

“A New Life”

John 3:1–21 (NRSV)

New life can be yours!

I enjoy watching old episodes of the Twilight Zone. Imagine, for a moment, that Rod Serling stepped out and told you that you were about to enter the twilight zone. Your life would begin anew. Nothing would be quite the same. You were about to start over, get another chance. Indeed, you, your very self, would be a new creation, kind of like being born a second time.



What would you do with this do-over? Would you embrace this new life or would you strive to cling to the old, the known, out of comfort if nothing more? Would you trust, truly, the one who offered you this new life? These are sorts of questions that were put to a man named Nicodemus almost two thousand years ago by a Galilean peasant from Nazareth.

The twilight zone?

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a villager from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus' world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry for a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. "Who is he?" the crowds asked. Nicodemus wondered himself. Feeling his heart warmed and his mind perplexed, Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn't just walk up to him. He had a reputation to protect. Already, some of the Pharisees were talking about the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night -- so no one would know.¹

There, Nicodemus sat in front of Jesus looking only ever more confused. Born a second time? Born from above? Blowing wind and the kingdom of God? What is Jesus talking about? Crazy talk. I know the Scriptures inside and out, Nicodemus thought to himself. None of this is making any sense! Jesus had even taken him to task, wondering how Nicodemus could possibly be a teacher of the people if he didn't understand what Jesus was saying. Bewilderment and insults – that pretty much summed it up. Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived.

Still, he wondered, what did Jesus really mean by, "You must be born from above"? How was Nicodemus to make sense of what Jesus told him? Should he even try? Had he entered the twilight zone?

Born of water and Spirit

The problem is that Jesus tried to lead Nicodemus into a facet of God's truth that has been perplexing to people for these last two thousand years. Few topics will raise as many eyebrows and create as much as confusion as discussions of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's work in each of us and in this world. It is a story that is grounded in the Old Testament; nonetheless, most of us need a guide to help our understanding. Nicodemus ought to be such a guide, for he is a Pharisee, a supposed expert in Hebrew Scripture. But no, he is as confused as anyone.

So, Jesus pushed hard on the man for not understanding when he should (v. 10). Nicodemus should understand that when Jesus speaks of being "born of water and Spirit" he is calling on common Old

¹ Obviously, I'm using a little informed imagination to flesh out the portrait of Nicodemus. Also, every time John refers to "night" in his gospel, it is a reference to spiritual darkness. Nicodemus is living in the darkness as he comes to confront the light that is Jesus.

Testament imagery of cleansing repentance and God's life-giving spirit being poured out on the people of God (see esp. Ezekiel 36:25- 27). He should grasp that God's promises of a day when God would dwell in his people's hearts are coming to pass in and through Jesus.

Jesus wants Nicodemus to perceive that being part of God's people and their entry into God's kingdom, had never been about what Nicodemus had most valued: the Law, circumcision, the temple, the land. Instead, it had always been and still was about faith, faith that was possible only after the radical transformation, the rebirth, brought by the Spirit of God.

When we are "born of water and the Spirit," when we are given new life, the transformation is total, reaching into every part of our being. This is not about adding something to us that was lacking. It is not about fixing something that was broken. It is not about any incremental approach. Rather, it is about our complete and utter rebirth, our regeneration, our re-creation.

Our regeneration

This new birth Jesus speaks of, this regeneration, is only one image of salvation used by the New Testament writers to express the reality created by Christ's coming. But is fundamental to our notions of salvation, for as Jesus tells Nicodemus, this regeneration will characterize all who are part of God's kingdom, whether we speak of it as new birth or new creation.

The imagery of the "new" is used most often in connection with the regeneration of the individual. Regeneration is for the believer nothing less than a new creation: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17 RSV). Newness here indicates that a clean break is provided, with the past forgiven and transcended. This transformation into something new is the essential spiritual reality: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal 6:15 RSV; cf. Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).²

The effects of Sin³ in our lives can be understood as a four-fold dysfunction: the brokenness of our relationship with God, within ourselves, with others, and with God's creation. The images of rebirth and new creation speak to all of them.

Is Nicodemus "reborn"? Nothing in the story from John 3 seems to point to Nicodemus being born anew (born a new person who has been put right with God). But later in John's gospel, Nicodemus steps up to defend Jesus from his accusers (7:45-52) and after Jesus' death, Nicodemus honors him with a burial fit for a king (19:38-42). So, you tell me, was Nicodemus reborn? Was he "saved"?

How about us? Granted, we often don't act like the born-from-above people of God, but a bit like a child who isn't acting his or her age. But the Spirit works within each of us so that as we mature in Christ, our thoughts, words, and actions increasingly conform to the new person God has created. All this, because God loves us so much that he gave his only Son on that cross, so we might be offered the new birth of water and the Spirit.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When has there been a time in your life that you were excited for a do-over (starting a new school year, moving to a new place, or even during an exciting board game)?
2. How do you respond to the idea that we experience brokenness because of sin in four areas of our lives (our relationship with God, within ourselves, with others, and with creation)? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Share about a time when you have felt separated from God, whether you knew it in the moment or realized it after. What was that experience like? How is your relationship with God different now?
4. When have you, like Nicodemus, been unaware of what you needed from God? How did God show you this need and answer it for you?
5. Where do you need renewal in your life right now?

² From the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, IVP, 1998

³ I capitalized "Sin" here to make the point that our separation from God is more profound than simply the sum of our wrongs. Sin is like a beast waiting to devour us (Genesis 4).