



STUDIES IN JOHN 3

*EXPERIENCING*  
*the* NEW  
BIRTH

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

“Martyn Lloyd-Jones was one of God’s special gifts to the church in the twentieth century.”

**Mark Dever**, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,  
Washington, DC; President, 9Marks

“Lloyd-Jones’s preaching was based on deep reading and scholarship, yet it was accessible to everyone—it stirred the affections and changed the heart.”

**Timothy Keller**, Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church,  
New York City; best-selling author, *The Reason for God*

“I regarded Martyn Lloyd-Jones with admiration and affection during the years that we were both preaching in London, so I am delighted that his unique ministry is to be more widely available in the United States.”

**John Stott**, The Late Rector Emeritus, All Souls Church, London

“Lloyd-Jones was a titan of Christian ministry, and it thrills me to see his influence accelerating today for the benefit of the church around the world.”

**R. C. Sproul**, Chairman, Ligonier Ministries; Copastor, St. Andrew’s  
Chapel, Sanford, Florida

“Without question the finest biblical expositor of the twentieth century. In fact, when the final chapter of church history is written, I believe he will stand as one of the greatest preachers of all time.”

**John MacArthur**, Pastor, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley,  
California

“The preaching and subsequent writing of Lloyd-Jones have been and continue to be a huge source of inspiration in my own life and ministry.”

**Alistair Begg**, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

“I loved to hear Lloyd-Jones for the sheer quality of his biblical expositions and his stance for evangelical Christianity.”

**I. Howard Marshall**, Professor Emeritus, University of Aberdeen,  
Scotland



*Experiencing the New Birth*



Other Crossway Books by Martyn Lloyd-Jones

*The Christ-Centered Preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones*

*The Cross*

*Glorious Christianity*

*The Gospel in Genesis*

*Great Doctrines of the Bible*

*The Kingdom of God*

*Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled*

*Life in Christ*

*Living Water*

*Out of the Depths*

*Revival*

*Seeking the Face of God*

*Setting Our Affections upon Glory*

*Triumphant Christianity*

*True Happiness*

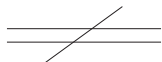
*Truth Unchanged, Unchanging*

*Walking with God Day by Day*

*Why Does God Allow War?*

# Experiencing *the* New Birth

STUDIES IN JOHN 3



Martyn Lloyd-Jones

*Experiencing the New Birth*

Copyright © 2015 by Elizabeth Catherwood and Ann Beatt

Published by Crossway  
1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Studio Gearbox

First printing 2015

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback: 978-1-4335-3960-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3961-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3962-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3963-3

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Lloyd-Jones, David Martyn.

Experiencing the new birth : studies in John 3 / Martyn

Lloyd-Jones.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3960-2 (hc)

1. Bible. John, III--Sermons. 2. Sermons, English. I. Title.

BS2615.54.L56

2015

226.5'06—dc23

2014014345

---

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

SH	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16	15			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

# Contents

1	Nicodemus (John 3:1–30)	9
2	The Essential Foundation (John 3:1–8)	25
3	Characteristics of the New Birth (John 3:8)	40
4	The Sign of the New Birth (John 3:8)	55
5	Marks of the Spiritual Life (John 3:8)	72
6	The Christian and the World (John 3:8)	89
7	Righteousness (John 3:8)	104
8	Loving the Brethren (John 3:8)	120
9	Knowing God (John 3:8)	135
10	A Personal Knowledge of God—God the Father and God the Son (John 3:8)	150
11	The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit (John 3:8)	166
12	Heavenly Things (John 3:8)	183
13	Assurance (John 3:8)	198
14	Alive in Christ (John 3:8)	212
15	The Love of God in the Salvation of Men and Women (John 3:16)	228
16	Darkness and Light (John 3:19–21)	244
17	The Friend of the Bridegroom (John 3:30)	260
18	The Baptism with the Holy Spirit (John 3:30)	276
19	None of Self and All of Thee (John 3:30)	294
20	Make the Poor Self Grow Less and Less (John 3:30)	310



21	He Must Increase (John 3:30)	327
22	Is He Everything? (John 3:30)	342
23	Prophet, Priest, and King (John 3:30)	358
24	Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise (John 3:30)	373
	Notes	391

# Nicodemus

JOHN 3:1-30

Sunday morning sermon preached in  
Westminster Chapel, January 9, 1966.

I should like to call your attention to the incident that is recorded in the first part of the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, the incident concerning the man Nicodemus. We are continuing our studies in this Gospel, but let me make it quite clear that we are not working systematically through the Gospel as such and dealing with every part and portion, but rather selecting the great theme that I would suggest is the main object and purpose of this Gospel. And I have suggested that the real key to the understanding of John is in the sixteenth verse of the first chapter where he says, "And of his fullness have all we received, and grace for grace" (John 1:16).

Now we are concentrating on that particular theme because, after all, that is what is meant by being Christian. This, it seems to me more and more, is the greatest need of the hour, that we should all realize what a Christian really is and is meant to be, and there is no better definition than this one. It involves, of course, believing certain things. There is the creedal element; that is vital. But Christianity is primarily life receiving of his fullness, and if we forget that, we miss the greatness and the glory and the splendor of it all. Our danger always, even as Christian people,

## Experiencing the New Birth

is to be reducing this life—eternal life—to something that is merely a point of view, a teaching, a philosophy, a theology, or whatever. We must never do that. Its essence is that it is a *life*, and that means receiving of his fullness. This is the greatest thing in the world, the greatest thing that any of us can ever realize.

So I make no apology for asking at the beginning of a new year and as we resume these studies, do you know that you have received of this fullness? Are you receiving of it, “grace for [upon] grace”? Is it going on; is it increasing? Are you living on a past experience or a past decision? Or are you in the position that you *know* that you are linked to the Head and that life from the great Head is coming down to you and permeating the whole of your being? This, I emphasize, is Christianity, and it is only as the church is manifesting this life and this “fullness” that she really functions as the church and counts at all in the world.

Now I need not take time to remind you that the church counts so little today, it counts less and less, alas, and ultimately it is all due to this. The church cannot live on activities, on her own efforts and organizations. She has been trying to do so, but it does not work. It is an astonishing thing, it is the paradox of the faith in many ways, that the world outside, in its ignorance and darkness and death, recognizes one thing only, and that is *life*. That is the whole story of the book of Acts, indeed of the whole of the New Testament. So I say again that the great question that all of us should be concerned about is this: Do I know that I have received of his fullness? Is it my greatest desire, my highest ambition, to receive more and more of him?

So I suggest that the great purpose of this Gospel of John is to instruct us in this one great matter. Of course, it gives us historical details, and we thank God for that. But they are surely meant to help us and to act as illustrations. There are difficulties about this question, but it is we who make the difficulties. It is because we are not sufficiently childlike, not sufficiently simple. We are all so sophisticated, so clever, so philosophical. That is always the greatest hindrance of all. Our Lord said, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). We create and make these difficulties. And

so we are given these records and accounts of people like ourselves—how they blundered, how they went astray, how they had their false notions and ideas. And we must thank God for this because, through looking at and seeing the pitfalls and the errors into which others have fallen, we are warned and we are instructed, and so we are able to look again more positively at the whole subject.

Now after laying down the great doctrines, particularly in the first eighteen verses of the first chapter, John has then gone on to give us the testimony of John the Baptist. Then, at the end of the first chapter, he has given us a series of men who came to our Lord and who were brought to him. And in these men who subsequently became apostles we have learned great lessons. Then in the second chapter, in various ways our Lord gave further instruction. He did so even at the marriage feast of Cana in Galilee, in connection with the miracle of turning the water into wine. He also did it when he went up to Jerusalem and saw what was happening in the temple. And then he did it again when certain people came to him when he was in Jerusalem—people who “believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them” (John 2:23–24). And in all these ways John shows the particular error, the particular fault in those various approaches, and how they all have messages to convey to us. And what is so interesting is that we see the variety and the number of mistakes that we can make in connection with this matter. Each one of them has a particular point to emphasize, a particular aspect of the truth to bring out and to put before us, and so we continue with this study of John’s Gospel.

I am anxious to emphasize this point, but I am not doing so merely out of a theoretical or academic interest. I did not just decide to expound the Gospel according to St. John. The thing that came to me and gripped me was this great question of *life*, the life of God in the soul, this supreme need, this supreme glory of the Christian life. And all these passages are given to us just to help us to arrive at that. There is nothing so fatal as to approach the Bible as just a textbook that you get to know; that is not its business. Its whole object is to bring you to him in whom is all this fullness of which we stand in need.



## Experiencing the New Birth

So now we come to this third chapter and to this particular interest, and we shall see that there are very fundamental and basic questions raised and put before us that will show us some of the difficulties with regard to this matter. It is often the case that people have regarded the story of Nicodemus as evangelistic, and in a sense, of course, it is that, as we shall see. But at the same time it has a great deal to say to many of us who are Christians, and I trust we shall see, as we analyze this case, further difficulties that lie in the way of people experiencing this fullness of his and receiving it more and more.

Let us look then at Nicodemus. The first thing that strikes you here is that he is a different case and a different problem. Back in the second chapter we see the Jewish leaders and how they had abused the temple and so on, and other Jews came and said to our Lord, "What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?" (John 2:18). The people who had not seen the significance of his miracles were asking for some startling, outstanding phenomenon. And then we see the people at the end of the chapter, the credulous people who came rushing to him, carried away for the time being by the spectacular nature of his work.

But here in the case of Nicodemus we are looking at a man who does not fit into any of those categories. He is quite a separate and a distinct type. And I am concerned to hold him before you because he does seem to me to represent a very definite type at the present time. So the important thing for us is to discover the characteristics of this man, because the whole object of the record is to show us that he was entirely wrong. That is the astounding thing. Not in the same way as the others, but in his own particular way.

What, then, are the characteristics of Nicodemus? The first, obviously, is that he was a very religious man. In addition to that, he was a very able man, a master, a teacher in Israel; he was a man whose whole lifework and occupation was to be religious and to study the Scriptures and to teach and instruct others. It is very important that we should remember all this about him. I take it that the people described at the end of the second chapter were heedless, thoughtless people, part of the crowd in Jerusalem who, when something startling happened, crowded

together and were ready to believe anything that was said and to join any new movement.

Now Nicodemus is completely removed from all that. Here is a man who is a great man in many ways, a highly religious intellectual teacher. And another thing that one must add about him is that he is a man who is obviously free from prejudices. We have evidence of the prejudice against our Lord in these religious leaders. That is why they demanded a sign of him. “This man who suddenly appears and who takes this action in the temple is not a Pharisee. What right has he to do and to say these things?” Nothing is so obvious about the Pharisees, as you read the Gospels, as their prejudice against our Lord, a kind of instinctive prejudice. They were intolerant, always waiting for opportunities to trip him in his words and in his teaching and to prove that he was wrong.

Now Nicodemus seems to be entirely free from all that, and this is a wonderful thing. The harm that is done by prejudice is incalculable. It is always based on ignorance, of course, and the lack of clear thinking. But it is a terrible thing because it is deep and it is emotional and it can do great damage. But here is a man who is obviously entirely free from all that. His whole attitude toward the Lord is unlike that of the majority of the Pharisees, and as you read about him later on in this same Gospel, you find that this same trait in him continues to manifest itself. So all honor to him for these things.

There then is Nicodemus as it were by nature, there he is in general. But there are certain special, peculiar virtues in him that I must emphasize because the thing that he illustrates so perfectly is that a man can be so right and yet be all wrong. And there are many such people. I have known many who are genuinely and honestly seeking God’s blessing, but they never get it because they belong to this particular type, and I suggest there are many like this at the present time.

So what are these special virtues? The first one we must emphasize is the one that is put before us in the words of Nicodemus himself. We are told that this man “came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, ‘Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him,’” (John 3:2). In other

## Experiencing the New Birth

words, here is a man who sees the real meaning of the miracles. Now you see the contrast with the previous people in chapter 2 who did not. There were some who did not see it at all, and others saw it in a credulous, superficial manner. Not so here. Nicodemus is not just interested in the spectacular; he sees that there is something deeper here. He has watched these miracles, and he has said to himself: *These miracles show quite plainly that this is no ordinary person; here is a man who has been sinless in a unique manner and is used of God and blessed by God. There is something special about this man.*

In other words, he makes a true appraisal of the miracles and does not merely look at our Lord as a miracle worker, a wonder, a phenomenon; he says, “You must be a teacher come from God.” We know that; it is indisputable. “For no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.” In other words, he is a thinker, he thinks beneath the surface, and he is sufficiently enlightened spiritually to see the real meaning of these miracles worked by our Lord.

But then beyond that, obviously Nicodemus detects something in the person and character of our Lord himself. He comes to him and says, “Rabbi . . .” Though Jesus is just a carpenter he calls him teacher, master, and in using the term he is revealing the fact that he has sensed—I do not know how deeply—that there is something here quite unusual and exceptional.

Now this is a most important characteristic. The rest of the chapter emphasizes it and goes on to deal with it, and it is basic to our whole position. People who do not recognize something of the uniqueness of our Lord are not Christians. Those who just put him into the same category as other great religious teachers have not started and have no hope of ever receiving this fullness. But here is a man who addresses him as “Rabbi”—“Master.” He is aware of this strange something that he had never encountered before.

And beyond that, and this is what brings us to the very heart of this matter, Nicodemus is clearly aware that our Lord has something that he does not have. Now that to me is the great thing about Nicodemus. He watches Jesus though he is a great man and is in a high position. And

though all the rest in the same position are prejudiced, this man looks on in a wistful manner. And he is struck by this and convicted, I think, by this—our Lord is not merely one who actually is able to work these miracles: he is able to do so because of some relationship to God that is special, unique, quite above the ordinary.

Now I emphasize this because this is one of the great keys to the spiritual life. It is one of the great keys to receiving this fullness and to growing in grace and in knowledge of him and receiving his fullness, which puts us into the category of men and women who know something about heaven on earth and who have foretastes of the glory everlasting.

In other words, to put it negatively, Nicodemus is not self-satisfied or complacent. This is a great and fundamental principle. He desires something greater. The trouble with so many is that they are self-satisfied, they feel they have arrived, they have it all! They have been converted—haven't they made a decision? And once they do that, well, they just go on free-wheeling, as it were, and they spend the rest of their lives like that. Not so a man like Nicodemus. He has every reason to feel like that. He has arrived at a great position; he is one of the authorities; he is one of the masters of Israel. But this man is sensitive to the spiritual realm, and when he sees this strange new Person who is able to work these extraordinary miracles, what strikes him at once is, "That man has something that I don't have." There is a knowledge of God here, there is an intimacy with God—"We know that thou art a teacher come from God." Nicodemus is not only interested, he is not only intrigued by this new teacher—he is convicted in a sense, and he has a desire within him to get hold of this something extra, this further something that this new teacher so obviously possesses.

Now here is an important question that I must hold before you: Are you satisfied? Self-satisfied? Or are you dissatisfied, lacking in satisfaction? Is there a hunger and thirst within you for righteousness? Is there a longing for something bigger and greater and deeper? There is nothing better about Nicodemus than this: coming into contact with our Lord he is aware of and recognizes and acknowledges this need in himself, this lack of something, this longing for a greater fullness and a receiving of a greater fullness from God.



## Experiencing the New Birth

There is no hope in the Christian life unless we are aware of that. There is nothing that is more important to any one of us than this. Do we have a hunger and a thirst after righteousness? Do we, “as the hart panteth after the water brooks” (Ps. 42:1), long for the living God and a knowledge of him? Oh, we may have attained up to a certain point, we may look back across the years and be satisfied with our record, but do we stop there, are we content, do we feel that this is excellent? Are we always comparing ourselves with people who are obviously worse? There are many heretics these days, people who deny the truth—do we spend all our time denouncing heretics or showing what is obviously and plainly wrong, looking at the world as it is in its raucous laughter and its blasphemous godlessness at the present time?

That is all right, but that is not the way to measure ourselves. The way to measure ourselves is this: as we read our New Testament, as we look at our Lord, is there a profound hunger within us, a profound thirst, a feeling that we are lacking, that we need a fullness that we do not possess and that we have not known hitherto and that we feel we must have? Do we feel this way when we read the lives of saints who have lived in this world before us and who have adorned the life of the church? There is nothing, I repeat, greater about Nicodemus than that. That is why he went to our Lord; he was conscious of a need.

The next thing we notice about him is that he was not only sufficiently conscious of his need, but he was also sufficiently humbled to go and seek an interview with our Lord and to seek instruction. It is very difficult for us to realize what this meant to a man like Nicodemus, but here it is. He is a “a ruler of the Jews,” remember. Our Lord is an unknown person, but Nicodemus is sufficiently humble to go and seek an interview with him. And the key to this humility is the fact I have been emphasizing—his awareness of need. He has been given the feeling by our Lord that there is a quality of life, a depth of experience, an association with God that he knows transcends everything that he or any of his fellow masters in Israel has ever attained. We cannot make ourselves humble. There is only one thing that will ever make us really humble, and that is when we see perfection and then see what we are by contrast. That is what always

makes people humble. They are “the poor in spirit” because they “hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Matt. 5:3, 6). Each one of the Beatitudes helps the other, and in a sense each describes the other.

But somebody may say, “You are over-praising this man Nicodemus. He went to our Lord by night. Why didn’t he go like a man in the day-time? Why does he slink under the cover of darkness to seek this interview with our Lord?” I do not accept that criticism of him for a moment. I think that even this is a virtue in him. He is a very wise man, he is conscious of all that I am describing, but our Lord is an unknown teacher, and there is nothing wrong in being cautious. Indeed there is everything right in being cautious. The teaching of the New Testament teaches us to be discriminating. We have to “prove” and to “test” and to “examine.” The previous people at the end of the second chapter of John are those who rush after the latest phenomenon, but they are not accepted. Going at night is a virtue; this is in Nicodemus’s favor. He is a man in a responsible position, and a man in such a position cannot afford to plunge into things unwarily and without considering. But these factors are balanced here. In spite of his upbringing and his background and the prejudices of his fellows, he is made aware of his need, and then he says, “I must find out more about this.” But he must think of his whole position. This is excellent, it is a mark of his true greatness—this wonderful combination of awareness of his responsibility and yet his desire for this greater fullness that he feels the Lord has to give him. So he seeks his interview by night. I put the two things together.

But the truth that we gather, therefore, from all this and the first great lesson that comes to us I would put like this: Nicodemus acts on what he feels. Why do I emphasize that? It is because I know from personal experience, and I know that you are all exactly the same, that one of our greatest dangers is this: something influences and affects us, we are suddenly disturbed, perhaps in a meeting or in reading a book or in some event that happens, and we are made to feel something of this longing of which I have been speaking. Something disturbs us, we feel we cannot go on as we are, we see that there is something better and higher, and we are anxious to get it. But nothing ever comes of it. Why? Because we do

## Experiencing the New Birth

not do anything about it. It comes, and it goes. There is a ripple on the surface of the soul, but it ceases. The gale has come, and we are moved, but soon it is gone. We forget all about it, and back we go to where we were before.

Here is one of the great lessons that is taught to us by this great man Nicodemus. He does not allow the feeling to pass. He does not say, "Well, that's very interesting, but, of course, this sort of thing comes and goes. New teacher? Well, I have seen many new teachers before, and nothing has come of them." You will find all that put in detail later on. That was the kind of way in which these people argued. But Nicodemus is aware that something is here that he has never seen before, and he says, "I cannot leave it. I must, I am bound to find out about this." So he decides that whatever the risk, whatever the cost, he is bound to have an interview with this new teacher who has suddenly appeared. He is so concerned about it that he acts upon his feelings.

That sounds very simple and elemental, does it not? But it is the key to the whole of the Christian life and Christian living—the absolute necessity of application and of action and of following our impulses, following our feelings, listening to these deep convictions that come to us, and not giving ourselves rest or peace until we have discovered the secret.

I could illustrate this to you endlessly in the lives of God's saints throughout the centuries. That has been the quality that has characterized them. They did not just sit down and allow the feeling to go away; they got up and said, "I must know; I cannot rest." There is a determination here. This is taught in the New Testament. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. 7:7). Our Lord himself was constantly teaching such importunity, and it is exemplified constantly throughout the whole history of the Christian church and her greatest people. Nicodemus gets up and says, "This is something that, surely, I ought to have. I don't have it, but he does. What is it? I must find out! I'll go and see him." So he did.

I trust that I have been able to rouse you all to follow on beyond any dissatisfaction that is in you. Do not allow yourself just to have the feeling and to be content with the fact that you have had it and say, "At any

rate I am aware of a need.” Do not stop at that. The question is, have you received of the fullness? So what should you do? Do what Nicodemus did. Go to the Lord himself. It is the one thing to do.

So far, then, everything that Nicodemus does is right, and all that we have had to say about him is commendation. And yet the whole point of the story is to show us that Nicodemus was wrong at a very fundamental point. Are you this type of person? I have known many people like this. Perhaps you really do desire this “something” that you feel you do not possess or that at any rate you do not possess in sufficient measure; you are not content just to keep going through the motions. You have been converted, you have been given tasks to do, and you just go on and on from the beginning of the year to the end, and you are the same at the end of fifty years as you were at the beginning. But you are not content with that; you know this is not full Christianity. It is Christianity, but it is not what is described in the New Testament; it is not this profound, this thrilling quality of life. So what I say to you is, emulate this man’s example. Act! Go to Christ! Why? Because he will deal with you.

And so I come to the second great matter, which is the picture that is given here of our blessed Lord and Savior. This is what is so wonderful in all these varied pictures at which we have been looking. There is only one constant, and Christ is the constant. People vary. We are different in temperament, psychology, outlook; we are different in our makeup or our abilities or our particular experiences, and we come from all sorts of different directions. But when we come to him, he is always the same. He stands out. The moment you meet him in the Bible, he always towers over everything; he commands the situation always. He may merely be a guest at a marriage feast in Cana of Galilee, but he is still in control, he cannot be hidden. He walks up to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover feast and takes charge of the temple. He does so with ease, with grace. He does it in the most natural manner. He is the Lord of the temple. The leaders of the Jews come to him and question him and put a wrong suggestion to him, and he deals with them in the same magisterial manner. Other people come rushing to him, wanting to join him, carried away by the phenomena that he works, but he does not commit himself to them.



## Experiencing the New Birth

And here he is approached by a great teacher, a master of Israel, one of the great authorities. “He is nothing but a carpenter,” you say, “He has had no training; he’s a nobody and comes from nowhere.” Oh, but he is always the same, he is always in command, he is in charge of the situation. And this is the first great thing we must realize about him always. He is the Lord.

As we are reminded at the end of the previous chapter, which gives the setting and the context for this one, “Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.” He does not need to be surrounded by secretaries and undersecretaries who have put a note in front of him or whispered in his ear, “Ah, the man who is coming now is a master of Israel; he is a great man.” He knows all men; he knows what is in man. He knows all about Nicodemus before he ever comes. We can see this in the case of Nathaniel. “Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47).

This is the first thing we must realize—he knows all about us. In one sense that is terrifying, but in another sense it is the most comforting fact in the world, because in your need and as you are at this moment, when you go to him you can be certain he knows exactly what you need. We think we know, but we do not. Nicodemus thought he knew, but he was wrong. With all his excellencies he was wrong, he did not know himself. None of us know ourselves. We are ever ready to balance the good with the bad, to draw up our balance sheets; we are always ready to rationalize our sins; we think we know what we want. But if you know anything about the spiritual life you will agree with the man who says, “I cannot trust my best feelings.”

I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a most wonderful and glorious fact: when you go to him, you go to One who knows all about you. He knows your real fundamental need. He will put his finger immediately on the essence of your trouble.

He does not need any help or assistance, and this, I repeat, is to me a most comforting and encouraging thought. He will cut through all that we have put up and erected around ourselves, he will expose the ill—there it is staring us in the face. He will do that, he always does it, and he did it here with Nicodemus. At once he cuts through the conversation and brings him to the point.

And then we must emphasize this: he did so on this occasion in a rather sharp, almost a brusque manner. Here it is: “The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). Cannot you hear the tone of voice, cannot you sense the feeling that is in it? But listen: “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee”—master of Israel as you are—“Except a man be born again, [except *you* be born again], he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). He interrupts him, breaks across what he was about to say, and he does so in a manner that can only be described as sharp.

Why does our Lord behave like this? The answer is, because he knew Nicodemus, because he knew this was the only way to bring Nicodemus to the point at which he could get the blessing he was seeking. The seeking was right. The thing that had brought Nicodemus to our Lord was absolutely right. But what was wrong was Nicodemus’s attitude to this and the way in which he thought the problem was to be solved. Now our Lord, because of his love and because of his knowledge, brings Nicodemus face-to-face with the central condition, the central need. And, my dear friends, he will do that to us.

I must point out here that we must all be ready for this. We tend to come to our Lord, do we not, with our own ideas and, like his mother, Mary, we want to dictate to him; we think the blessing will come in this way or that. Now you must get rid of that at the very beginning, because if you do not, he will do it for you. You may well find, as many have found, once you begin to feel this need and begin to act upon it and to seek him, at first you may feel that he is all against you. You may feel that you are rebuffed, that things are worse even than they were before, and you wish

## Experiencing the New Birth

you had not gone to see him. You must be ready for this, but above all you must realize why this happens.

In other words, once more here is our great principle: you must submit utterly and absolutely to him. If you do not do so voluntarily he will make you do it. He will insist upon it; he is always in charge. You cannot go to him with any kind of reservations because he knows everything. He knows all about you, and he will always make it plain. He will bring you to face the one big obstacle that stands between you and receiving his fullness and grace upon grace.

What was it in the case of Nicodemus? There are quite a number of things here. We cannot deal with them all now, but they are all revealed in the way in which our Lord handled Nicodemus and in the dialogue that took place between them. The first one is this: Nicodemus was still in charge of himself. "What do you mean?" asks someone. "Shouldn't people be in charge of themselves?" Well, yes, they should, until they come face-to-face with the Lord. Then you become as a little child. You are a master of Israel! All right. You also have the humility that takes you to seek an interview with Jesus. All excellent. But the moment you meet him you are no longer the master; you are very much the pupil, you are very much the pauper, you are no longer in charge of yourself.

Now this is extraordinary. You say, "You have emphasized the humility of Nicodemus, and yet you are now saying that his main trouble was that he was still in charge of himself. Is that not a contradiction in terms?" In a remarkable manner it is not because you often find those two things present in the same person. Truly great scholars are always humble, and yet they know they have great knowledge. They have a kind of confidence because they know what they know, and they know that they do know; they have the confidence of a scholar. And yet because of what they do know they realize so much of what they do *not* know. So you can find these two things together in the same person. And thus is the extraordinary thing about a person of this type. In humility Nicodemus goes to our Lord, and yet his trouble is that he is not sufficiently humbled. He is big enough and great enough to be humbled, he is not like the man with little knowledge, and yet he has not become as a little

child. That is the difference, and this is what has stood between thousands, even millions, of men and women of this type and really knowing the Lord. Have you not met such people? They are great, and they are truly humble people; there is no arrogance about them at all. But they have never become Christians. Why? Because they have never become as little children, they have never seen the need of being born again; in fact they object to that. There is something, therefore, about the pride of knowledge that can follow a person through all his or her humility even into the presence of Christ and ultimately become the greatest stumbling block of all.

Let me put it like this. Nicodemus goes to our Lord because of his consciousness of this lack, this need, this awareness that there is something in this Other that he does not have, and yet in a sense he is going to him as an equal. It is the recognition of another scholar, if you like, another teacher who is yet greater than himself, but he still sees himself as one of the teachers, he is in the same category, in the same class. Nicodemus is a humble man, but he has not become as a little child.

Or to put it another way, he still goes to Christ as a teacher; he says, “Rabbi.” But he does not go to him as the Savior. He goes to him, in a sense, as one who is ready to learn from him, but he does not go as a penitent. Nicodemus has felt the need of help, he feels the need of a little further instruction, and he is prepared to humble himself and go to the unknown teacher in order to get it. Oh, yes, he has felt the need of help, but he has never felt helpless.

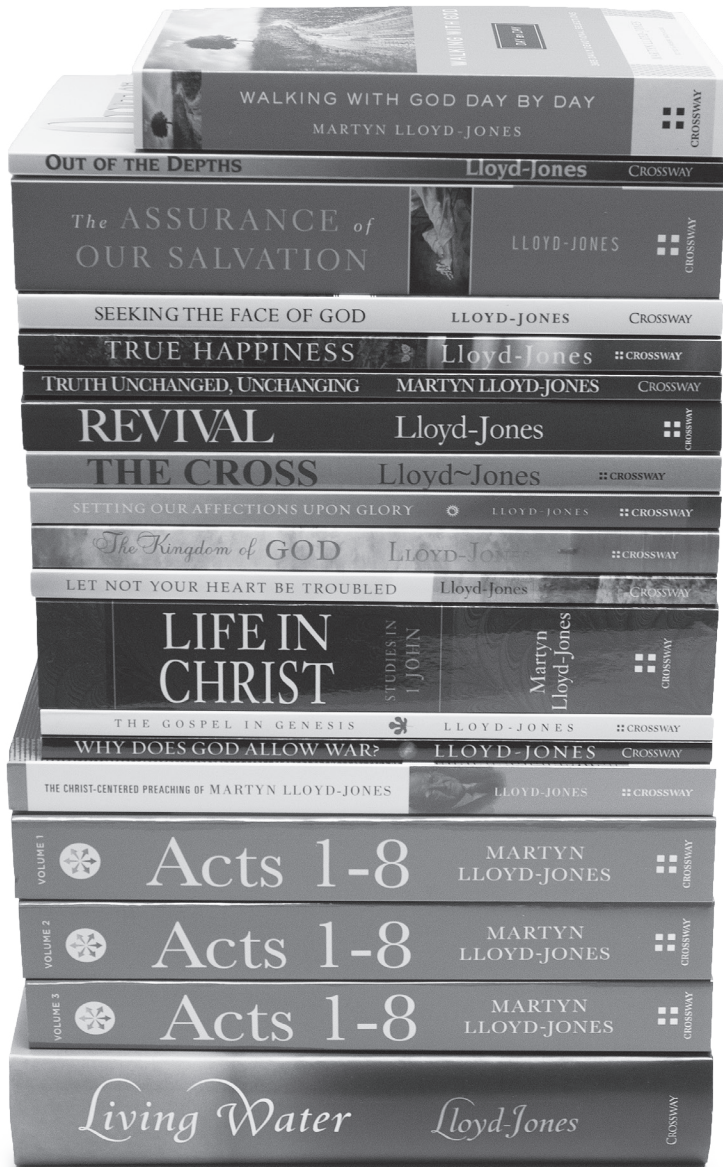
Is this a vital distinction to you? The people who eventually receive this fullness are those who know they are completely helpless and absolutely hopeless. There is no more subtle point, I sometimes think, in the whole of spiritual life than just that. You may feel the need of help, but you must feel helpless, you must feel completely hopeless. As long as you feel you only need further help, you are still standing on your own feet; you are still in charge of yourself. You say, “He is one step further. I have to go from here to there.” That is a fatal problem in the whole matter. That is why our Lord handles Nicodemus as he does. Nicodemus feels that this “something” that our Lord has is something he can add to what

## Experiencing the New Birth

he already has. He feels that what he needs is a supplement, an appendix to the book. But this is not what he needs. The whole book is wrong; it needs to be rewritten from the beginning. That is the trouble. And, of course, he feels that it is something he can add on himself, and he goes therefore and says, "Now then, I have been watching you, and I can see your uniqueness. I am a master in Israel. What is the extra? Can I get this? Tell me what must I do." Fatal thinking!

And the last thing we notice is this—he is so anxious to understand; he keeps on saying that. "How can a man be born when he is old? . . . How can these things be?" (John 3:4, 9). We will continue with this, but there it is—those are the main troubles in the whole attitude of Nicodemus. These are the things that vitiate all his excellent qualities. He has not realized it is a *life*. He thinks of it only as a teaching a man can take up, add on, and so put into practice. Oh no, it is not! It is a life; it is becoming part of this great Head, this great Person. It is becoming parts and members of the body of Christ. It is receiving the life of God in the soul. It is becoming "partakers of the divine nature." And because it is that, anything we may have, whether it be religion or morality or philosophy or anything else, is of no value, and our Lord says to such a person, "Stop! 'Ye must be born again. Ye must be born of water and of the Spirit.' Your whole outlook upon this thing is wrong, and you can never receive anything of it until you have been born again."

Also Available from Martyn Lloyd-Jones



For more information, visit [crossway.org](http://crossway.org).













“Martyn-Lloyd Jones was one of God’s special gifts to the church in the twentieth century.”

MARK DEVER, *Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC*

“Lloyd-Jones’s preaching was based on deep reading and scholarship, yet it was accessible to everyone—it stirred the affections and changed the heart.”

TIM KELLER, *Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City*

“I regarded Martyn Lloyd-Jones with admiration and affection during the years that we were both preaching in London, so I am delighted that his unique ministry is to be more widely available in the United States.”

JOHN STOTT, *The Late Rector Emeritus, All Souls Church, London*

---

“This, it seems to me more and more, is the greatest need of the hour, that we should all realize what a Christian really is and is meant to be...It involves, of course, believing certain things. There is the creedal element; that is vital. But Christianity is primarily life receiving of [the Son’s] fullness, and if we forget that, we miss the greatness and the glory and the splendor of it all.

“Our danger always, even as Christian people, is to be reducing this life—eternal life—to something that is merely a point of view, a teaching, a philosophy, a theology, or whatever. We must never do that. Its essence is that it is a life, and that means receiving of his fullness. This is the greatest thing in the world, the greatest thing that any of us can ever realize.”

—MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

BIBLE STUDY

