

Series: Heaven on Earth

December 17, 2017

Title: Born from Above

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Text: John 1:9-13

Nicodemus

At the cross:

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It was time. Time to take a stand. Too late? Perhaps. But there was no other way.

Nicodemus had stood all afternoon under a hot April sun to watch the execution of the condemned messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. He had felt the ground quake shortly after Jesus' final cry. He had seen the dust rising over the city from collapsing buildings and watched as people streamed out through the gates in terror.

In the midst of the commotion he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Joseph of Arimathea, like himself a secret believer in this Jesus of Nazareth. Now Joseph was whispering in his ear. He planned to go to the Roman governor and request the body of Jesus and he was asking if Nicodemus wanted to help give the poor rabbi a proper burial. He would provide his own new rock-cut tomb. Perhaps Nicodemus could provide the funeral spices.

Yes. It was time. Time to take a stand. Too late? Perhaps. But it was time just the same.

A king's funeral:

An hour later a small entourage could be seen leaving the city through the northern gate. Nicodemus led the way, with his servants carrying 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes. The tomb was located in a garden, like the tombs of Israel's ancient kings. It had never been used. The spices for anointing the body were worth more than \$150,000. This would be a funeral fit for a king.

The rabbi from Nazareth had promised that God's Kingdom had come. He had entered Jerusalem 5 days earlier riding on a donkey as Israel's long-

awaited King. Today He had died on a cross with a placard over His head that read: King of the Jews.

Matthew tells us that magi came from the east, bearing gifts for the King of the Jews: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Now two of Israel's rulers attended to the same King's death with a king's ransom of myrrh and aloe.

Nicodemus:

So who was this Nicodemus, and how did it come to be that he would take such a stand for Jesus?

Nicodemus was:

- A member of the ruling council in Jerusalem.
- A member of the religious party known as the Pharisees.
- A rabbi, or teacher of the Law of Moses.
- A very rich man; the wealth of his family, the Gurions, was legendary among the Jewish people.

Nicodemus was his Greek name. His Hebrew name was Naqdimon. His family and close friends would have called him by his nickname: Naqqai. An ancient rabbinical source lists a person named "Naqqai" as one of Jesus' disciples.

Riddles

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Riddle #1:

The first time that Nicodemus met Jesus was a nighttime visit in Jerusalem. Why at night? Well, for one thing, rabbis customarily discussed Moses' Law into the wee hours of the morning. Or perhaps Nicodemus thought it wiser to visit the controversial rabbi from Galilee in secret. Whatever the case, he got more than he bargained for. And it came in the form of riddles.

The **first riddle** came after Nicodemus complimented Jesus on being a teacher who had come from God. In reply, Jesus said:

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John 3:3 Phillips [amended]

"Believe me, a person cannot even see the kingdom of God without being born again."

Born all over again? Nicodemus protested:

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John 3:4 Phillips [amended]

"And how can a person who's getting old possibly be born? How can they go back into their mother's womb and be born a second time?"

If Nicodemus thought Jesus would clear up any misunderstanding, he was mistaken. Jesus answered with a second riddle.

Riddle #2:

The **second riddle** went like this:

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John 3:5-6 Phillips [amended]

"I assure you," said Jesus, "that unless a person is born from water and from the spirit, they cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh and spirit gives birth to spirit: you must not be surprised that I told you that all of you must be born again."

This time the riddle came with a hint. You see, the Greek word translated "again" has two meanings: It can mean "*again*," as in "a second time." Or it can mean "*from above*." Nicodemus took the riddle to be talking about a *second birth*. Jesus now points him toward the second meaning of the word: *a birth from above*.

Heaven on Earth. That is what the riddle was all about. Humans are born on earth and have earthly bodies. If they want to experience Heaven on Earth, they need another birthday – a birthday from above. They need to be re-born by the God's Spirit. Only then can they see the Kingdom of God.

Riddle #3:

Poor Nicodemus. By now his head was spinning. He was a rabbi who was supposed to be pointing the way to the long-awaited Kingdom of God. As a member of the religious party known as the Pharisees, he was supposed to

be an expert on the subject! And now he's being told that he doesn't have a clue.

In fact, the Jewish people of his time described conversion to Judaism as a *new birth*. Was this strange rabbi, Jesus, saying that he, Nicodemus, needed to convert to some new form of Judaism in order to be part of God's Kingdom?

Jesus gave him a **third riddle**:

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John 3:13-14 Phillips [amended]

"No one has ever been up to Heaven except the Son of Man who came down from Heaven. The Son of Man must be lifted above the heads of people – as Moses lifted up that serpent in the desert – so that anyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Heaven had already come to Earth in the person of someone called "The Son of Man." To know Him would be to experience Heaven on Earth. He was the long-awaited King. But this Son of Man was to be lifted up, like the bronze serpent that Moses put on a pole to heal the people bitten by poisonous snakes. The man from Heaven taking the place of a dreaded viper, standing in for all of the Sin and Death of the world? How did all of this fit together? What kind of Kingdom could this possibly be?

- Once again, Jesus provided a hint by using a word that had two meanings. To be "lifted up" *could* mean to be exalted or put in a place of fame and power.
- But it could also refer to something more sinister. It could refer to being nailed to a cross, so that the deep poison of Sin could finally be drawn from the human race and we could all be healed.

Nicodemus left the encounter scratching his head. He had always thought that when Heaven came to Earth, God would bring justice and retribution to all of His enemies. Israel would be enthroned supreme among the nations. But these riddles pointed to something very different:

- Being born a son of Israel was not enough in and of itself. He would need a new birth to become part of a new family.

- This birth was nothing he could make happen by himself. No human system could bring it about. It came from Heaven, through God's Holy Spirit.
- And when Heaven came to Earth, it would not be to fill the Temple with glory. Heaven would come in the person of a man lifted up like the hated viper in the desert.

Born from Above:

The Last Riddle:

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Huddled in the darkness of Jesus' tomb, Nicodemus left us with the **last riddle**. It was a riddle of actions, not words: a royal funeral for a condemned blasphemer. Like Jesus' own carefully chosen words, it could be taken two ways:

- It could be seen as a final act of respect and love for a failed messiah.
- Or it could be seen as something much more: the celebration of the enthronement of the King who brought Heaven to Earth.

If you were only "born once," the lavish funeral of Jesus was the end of the story. But if you had been "born from above," you could see that like the serpent in the desert, the Son of Man had at last been lifted up, bringing Heaven to Earth.

Children of God:

In the introduction to his Gospel, John tells us:

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John 1:11-13 NIV

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

This is what it means for Heaven to come to Earth. We, earthbound as we are, can become full citizens of Heaven and members of God's family. But

only if, like Nicodemus, we put our trust in the One who came to bring Heaven to Earth, and who took upon Himself all of our Sin when He died on the cross.

When we put our faith in Jesus, we see that Heaven came to Earth when God's only Son gave His life for us. This is the greatest vision of God that we can have – a glimpse into the very heart of God.

Born from Above:

At Christmas we celebrate a birth: the Birth of Jesus the King. But John, in the opening words of his Gospel, reminds us that Jesus was born so that we could be re-born. This is God's great Christmas gift to each one of us. He loved the world so much that He gave His only Son to save us from Sin and Death. Now it's up to us to answer those three riddles:

- "Born again?" That means I was not automatically born into God's family. I need a new spiritual birthday.
- "Born of the Spirit?" That means that there is nothing I can do by my own efforts to make myself a part of God's family. He is the one who births the new me.
- "The Son of Man lifted up?" That means that Jesus died for my sins, and when I put my trust in Him, I am forgiven and made a new person. I am born again.

And when that happens, you experience Heaven on Earth.