

You Must Be Born Again!

My message is from John 2: 23-25; 3:1-13:

“You must be born again!”

Theology is the study of **God**.

In the third chapter of John’s Gospel we have the **highest** and the **loftiest** statement of theology in the entire Bible. It is not John 3:16 but rather it is **“You must be born again!”**

If you can grasp the depth of the meaning of this imperative you will know the Gospel.

The terms “born again,” the “new birth,” “born from above,” all refer to regeneration.

The most famous evangelist of our time wrote a book with the title, “How to Be Born Again,” but of course he does not know how to cause regeneration. You cannot tempt God with your so-called “decision.”

The famous evangelist cannot tell you and neither can I tell you how to be born again because regeneration is entirely in the control of a sovereign God. **What is the new birth?**

The **new birth** is the direct and sovereign act of **God the Holy Spirit** upon a totally helpless sinner that is “dead in trespasses and sins.” **God the Father** uses the preaching of the **Gospel** to draw men and women to Himself.

God the Holy Spirit reveals the holy law of God to give a person the knowledge of sin. Men will admit that they have sinned but they do not agree that they deserve to be condemned to an everlasting torment in hell!

If by the **grace** of God men and women are enabled to agree with God about their personal guilt and **condemnation** then and only then does the law lead them to Christ. By **grace** through **faith alone** the guilty sinner receives the righteousness of **God the Son** in Christ Jesus.

God has chosen them in Christ before the foundation of the world and they are called by God in time before they die and they are **justified** in the sight of God.

Only then can a sinner claim the immeasurable blessing and shout

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus!” [Romans 8:1]

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The fact that God must take the initiative in saving a sinner in no way excuses the sinner for his or her unbelief! **“Repent and believe in the Gospel!”** is a command.

The justified person does not become **personally** righteous but is **accounted** as righteous in **Christ Jesus**. At the instant of regeneration a lifelong process of personal holiness begins. This process is sanctification. This is **personal holiness**, without which no one will see God [Hebrews 12:14], but **personal holiness** does not create personal merit for God’s favor but **personal holiness** is the necessary **result** of having been **born again**.

Let me say that this is the sum and substance of my theology and that is what I preach.

“You must be born again!”

Before we expound our text let me tell you what the **new birth** is not:

The **new birth** does not come from the acceptance of the **historical facts** about Jesus. You can believe that Jesus was born of a virgin and lived a perfectly sinless life; that He died on the cross for sinners; that He arose from the grave on the third day as He said He would; that He ascended unto the Father and now intercedes for His own. You can believe all of the facts about the life of Jesus and still go to hell.

The **new birth** does not come from the intellectual acceptance of a **proposition** such as the “Four Spiritual Laws”.

The **new birth** does not come from your so-called free-will **“decision”** to become a Christian. That is the great error of the book, “How to Be Born Again.”

The **new birth** is not the result of your having been raised in a Christian home by godly parents.

The **new birth** is not the result of your having been baptized at any age!

The **new birth** will be as much of a **shock** to you as it was to Nicodemus. Even if you were born again as a very young person you will still have the knowledge of your sinful nature and be continually amazed that God would save such a sinner as yourself.

**Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us,
that we should be called children of God!** 1 John 3:1

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In my expositions of John's Gospel I labor to give the spiritual interpretation that is missed by many scholars and writers. It is not so much that they are wrong in what they say but it is that they have missed much in the life and words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. It is my strong conviction that everything that Jesus Christ said and did in His time of earthly humiliation was a fulfillment of the Law the prophets, and the psalms.

The encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus is perhaps the most important theological lesson that you will ever learn, if you are blessed to learn it.

In order to truly grasp the imperative that Jesus commands Nicodemus, we must recall the mission of John the Baptist which was **two-fold**.

John the Baptist was the "voice of one crying in the wilderness." He was the forerunner that Isaiah had prophesied would come and announce the arrival of Messiah or the Christ.

John the Baptist indeed pointed out that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ but John also announced the end of Judaism and the OT sacrificial system. That system was surely ordained by God to point to the Substitution and Suffering of the Christ but the system was now was corrupted by the Jewish leaders and true religion had been dead for centuries. It was certain that they were not going to hear the truth from the Jewish leaders.

Very few people had knowledge of the true God. There were a few like old Simeon in the temple that could not die until he had seen the Consolation of Israel, but he was the exception.

The means of establishing the new and correct way to worship God was introduced by John the Baptist. "Show me evidence of repentance or I will not baptize you," says John.

One day while John was baptizing, Jesus of Nazareth, coming from the temptation in the wilderness, comes walking towards him, and John declares, "**Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**" The OT system is over, "**Behold the Lamb!**"

Then Jesus comes preaching,

*"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent, and believe in the gospel."* {Mark 1:15}

Jesus performs His first miracle by turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana, because the Covenant of Redemption is a **wedding**. Then He goes to the temple in Jerusalem and throws out the merchandisers thus making His claim to be the fulfillment of Zechariah 14:21 that there will be no Canaanite {merchant} in His Father's House.

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What Christ told Nicodemus is the most necessary thing for any human being to know. The lesson comes when Jesus tells “the teacher of Israel,”

“You must be born again!”

Being born again, or being born from above, and refer to **regeneration** and that is what John the Apostle alluded to in:

John 1:12-13

12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Let me say this, and pray that your ears are not stopped up and that your heart is not already hardened. If our text today teaches anything at all it teaches,

“Salvation is of the Lord.” {Jonah 2:9}

You may be as religious as Nicodemus and you may be just as lost. If you are truly saved it is only because you have been born again by the Holy Spirit **and if** you have been born again it is by the sovereign grace of God!

Open your Bibles and follow with me as I read the text.

John 2:23-3:13

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. 24 But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, 25 and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

3:1 {Now} There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 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."

3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly [Amen, amen], I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

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5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 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."

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? 11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven."

Many times the chapter divisions may cause you to miss the context of a passage. You must see the connection between the last verse of chapter two and the first verse of chapter three.

*2:25 and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.
3:1 {Now} There was a man*

Eight of ten translations, including the ESV that I checked have the word “**now**” at the beginning of 3:1.

What is the significance of “**now**” in 3:1?

“Now” means that Jesus knows the hearts **all men** just as he knew the hearts of Philip and Nathanael. It means that Nicodemus is the representative man of dead religion. Nicodemus has gone about as far in religion as a man can go and he is still lost!

3:1 {Now} There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

Names in the Bible usually have significance in the narrative in which the person is involved. Nicodemus means “victorious among his people” and so he was “*a ruler of the Jews.*”

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Council of Seventy, made up of priests, Levites, scribes, and elders of Israel.

Judaism, the Pharisees and the religious leaders had **externalized** religion.

Religion was something that you observed. You prayed long prayers to be seen of men. Enlarge the borders of your garments and broaden your phylacteries. Put a frown on your face so men would know that you were fasting. Dead religion makes you feel good about yourself and how good you are. **No repentance!**

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Not much has changed since the days of the Pharisees because many people who claim to be Christians live like lost people. There is no demand for a changed life. **No repentance!**

Religion, but dead religion without a hint of repentance and personal holiness!

Jesus is about to take all of that error away from Nicodemus!

2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him,

Much has been speculated as to why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night.

William Hendriksen says that no one really knows why he came at night. I do not accept the idea that Nicodemus was afraid to be seen by his fellow leaders because even though He had cleansed the temple of the merchants the opposition to Jesus had not really started.

Augustine says that Nicodemus' coming at night was **prophetic** in nature and that he is the emblem of Israel's night of ignorance and unbelief. It was "night" in Israel. Nicodemus and all the rest of the Jewish leaders were in spiritual darkness.

"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs { 2:23} that You do unless God is with him."

This page of my Bible has several words with circles drawn around them with lines drawn to connect the words. These repeated words are a "play on words" and are extremely important to the correct understanding of this passage.

You might note these plays on words. It will be very instructive. "Man" in 2:25 and 3:1. "Signs" in 2:23 and 3:2. "We know" in 3:2 and 3:10, 11. "Unless" in 3:3 and 3:5.

Nicodemus, "the teacher of Israel," can teach Israel all there is to know about religion but he does not know the most elementary fact of all of theology. Nicodemus does not know what **regeneration** means and Jesus said he was supposed to know that!

Whether Nicodemus knew it or not he uses words that can only come from the OT prophecy of Joel.

*Joel 2:23
23 Be glad then, you children of Zion,
And rejoice in the LORD your God;
For He has given you the former rain faithfully,*

The prophecy is the term "former rain."

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Now here I must trust the scholarship of someone who has mastered the Hebrew language who says that an alternate translation of Joel 2:23 “the former rain” is “For He has given you a **TEACHER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.**” This translation is supported by perhaps the greatest Hebrew scholar that ever lived so many centuries removed from the original language, Dr. John Gill.

*23 Be glad then, you children of Zion,
And rejoice in the LORD your God;
For He has given you the Teacher of Righteousness,*

Is not this passage from Joel from the same chapter the prophet that Peter calls on to explain the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost? What happened at Pentecost? About three thousand souls were born again!

Nicodemus calls Jesus “*a teacher come from God*” and indeed He is.

3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

“Truly, truly,” “Verily, verily,” “Most assuredly,” are translated from “Amen, amen.”

“**Amen, Amen!**” John is the only gospel writer to use the double “Amen.”

The double Amen declares that the One who speaks is Himself the Amen, the conclusion of all things, the only truth, and the possessor of all wisdom the full and final authority who speaks from above. [Charles Alexander]

John the Baptist had told the multitudes:

Luke 3:7-9

Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 9 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

In saying that Jesus has just destroyed the Pharisees claim that they are the children of Abraham after the flesh and are thus the children of God. Jesus says that Jew and Gentile alike become children of God in only one way, you must be born again!

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No one has ever been justified by God based on their birth certificate!

Jesus, in a single phrase, has destroyed Judaism and shattered the confidence of this proud Pharisee!

“Unless!” Without exception! Unless God the Holy Spirit quickens your soul that is “dead in trespasses and sins” you will die in your sins and go to hell in spite of all of your religion!

Can you “see” or comprehend the “kingdom of God?”
Then it is only because God had done something for you.

The Jews expected a literal return of Elijah; a literal earthly kingdom with Messiah as king, and they thought Jesus meant a literal destruction of the temple. No spiritual understanding of things that “the teacher of Israel” was expected to know. Now listen to the Jewish leader, “the teacher of Israel,” who is ever the **literalist**.

*4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old?
Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"*

And so this spiritually blind and lost religious leader takes the words of Jesus literally. How could Jesus mean being “born again” as a literal physical rebirth?

Some writers are so dense that they say that Jesus meant that you had to be born the first time. That is simply a ridiculous interpretation.

There is perhaps something that intrigued Nicodemus. What if a man **could** actually start over? **What if you could have a new beginning?** Well, you can if it pleases God to call you from darkness to light!

5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

“Amen, Amen!” “Unless!” Unless what?

unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

There has been much dispute over “*born of water and the Spirit*”.

The dispute is over the little word “and.”

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The Greek word *kai* may be translated into many English words.

The **context** of the passage will help you determine how to understand what the “kai” means. It is a simple conjunction and may be translated, yet, indeed, likewise, manner, moreover, very, yea, and the word that I believe is consistent with the context is “**even.**”

“Even” explains what the meaning of “water” is. Born of water, **even** of the Spirit.

Let me disabuse you of any notion that Jesus is referring to water baptism.

Those who teach that baptism is essential to salvation insist that Jesus here means water baptism. These false teachers sidestep the salvation of the thief on the cross by saying that the thief was saved in the OT way. That only shows their ignorance of the Bible because there is no OT way and a different NT way to be saved.

Stay with the context. What does John 1:33 mean?

John 1:33

33 I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

Here is the clue. How many new births are there?

Are there one new birth of water and another new birth of the Spirit?

In the other verses of this passage [6 and 8] Jesus only refers to being born of the Spirit. There is only one new birth!

John the apostle consistently uses water **metaphorically** as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. In Chapter Four Jesus refers to living water. In Chapter Seven John explains that when Jesus speaks of water He is referring to the Holy Spirit [7:37-39].

John 7:37-39

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. 38 He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." 39 But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

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Unless one is born of water, and by that I mean the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven!

Nicodemus, all that will ever result from the flesh is flesh, or sin.

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Jesus continues to instruct Nicodemus: **“Nicodemus, while you are standing there in amazement and confusion, I will tell you how God saves sinners!”**

8 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.”

Jesus uses the metaphor of the sovereignty of the wind to teach about the sovereignty of God in bringing about the new birth.

You are not in control! You are not born again because of anything that you have the power to do. You do not make a “decision” to allow the Holy Spirit to change you from death to life. You don’t have any more power than Lazarus did before Jesus cried out, “Lazarus, come forth!”

You must be born again, but it is entirely up to God as to whether that will ever happen to you. Being religious without Christ will not give you the new birth. Religion without regeneration produces Pharisees not children of God!

Many years ago I was trying to help a woman understand the sovereignty of God in salvation. She honestly believed that salvation came as a result of a person making a “decision.” Finally, she said to me, “You know, I think I understand what you are saying. How does the Holy Spirit know whom to regenerate?” Does the Holy Spirit depend on man to “permit” Him or is the Holy Spirit sovereign like the wind?

In John Chapter 6:

John 6:43-45

43 Jesus therefore answered and said to them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. 44 No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. 45 It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me.

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There it is. Your salvation and mine and the salvation of anyone who is saved is entirely up to God. **Do not murmur among yourselves.**

The wind is under the sovereign control of God and so is the new birth.

Nicodemus is still the amazed **literalist**.

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

And now Jesus begins to rebuke Nicodemus for his ignorance of spiritual matters. There are some things that “the teacher of Israel” should know.

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? 11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

There is not time in this message to go into several important things that are taught in verses 11 & 12.

Who are the “We”? The Holy Trinity!

What are the “earthly things”?

The earthly things are what Moses wrote of the Christ. If Nicodemus did not understand the symbolism of the OT there is surely no way he can understand regeneration!

Unless, unless he is born again!

Before we get too smug, keep in mind that if you or I know anything about the Word of God, it is because we were taught of God. Yes, Nicodemus was responsible and he was expected to know about regeneration but he could not learn what he must know apart from being taught by God. That in no way excuses Nicodemus from the responsibility to know about regeneration.

When Jesus referred to being “born of water” what should Nicodemus bring to mind? We have already laid aside the notion that He means water baptism.

What would “the teacher of Israel” be expected to know about the symbol of water?

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Charles Alexander writes:

The Water as a symbol of the Spirit.

Was it not from Ezekiel 36 that the Lord was quoting to show Nicodemus his Jewish error, when He, the Lord, spoke of being born of water and the spirit? That water is not baptismal water, not the holy water of Rome, nor yet the ritual ablutionary water of the Mosaic code, nor yet even the not-quite-near-enough venture of many good evangelicals that it is the water of the Word. It is the water of the Spirit, the same water Christ was referring to when conversing with the Samaritan woman, and the same water He spoke about to the Jews in the last day of the feast, “He that believeth on me AS THE SCRIPTURE HATH SAID, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.... This spake He of the Spirit which THEY THAT BELIEVE ON HIM SHOULD RECEIVE...” (John 4:13-14; John 7:37-39).

If Christ was quoting Ezekiel in these passages and also from the later passage in Ezekiel relating to the living waters which were to – and where else? – Then Christ was interpreting the O.T.

The understanding of the new birth or regeneration was rare in the OT but it was not completely unknown. How else did John the Baptist come to know about the baptism of the Holy Spirit if it was not known in the OT?

John the Baptist didn't have a single page of our NT to work from.

Regeneration is taught in the OT and Nicodemus, “the teacher of Israel” did not have an inkling of that great truth.

Now hold on for few minutes while Jesus causes an **earthquake** in the soul of this Pharisee. Not only will Nicodemus understand regeneration but he also is about to be born again. He is about to be born of water **even** the Spirit!

13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

What OT passage did Jesus quote to Nicodemus?

Turn to Proverbs 30:1-4.

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Proverbs 30:1-4

The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, his utterance.

This man declared to Ithiel — to Ithiel and Ucal:

There is even significance in the names listed here. Again, I will not go into this except to point out that Jakeh means “**gathered**” and is only used in one other place in Genesis 49 referring to Shiloh {Messiah} and those gathered to Him.

*2 Surely I am more stupid than any man,
And do not have the understanding of a man.*

NICODEMUS

*3 I neither learned wisdom
Nor have knowledge of the Holy One.*

4 Who has ascended into heaven, or descended?

CHRIST

Who has gathered the wind in His fists?

Verse 8

Who has bound the waters in a garment?

Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is His name, and what is His Son's name,

If you know?

Before Jesus spoke these words Nicodemus could have quoted Proverbs 30 and would not have understood its meaning. Now he does!

And so we have, perhaps, one of the most religious men who ever lived comes to Jesus as a lost sinner and he is confronted with the sovereignty of God in salvation. You may have everything in religion that Nicodemus had and still be lost. **You must be born again.**

Please know that I have barely scratched the surface of the spiritual interpretation of this passage. There are other allusions to the OT but if you have grasped what I have preached today you will be far ahead of a great number of religious people who will not give God all the glory in salvation.

As long as you cling to any idea that you are in control of your salvation beyond the simple receiving of a free gift you are no better off than Nicodemus was when he dwelt in spiritual darkness.

Jesus of Nazareth is approached by Nicodemus, the Pharisee, to question His authority, His signs. Jesus knew what was in “man” and Nicodemus represents the religious man.

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In spite of his pedigree, learning, and achievements Nicodemus lacked the one essential thing that would determine if he was saved or lost. He needed a new heart! He couldn't buy one, he couldn't earn one, he couldn't even learn how to get one; **but God gives them away!** [Charles Alexander]

The new birth, or being born again, or born from above, is called regeneration. The spiritually dead sinner is quickened or made alive by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. Read Ephesians Chapter 2:1-10.

Look at what Jude said:

Jude 3

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, ...

Our common salvation is **regeneration!**

We will not continue to look at the most quoted and most abused verse in the entire Bible, John 3:16.

Just a brief comment on the **contrast** between Chapter Three and Chapter Four that is **remarkable** and **intentional**. Do you want any more evidence that God saves sinners in only one way? Salvation is by grace through faith alone in the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. **You must be born again!**

What exactly is that contrast between John 3 & 4?

In **John 3** we have the “man” [2:24], a self-righteous Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, the teacher of Israel. Surely if anyone is a child of God through religion and birthright it is this Jewish leader!

Nicodemus is one of the richest and most respected men in all of Judaism. But Jesus told Nicodemus that in spite of all his religion and the esteem of the people that there is yet one necessary thing, Nicodemus, that you **do not** have. **You must be born again!**

In **John 4** we have the very opposite of Nicodemus. We are presented with a woman who is at the lowest place in society. Here is a poor wretch of a woman who has gone from one man to another and is now living with a man who is not her husband.

No one regards her with any respect and no doubt she also despises the life that her choices have produced for her.

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But Nicodemus was no closer to God before he came to Jesus than was this wretched Samaritan woman. **Do you know why?**

You must be born again!

Have you been born again? If you have received Christ but have never made a public profession of faith in Christ alone and received Christian baptism, which is believer's baptism, then you need to take care of that.

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