

¹ *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, 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?”* 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.* ¹⁴ *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.* ¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* ¹⁷ *For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*

Text: John 3:1-17 A Trinity 5-7-18 Isaiah 6:1-8 Romans 8:14-17 Psalm 138 Resp. Ps.: 115
Hymns: 246, 239, 245, 248

THE TRIUNE GOD SAVES US

Dear fellow believers in Christ,

The Pharisees were religious teachers who were highly respected by their fellow Jews. As a group, the Pharisees hated Jesus. But there was at least one Pharisee who was a happy exception to that rule: *“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews”* (a member of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ‘high court’). Nicodemus *“came to Jesus by night.”* Nicodemus may have come at night to keep his visit with Jesus a secret. If word got out about it Nicodemus could end up being removed from his position as a Pharisee and as a member of the Sanhedrin, banned from the synagogue, and shunned by the Jewish community.

Although Nicodemus may not have come to Jesus under the best of circumstances, he did come. And Jesus didn’t turn Nicodemus away. Jesus says, *“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out”* (Jn. 6:37).

Nicodemus addressed Jesus as *“Rabbi,”* which means, *“teacher,” “master.”* Unlike other Jewish leaders who called Jesus *“Rabbi”* to try to ‘butter Him up,’ Nicodemus was sincere. The Holy Spirit was working in Nicodemus’ heart.

Nicodemus told Jesus (and I’ll emphasize the words Nicodemus emphasized in the original text), *“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.”* Jesus healed everyone who came to Him of whatever was wrong

with them, casting demons out of people, and bringing people who had died back to life. Nicodemus knew that these things can only be done by the power of God. Remember, Nicodemus had called Jesus “*Rabbi*” (“*teacher*,” “*master*”). He had come to Jesus not only because of Jesus’ miracles, but also to listen to what Jesus had to say. Nicodemus wanted to know the truth about Jesus.

Jesus knew Nicodemus could only understand Him by faith. So Jesus told him, “*Most assuredly, I say to you*” (what Jesus was saying was very important), “*unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” As a Pharisee Nicodemus believed he was going to heaven because of the good things he did. Jesus let Nicodemus know that who he was and what he did would not get him to heaven. The Bible says that everyone by nature is spiritually “*dead in trespasses and sins*” (Eph. 2:1). Nicodemus, the spiritual leader, needed a complete spiritual rebirth in order to be saved. Later Jesus says, “*You must be born again,*” “*you*” in the original being plural. Not just Nicodemus, but every human being must be born again.

Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant. Jesus told him, “*Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit*” (which is the New Testament’s expression for baptism), “*he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” (Anyone who would despise or refuse baptism, Jesus says, can’t go to heaven.) Nicodemus needed to be “*born again*” spiritually by the Holy Spirit through baptism. We read in Titus 3:5, “*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy [God] saved us, through the washing of rebirth and renewing of the Holy Spirit.*”

Before he could be baptized Nicodemus needed to learn more about Jesus and salvation by faith in Him.

Jesus told Nicodemus, “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*” Through his parents Nicodemus had received physical life, and along with it, spiritual death. We all must confess with David, “*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me*” (Ps. 51:5, NIV). Nicodemus could only receive spiritual life through the Holy Spirit. The Bible says, “*No one can say that Jesus is Lord*” (can call Jesus his Lord and Savior by faith) “*except by the Holy Spirit*” (1 Cor. 12:3). Nicodemus needed the Holy Spirit to work faith in his heart so he could understand Jesus and believe in Him.

Jesus told Nicodemus, “*Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 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.*” We can’t see wind, but we can hear it and see its effect on things. We can’t see the Holy Spirit, but we know His effect within us by the fact that we believe in Jesus. As we just heard, “*No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit*” (1 Cor. 12:3).

Nicodemus asked Jesus, “*How can these things be?*” What Jesus was telling him was all new to Nicodemus, and he was very confused. But Nicodemus wanted to learn, and Jesus didn’t give up on him. Jesus invites us and commands us, “*Keep asking, and it shall be given to you; keep seeking, and you shall find; keep knocking, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened*” (Mt. 7:7-8).

Jesus said to Nicodemus, *“Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?”* “Know” in the original means *“know from personal experience.”* As a Pharisee Nicodemus knew a great deal about God and about the Old Testament Scriptures. But he didn’t know God, so he didn’t truly understand God’s Word. Nicodemus was one of the leading religious teachers of the Jewish people, but he didn’t even know how a person is saved.

Jesus told him, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what we know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.”* The message of eternal salvation in Jesus is true, but in the past Nicodemus didn’t believe it. Jesus told him, *“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”* Since Nicodemus didn’t understand what Jesus had said about baptism and the Holy Spirit working like the wind, he would have an even harder time understanding more difficult spiritual things.

Still, Nicodemus wanted to learn, and Jesus kept teaching him. Jesus told him, *“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.”* Jesus was telling Nicodemus that He, Jesus, is the Son of God who came from heaven. As He was talking to Nicodemus Jesus told him that He, Jesus, *“is in heaven.”* Jesus was telling Nicodemus that He, Jesus, can be on earth and in heaven at the same time because He is God.

Jesus reminded Nicodemus about something he knew to help him understand what Jesus would say, referring to *“Moses [who] lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.”* Nicodemus knew the Old Testament account of the children of Israel traveling through the wilderness and complaining bitterly against God and Moses. God sent poisonous snakes that bit some of the people and killed them. The others repented and asked God to save their lives. God had Moses make a brass snake and put it up on a pole. When someone bitten by a poisonous snake looked at the brass snake, God let him live. Jesus told Nicodemus, *“...even so must the Son of Man”* (He, Jesus) *“be lifted up”* on the cross. Jesus was prophesying of His upcoming crucifixion. *“...that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”* Everyone who believes in Jesus as his Savior who died for his sins on the cross has eternal life!

Jesus told Nicodemus very clearly who He is and how He saves us: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* Later when Jesus was crucified Nicodemus could put that together with the story of the brass snake. Nicodemus was like the people bitten by the poisonous snakes who could do nothing to save their lives. It was only by trusting in God and looking at the brass snake on the pole that God saved them. From what the Bible tells us about Nicodemus later, it certainly seems that he eventually gave up his Pharisaic beliefs and came to believe in Jesus and be saved. (See Jn. 7:50f.; 19:38-42).

Jesus says, *“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”* If God only wanted to judge us and punish us forever in hell, He never would have sent us Jesus. And Jesus never would have died for us. But God sent Jesus to save everyone. Jesus died on the cross to save everyone. And everyone who believes in Jesus is saved, and is going to heaven!

“Thank You, Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for saving us!” Amen.