Exploring the Bible—Gospel of John (3)

The Need of the Moral

**Scripture Reading:**

1 But there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This one came to Him by night and said to Him, Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him. 3 Jesus answered and said to him, Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. 4 Nicodemus said to Him, How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he? 5 Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:1-6)

**Ministry Reading:**

THE HUMAN CONCEPT

When Nicodemus came to the Lord Jesus, he said, “Rabbi,...You have come from God as a teacher” (v. 2). These words show his concept and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. He called the Lord Jesus, Rabbi. The Jews calling someone Rabbi can be compared to the Chinese calling Confucius a teacher. Nicodemus considered the Lord Jesus to be a teacher. Therefore, he said that the Lord Jesus had “come from God as a teacher.” Nicodemus had the concept that man needed to be taught and that man could be taught how to be good. He believed that man was bad because man had not been taught. Nicodemus’s concern was that man needed to be taught by a good teacher. He thought that the Lord Jesus was a teacher sent from God to teach man how to be good and how to do good. Nicodemus believed that man’s problem was related to teaching, that man only needed a good teacher.

Many moral and thoughtful people are just like Nicodemus. They think that as long as people can be taught how to properly conduct and cultivate themselves, people will be good. The human concept is always focused on man’s self-cultivation in order to do good.

THE LORD’S VIEW

People do not realize that this human concept is wrong. Man cannot be good. Man’s need is not teaching. The Lord Jesus did not come to be a teacher. When Nicodemus called the Lord Jesus Rabbi, teacher, the Lord interrupted him and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). Nicodemus had the concept that man needs teaching in order to be good. But the Lord Jesus said that man does not need teaching; rather, man needs to be “born anew.” Teaching is a matter of behavior, but to be born anew is a matter of life. Nicodemus thought that man does not have proper conduct because man has not been taught. His concept was focused on how to change one’s conduct. He did not see that man’s fundamental problem is not with conduct but with the lack of life.

For example, let us consider a tree that bears sour fruit. Such a tree may be trimmed and fertilized, but it will still not bear good fruit. Trimming and fertilizing will not make the tree bear good fruit. On the contrary, the more the tree is trimmed and fertilized, the more bad fruit it will bear. Hence, it is not a matter of outward trimming and fertilizing but of changing the life within the tree. This does not mean that trimming and fertilizing are not needed but that trimming and fertilizing are secondary matters. The primary matter is that the tree needs a new life. The original life within the tree bears sour fruit. Trimming and fertilizing the tree do not change the nature of the tree’s life. Trimming and fertilizing improve the outward appearance of the fruit, but they do not change the taste of the fruit. The outward appearance will change but not the inward taste.

Similarly, education and self-cultivation can at best change someone’s outward conduct and living but not his inward life. Teaching and self-cultivation are not primary matters. The primary matter is that he needs a new life. Therefore, the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus, “You must be born anew” (v. 7). This means that Nicodemus needed to be regenerated.

THE NEED FOR REGENERATION

The phrase born anew is very interesting. To be born anew is to be born again. What should we do if we want a tree to bear sweet rather than sour fruit? Tree cultivators know that they should first cut off the branches of the sour fruit tree. Then they cut off a branch from a sweet fruit tree and graft it into the trunk of the sour fruit tree. After some time, the tree will blossom and bear sweet fruit. Trimming and fertilizing will not cause a sour fruit tree to bear sweet fruit. This can be achieved only by changing the life within the tree.

Each kind of life can understand only the things that are in its realm. Monkeys cannot understand the things of men, because monkeys do not have the human life. In order for a monkey to understand the things of man, it must first have the human life. Likewise, human beings cannot understand the things related to God’s kingdom. A person who does not have God’s life cannot be taught to understand the things of God’s kingdom. No matter how educated or knowledgeable someone may be, without God’s life he cannot understand the things of God’s kingdom. Only God’s life can understand the things of His kingdom. A person must have God’s life through regeneration in order to understand the things of God’s kingdom. Therefore, the Lord Jesus said, “Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3).

The Lord Jesus did not come to the world in order to teach man but to give man His life. The Lord Jesus came to the world not to be man’s teacher but to be man’s life. Teaching is useful only after man has the divine life. Therefore, teaching is not man’s primary need; life is man’s primary need. Man must first have the divine life. Man must be regenerated.

Many moral and educated men think that moral and educated people do not need to be regenerated. Such people do not know that moral people need to be regenerated just as immoral people need to be regenerated. Educated people need to be regenerated just as uneducated people need to be regenerated. Both the educated and the uneducated need God’s life, and both the moral and the immoral need to be regenerated.

THE MEANING OF REGENERATION

Nicodemus might have understood the literal definition of the words born and anew, but he did not understand the meaning of being born anew. A person who enters a second time into his mother’s womb and is born a second time would still be flesh. Regeneration is not a matter of entering a second time into one’s mother’s womb to be born of the human life but to be “born of the Spirit”: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v. 6). Therefore, to be regenerated is to receive the life of God, to have the divine life in addition to one’s own life. Regeneration is the Spirit entering into man and giving man the life of God.

These two main concepts, water and Spirit, when put together, are the whole concept of the matter of regeneration. Regeneration, to be born anew, is the termination of the people of the old creation with all their deeds and their germination in the new creation with the divine life. The Lord made Nicodemus’s situation very clear to him. Everyone, whether he is good or bad, needs to be terminated through water and then germinated with the divine life. This is the second birth, a birth not of the mother’s womb, but of water and of the Spirit.

Reference: Changing Death into Life, Ch. 2.

Question for Discussion: Why do men need regeneration? And How do we experience regeneration? Please share with one another.