi was sent to the Roman governor. I hoped Pilate might act justly and overturn the evil plans of our leaders but like me, he was a coward and fearing for his reputation, he sentenced the Rabbi to death. Within a few hours I heard the unbelievable news that the Rabbi had been crucified. By the time I got to the place of execution it was all over. But as I looked in horror at the dead body on the cross I remembered his words to me ¹⁴*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,* ¹⁵*that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.* They comforted me that he had known this would happen and somehow it was in God's plan.

Joseph was bolder than me. He went to the governor and got permission to bury the body of our beloved Rabbi. Hurriedly, because of the coming of the Shabbat, we took the body down and buried it. We did not care that we were being defiled by touching a dead body. It felt to me that to touch him purified rather than defiled. We buried him in Joseph's new tomb near by, then broken hearted went to our homes for the saddest Shabbat I had ever had.

On the first day of the week while I was still deep in my sorrow at home, a rumor began to spread around Jerusalem. The body had gone. Later in the day Joseph came and confirmed that the tomb was empty. We wondered what had happened. After sunset one of the Rabbi's disciples arrived at my home. His face was shining. *“The Rabbi lives”* he told and explained how he had appeared to many of them that day. At first this seemed an impossible claim but as I heard more and more testimonies over the next few days, joy filled my heart and now I understood. The Rabbi from Nazareth had truly conquered death. He was alive. And because he lived he could

give eternal life to those of us who believed in him. He was not just a rabbi but Lord and Savior.

Over the next month or so I heard reports of him appearing to various groups of disciples and I wished I could have been in one of them. Then I was told an amazing story: his disciples had seen him go up to heaven in a cloud. So this is what he meant when he told me about going into heaven. And if he went into heaven, then he would surely fulfill the words he told to the Sanhedrin about “*coming on the clouds of heaven*”.

I was now an active member of the disciples in Jerusalem and we met daily for prayer. Ten days later during one of these meetings early on the morning of Shavu'ot, Pentecost, while we were praying, I heard the wind again. Not a gentle breeze but a mighty wind. Then I saw fire come down on us and inside me I felt a joy and boldness I had never felt before. No longer did fear control me. I found myself praising God in a language I had never learned. So this was what our Lord meant about being baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire.

By this time a crowd had gathered wondering what had happened. Some Jews who had come from a far off province of the Roman Empire seemed to understand what I was saying, apparently in their local language. Once again I became a teacher of Israel. Now I understood the Rabbi's words. Now I had boldness to teach.

Challenge

It is not always easy to understand what Jesus is telling us. Are we still willing to listen and work to understand. Are we willing to spend time in Bible study to understand him better?

How much do we let fear of what people think of us prevent us from doing what God calls us to do?

Have we all humbled ourselves and been baptized in water? Have we all invited the Holy Spirit to fill our life, to cleanse our heart with his fire? Have we asked him to release spiritual gifts in us and to give us the boldness we need to witness for Jesus?

The same Spirit who changed the life of Nicodemus can change our life now if we are willing. The Spirit has already come; we don't need to wait for him as Nicodemus did. Let us open our hearts and pray he will fill us so that we can serve Jesus with boldness.

Prayer

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