

The story of Nicodemus is fascinating and intriguing. Nicodemus came to Jesus secretly by night, because he didn't want anyone to see him. He came to Jesus with a compliment. He said, "Rabbi, we know that 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" (John 3:2), thinking that Jesus would be impressed by a compliment. He came wanting to discuss theology, assuming that Jesus would be interested in a good give-and-take battle of the mind. Before he got very far, Jesus interrupted him with an astounding remark which shook his foundations: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:3). Jesus told Nicodemus that he must experience rebirth in order to inherit the kingdom of God.

Rebirth into the kingdom? That raised lots of questions for Nicodemus. It raises questions for us too. "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked (John 3:9). Jesus said that spiritual rebirth into the kingdom of God comes from water and the Spirit. Baptism and faith give rebirth. Baptism begins the process of rebirth. Faith continues that process. To help us see what is involved with this rebirth, let's look at three words which emerge from the text: reoriented, refocused, and renewed.

Jesus said: "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again ... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:3-5). In other words, Jesus taught that rebirth is a matter of a total reorientation from the world to the kingdom of God. Only the kingdom of God is forever. Every other kingdom fades. Every other kingdom around which we build our lives is temporary.

Jesus said: Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.-- Matthew 6:19-21

Jesus wants us to invest our lives in something that has lasting value, not in those things which pass away. That's why he urges us to store up treasures in heaven. That's why he wants us to reorient ourselves to the kingdom of God.

We are called by God to be reoriented to God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is God's rule over us. Rebirth into God's kingdom is a matter of moving from an orientation around the things of the world to the things of God. After all is said and done, only what God does for us will last.

The kingdom of God came in the person of Jesus. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:14). The kingdom in its fullness will not arrive until the end of time, but in this life by baptism and faith we get a preview of coming attractions. Jesus said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16).

This reorientation to and preview of God's kingdom begins in baptism. We are baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In baptism we are claimed and cleansed; claimed by the Father as his sons and daughters; cleansed by God for his service and witness. In baptism we begin to know the fullness of the eternal God. Baptism is spiritual rebirth. Baptism in the name of the Trinity is the planting of the seed of the kingdom of God. This seed grows toward harvest, when it is nourished in the church and the home.

Baptism is the beginning of the rebirth. If you are ever approached by another Christian with the question, "When were you born again?" give them the best answer possible -- the date of your baptism. Baptism is the time when you were adopted as God's son or daughter. You were made a child of the heavenly Father by water and the Spirit when you were baptized. You came into the kingdom of God by baptism. You began the process of being reoriented to God in baptism.

This reorientation continues & matures by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Faith is a three-sided triangle with the three sides being knowledge, decisions, trust. We must know about God before we can believe in God. Faith includes decision-making. We must respond to what God has done for us by making decisions about the priority of worship, prayer, Bible study, and Christian fellowship in our lives. We must choose Christ over other options in life. Saying "yes" to Christ means saying "no" to unChrist-like behavior. We must decide to respond positively to God and God's ways, but faith is more than a matter of the will. Faith is also a matter of the heart. It means trusting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. In the head, the will, and the heart, God reorients us to his kingdom. The process of rebirth includes a reorientation. We are reoriented to God's kingdom. Rebirth is also a matter of refocusing. We are called to refocus our lives on the cross of Christ.

Refocused On Christ's Cross—Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14). Jesus was talking about refocusing our lives around the cross. Only what Christ does on the cross will last. Only the cross of Christ will matter.

Nicodemus knew the story of Moses and the bronze snake he held up for the disobedient people to look at and be healed (Numbers 21:8-9). Moses told the disobedient Jews in the wilderness to look up at the bronze serpent he held on a pole. "Look up and be healed." To this day the symbol of the profession of medicine is a snake on a pole. Nicodemus did not know that Jesus would be crucified, but Jesus knew it. Jesus spoke this eternal truth: "Look up at the Son of Man on the cross and you will be healed and forgiven. Look up and find real life." Tradition says that Nicodemus became a Christian at the time of the crucifixion. He was of the people who took Jesus down from the cross. Nicodemus was a wealthy Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews, but he made the transition from focusing on the world's values to focusing on the cross. In order to be born again of the Spirit, we must be humbled by what Jesus did for us on the cross. The cross must be the center of our attention. If you gaze at God and give him your full attention, while only glancing at your problems and sins, God will get you. You will be able to leave your problems at the foot of the cross.

One man called this "the magnetism of the uplifted Lord." There is a pull of the cross to every man, woman, and child. There is a power here which we cannot fully explain. When you look at the cross you find new hope. If you only glance, you do not find life, but if you look, really gaze at what Jesus is doing on the cross, your life will be refocused. Those who look at the Son of Man lifted up on the cross will find life. Rebirth means being reoriented to our Creator God & his kingdom, being refocused by the cross of Christ. Rebirth also means being renewed by the Holy Spirit for witness to the world. The task of taking the gospel to the world is given to Spirit-filled witnesses.

Rebirth means that our lives are renewed by the Holy Spirit so that the whole world hears the gospel of Jesus Christ and his cross. Only what God gives, his love for us in the cross of Jesus, lasts. Don't you want to invest your time and money and witness in something that will last to the end of time? The creating and recreating, redeeming and sanctifying work of God lasts into eternity. What is done by God lasts. What is done for God also lasts. What is done for God is called witnessing to the world. It's a job too big for any one of us to handle. That is why we need the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit calls us to faith, enlightens us with his gifts, and sanctifies us. Part of that sanctification is sharing the faith.

We receive more than we can imagine from the bounty of God's grace, and we are expected to pass it on to the whole world, which is much more than we think we can do. Renewed Christians who love God in return are asked to give too. When we are renewed, God asks us to be the instruments to pass the faith on to others. He gives us a job to do which is bigger than we think we can handle -- to witness to the whole world. God gave

his Son for us. He also gave his Son for the whole world. God wants us to witness to the whole world for Jesus. It is a bigger job than we can do. That's why we need the Holy Spirit. We cannot lock God into a book or a box. God is everywhere. He wants to save the whole world. He wants to use reborn, renewed Christians to reach the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Renewed life through the power of the Holy Spirit not only means receiving an unbelievable gift from God; it also means "letting God stick out" by giving our witness that the world may know the power of the cross. Christ alone is eternal. Christ alone will last. When renewed Christians embrace that truth, they want others to know it. They get caught up in the wonder of the cross and tell the story to others so that they too may have new life.

Reorienting your life to the kingdom of God, refocusing your life on the cross of Christ & living renewed by God's Holy Spirit for witness to the world -- these are values which last. In the gospel God gives us something of value which lasts. Witnessing for Christ is something of value which lasts. Rebirth is expressed by the Christian who is renewed by the power of God through the Holy Spirit. "God so loved the world that he gave...." We are called to give as well.

A Bishop in France told the story of a group of ruffians who stood outside a cathedral & made fun of the people standing in line to confess their sins. They said, "So, you believe in forgiveness, do you? Well, there is nothing to it. It is a hoax. So, you believe in Jesus, do you? He is a fake." One of the boys said to the leader of the gang, "I dare you to go in & tell the priest what we have been saying." "I'll do it," said the second boy. When he got to the priest, he said, "We have been mocking your parishioners outside and my friend dared me to come inside and tell you. We do not believe in forgiveness. We don't give a damn about Jesus. There, I have said it. Good-bye." "Just a minute," said the old priest. "I have a dare for you too. Go to the altar, look up at the cross, & say, "Jesus died for me & I don't give a damn." "Is that all?" asked the ruffian. "Yes, just do it & come back & see me." The young boy rushed down the aisle, looked up at the crucifix & said, "Jesus died for me & I don't give a damn." He went back to the priest & said, "I have done it. Now, good-bye." "Do it again," said the priest. "I don't want to do it again," said the smart aleck. "Afraid?" inquired the wise priest. "No," said the boy. Slowly he went down the center aisle of the church to the central figure of Jesus hanging on the cross. Once again, only this time more slowly, he said, "Jesus died for me & I don't give a damn." "Good-bye," he said to the priest. "Do it one more time and then you may go," said the priest. Very slowly the young boy walked down the aisle. When he got to the foot of the cross, he said, "Jesus died for me...." He broke down & knelt at the foot of the cross unable to raise his head.

The Bishop ended the story by saying, "I am that boy."

