

A Ruler's Difficulty

John 3: 1-21, John 7: 50-52, John 19: 39-42.

Seekers for Light.

Fourteen Addresses to Edinburgh Students.

by W. T. P. Wolston, M.D.

Chapter 4.

A Ruler's Difficulty; or, New birth, what is it?

There are three places in Scripture where we learn a little about this interesting man — Nicodemus. First in John, chap. 3, then in chap. 7, and after that again in the nineteenth chapter; and I believe you will find that in these three places we get illustrations of the true spiritual whereabouts of every person. Now I read the third chapter of John, as far as Nicodemus is concerned, as "midnight" The seventh was "twilight," and the nineteenth was "daylight."

Midnight is usually profoundly dark. That is where every man is who has not met Jesus. You are in midnight darkness, my friend, if still unconverted, and there you will be until you meet Him. And when you meet Him, I will tell you what will come after — a perfect flood of light. Light always comes from God, never from man. God is light. Then, you say, what about the "twilight"? In the seventh chapter of John you will find that Nicodemus puts in timidly — sideways — a word for Jesus. I know many people like that, who put in a little apologetic word for Jesus, who would not like to stand openly out for Him. Nicodemus says: Do not you judge Him before you hear Him! Do not be too hard on Him. Are you in His train? the Pharisees ask. Ah! he would not say that exactly. But there came a moment when he saw the Son of Man hanging upon a tree, crowned with thorns, and with all the world against Him, and then he came forward boldly, saying, I am on His side now. I do not care what the world thinks, what the world says, or what the world does. I am on his side. It was "daylight" in his soul.

Joseph of Arimathea came, you know, to Pilate, and asked to be allowed to take Jesus down from the cross, and then Nicodemus brought an hundred pounds of ointment to anoint Him with. He now saw the truth — who Jesus was. I wonder if you have ever seen who Jesus was? I wonder if there has ever been a desire in your heart to know Jesus? I cannot help thinking that you would not be here this evening if you had not. I do not think it was mere curiosity to hear me that brought you here tonight. I trust it was the desire in your hearts to know the Lord Jesus. That was what brought Nicodemus. He was brought into the presence of the Lord. It is quite true he came by night. He hoped nobody would see him. He is like all of us. We are all alike in this

respect. Men are the greatest cowards about Christ you can possibly imagine. A man will go coolly up to the cannon's mouth, and run the risk of having his head blown off by the enemy's shot, yet he would tremble like an aspen leaf to own that he was a follower of Christ. A strange thing it is, but it just shows what a dire coward man is where Christ is concerned. It shows, too, where the sinner is.

This man came to Jesus by night. There is no doubt he hoped nobody would see him. This is frequently the case, that when a man comes first to Jesus, he hopes nobody will know anything about it, but when he has found Him he wants everybody to know Him. That is what I find about everybody who has a sense of the forgiveness of the Lord, and is enjoying the blessing of His salvation. They then want everybody else to know it. Not to know about themselves, but to know Christ as their Saviour, and to learn like them to confide in Him. I am perfectly certain every Christian man here will back me up in this. There is not a man who has learned to know Jesus, to know Him as his Saviour, but wants every one else to know Him as such. That is the beauty of Christianity. See how wonderfully it opens and widens the heart. I would have you then get what I have got; because if you get it, you will be immensely richer, while I am none the poorer. On the contrary, I am much happier, because I have somebody else to enjoy Christ with. That is what Christianity does. You have such a treasure, such peace, and such joy in the knowledge of the Lord yourself, that you wish others to share these blessings. My dear fellows, I have tried both sides of the fence. Few of you were perhaps so careless and godless as I was; but I will tell you what God did. He picked me up and converted me, and has filled my heart with deepest joy, and now I would that you knew the joy the knowledge of this blessed Saviour imparts.

Before this knowledge and this joy can be known there must come the sense of need, and what I find in this chapter is this, that Nicodemus came to the Lord absolutely and profoundly ignorant as to the truth about himself. On previous occasions we have been seeing that Christ was the truth, and the perfect expression of grace. Now we must learn from the Lord Jesus a little about ourselves. I find in the second chapter of John — part of which I read — that "many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did." Do you think that saved them? Never. I would not think much of the faith of a man that was only based upon the testimony of visible deeds or miracles. I would not give you any thanks, if you could fill this room with evidences of the truth of Christianity. It is only unbelief that looks for external buttresses, and evidences of Christianity. I do not want them. I want nothing but the revelation of God in His own Word. And, thank God, we have there all the truth. Do you mean to tell me that Christianity requires to be buttressed up by the evidences which a man's senses can furnish? If it wants such buttressing, the sooner it tumbles down the better! Here are God's own Word, God's own Son, and God's own Spirit! What more do you want? Thank God, we have His Word. And in that Word, we have the record of the Son of God coming in grace to earth. Further, in this book I find a sinner, — a religious man, no doubt, but unsaved, — a religious, respectable, decorous, and proper man, and a man well instructed in the Scriptures, but profoundly in the dark as to his own state and God's requirements, — in what I might call nature's blindness, for that was where he was, — coming to Jesus, just as Jesus says, "I cannot trust any man," for "Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men" (John 2: 24).

The great truth of the second and third of John is this — Jesus, so to speak, says, I cannot trust you; but you will have to trust Me, or else you will perish. Well, you say, that is very

despotic! Never mind. I like despotism when it comes from the heart of God. I like the sovereignty of God. Because, you see, you and I must be broken down; you and I must be brought down as sinners before God. We must know the truth from God, for if I have not got the truth from God, I have not got the truth at all. I listen to the testimony of absolute truth, and what it says to me is this: "Many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But 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 knew well that the multitudes that followed His steps, and waited to be fed by His Almighty hand one day, would the next, in cold blood, prefer a murderer and robber to Him, would wickedly put a crown of thorns on His head, spit upon Him, smite Him with a rod, and send Him out to death.

Ah, but you say, these were the people of the first century. Do you think the people of the nineteenth century are any better? Let us see. Go to the corner of your street, and attempt to preach Christ. What will you find? You will find that most people do not want Christ. They do not like even to hear of Him. Preach Christ, however, and gather a crowd, and then policeman No. B246 comes and says, "You must not block up the thoroughfare; you must move on." All right. We are subject to authority, move on, go down three blocks, and there find a German band, with a couple of thousand people standing about the place. Does policeman No. B246 move them on? Ah, no. They get leave to stand. The world loves music; it does not love Christ. That is it. Sinners love music, but not Christ.

The truth is, that every man has a nature that is opposed to, and unfit for God. So bitterly opposed is that nature to God, that it is "not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8: 7). Since in the very springs of your being you are opposed to God, it is manifest that you will not do for God. You must be new-born, every one of you. You cannot be reconstructed. You cannot be patched up. I know you go in for reformation; but it will not do. It is like painting up a rotten ship, putting in new rigging, and new masts, and sending it out to sea only to sink in the first storm. You must have an absolutely new nature, and you cannot get it from any one but from the blessed Son of God. Self-improvement is a huge delusion. Have I not come across my reformation friends? Lots of them. There are hosts of men who have tried to reform themselves. Did I not try it myself? Long did I try it, and what was the result? I got no better, so I gave it up as hopeless, and what did I then learn? That I was lost. And what then? I believe God caused me to pass through the new birth, and Jesus saved me. And that is what He will do for you tonight. He cannot trust you; you had better trust Him.

I know people like to think there is still some good in man before God. Some years ago I was preaching in this city, and at the close three young men came to me — University divinity students by the same token — and said, "We should like to have a little talk with you." "I am glad to meet you," I replied. "We have listened to your address, and we do not agree with it." "What is the matter with my discourse?" I asked. — "Well," they said, "you have not given man a leg to stand upon." "I could not," I replied, "because he has not got one." "You have declared man to be ruined, lost, and undone, needing a new birth, and that he has not a single good point about him to commend him to God." "It is quite true. The Word of God says so." "Ah, but," they said, "we cannot allow man to come to that level." "My dear fellows," I said, "the point is this, the Word of God says man is lost. What then is the good of your saying he is not? The Son of God says, 'Ye must be born again.' What is the use of your denying it?" "We admit that man is

not what he ought to be — We admit the fall; but there is surely a good side to man. And what is wanted is to cultivate and develop that."

Such was their view, and I fear the belief of many, but the Lord Jesus settles that in this chapter, as He says to Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Educate it. It is educated flesh. Refine it. It is refined flesh. Though I educate it and refine it to the very utmost, it is flesh after all. Flesh will not do for God. Flesh is not spirit. You may sublimate the flesh as you will, you will never distil spirit out of it Do you understand? See that to improve the flesh is truly hopeless? Thank God that it is so. We are all in the same case. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3: 23), and that was what the religious Pharisee in the darkness of that night in Judea learned, and that he must be born again. You and I too — very likely not so religious as he — must be born again. I do not think your life or mine would bear comparison with that of Nicodemus. Come now, honestly, do you think so? Supposing for argument's sake we could put a pane of glass in your breast, and so let all here see and know the secret sins of your life, that nobody knows but God, and many of which very likely you have forgotten, what would happen? I think I should see you making quickly for the door, for you would not care that the secret sins and deeds of your life should be known. If Nicodemus needed the new birth, how much more do you and I need it? Do I not know what students are? Of course I do. Was I not one myself? Aye, and I know the life of the average young man. There is a good lot of your life you would fain have concealed from man, and you would blush to the roots of your hair if it were exposed. It is sin. You have lived in sin. You have indulged in sin. You are a sinner. If you are ashamed that man should know it, how do you stand with God? You will not do for God. You must be new-born. That is the naked truth.

Now this "man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews," came to the Lord, feeling that all was not right. Religion without Christ can never make a man happy. A large percentage of so-called Christians have got just enough religion to make life miserable.. Do you understand what I mean? They have a name to live, must keep up an appearance, and they have not Christ to satisfy their hearts. They are professors without being possessors of the truth, and their inconsistency of life is what puts numbers of young fellows against the gospel. You must have Christ within your heart, or it is no good. Nevertheless, do not think for a moment that I am giving you a reason for remaining in unbelief, or that any inconsistency in another man can be an excuse for your unbelief.

I remember a brother of mine returning from America, where he had been nearly all his life. I was a boy when he left, and twenty-five years had rolled by. Before he returned I had been converted, and of course I began to speak to him about his soul, as he was still unconverted. After a little conversation, he turned to me and said, "Christians are so inconsistent with their profession that they stumble me." "I admit that," I replied; "but I would ask you, Is my inconsistency going to keep you out of hell?" "I would not think that for a moment," he had to confess. No, for the man who takes this ground I have a simple answer. It is this. You turn to the Lord, and be a consistent Christian. Do not suppose because you see a flaw in the life of somebody else that that will justify your unbelief. Quite possibly you may say, I know somebody who professed to be converted, and he fell away, hence I do not believe in conversion. Very likely. Did you ever see a bad bank-note, or a bad half-crown? Does that bad banknote prove that all bank-notes are bad. You are not such a fool as to believe that. What does a bad bank-note

prove? A bad bank-note proves that there are millions of good ones, or the forger would not have troubled to produce it. Similarly the devil produces counterfeits of the real article, called a Christian, and when you think that one inconsistent man proves that all are false, you are guilty of gross folly.

Let us grant that some poor fellow you know has stumbled and fallen. He may have been converted, but not walking near the Lord, Satan has tripped him up, and he has come down. You think he is not genuine. Let me tell you, that at bottom, that man is perhaps much better than the man who has never come down. He will be a better man after he came down than before it. When the devil's maid-servant met Peter in the high priest's palace, she tripped him up, and he came down, and denied his Lord. He, no doubt, went out of that court feeling, "It is all up with me; and everybody else might well have said, 'We shall never hear of Simon Peter again.' But you hear of Simon Peter again — a great deal more. Three days after he met his Lord and Saviour in resurrection, and got the sweet sense of His forgiveness, and seven weeks afterwards we find him preaching on the day of Pentecost, when three thousand men and women were converted. I know what the devil said then: "I wish I had left him alone in the high priest's palace; the breaking of him has been the making of him." Peter had been picked up by the never-failing grace of the Lord. He never could have preached like that if he had never fallen. Satan often does the Lord's work without knowing it.

But now, what about you, my friend? Have you passed through the new birth? If you have never come to Jesus yet, come now. Nicodemus came by night; but he came to Jesus. Can this be said of you? He came and said, "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." Jesus replied, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." He has no eyes with which to discern God's things. "Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" A very foolish question, but it brought out a gracious answer, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." You say, I suppose, that was baptism. No, what did Nicodemus know about baptism? Baptism was not a Jewish rite. It is very simple. It is the Word of God, used by the Spirit of God.

Very frequently in Scripture water is the symbol of the Word of God. For example: "I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed" (Isa. 44: 3). Again: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean . . . and a new spirit will I put within you" (Ezek. 36: 25-27). Look at the thirteenth chapter of John, where Jesus washed the disciples' feet with water. Presently Judas goes out, and in the opening of the fifteenth chapter the Lord says, "Now ye are clean," not because I have washed your feet, but "through the word which I have spoken unto you." It is the water of the Word. Clearly, the apostle Paul speaks of it again, when he says, "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5: 25, 26). Again we read, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures" (James 1: 18). Peter also says, "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1: 23). It is the Word of God, applied by the Spirit of God to the soul. It is the Spirit of God, taking the Word of God, and using it in the conversion of the man. You will find it so in every case.

If you are acquainted with a Christian, one who is a downright, what I call a backbone Christian — for there are Christians without backbone, they are not out and out — but if you are acquainted with a downright, out and out, backbone Christian, ask him, "How did you get converted?" and I am pretty sure what he will say. He will quote to you some bit of God's Word, and say that through it he was converted. It was a portion of God's Word struck me. It was the last verse in the Bible you would have expected to be the means of a man's conversion. It was this, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well; the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2: 19). You say, There is no gospel in that. Not a bit. How then could that convert you? you ask. It simply showed me that I was the companion of devils. "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well; the devils also believe, and tremble," revealed to me that my faith and theirs was identical. They believed all I did, and I saw clearly that they were lost, they were damned. I knew I was going to be; and I am not ashamed to confess, I saw my company and fled. Do you say, "Coward!" I wish you had a little of my cowardice. I fled to Christ, and He saved me.

Do you dare the judgment of God? You say, I do not believe in it. You will be converted yet Christ believed in it, and bore it that He might rescue me. The Word of God is very simple, and the truth plain. "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." Men do not believe in judgment They will be converted yet. Scripture speaks plainly of "wrath to come." The Lord is coming. judgment is coming. I hear the thunder roll of the judgment of God in the distance. You say, I do not hear it Very likely; there are too many of the devil's drums going to make you attentive to the distant sound of the judgment of God. It is coming nevertheless. God "hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance to all men, in that he raised him from the dead" (Acts 17: 31). Yes, that judgment day is coming. Thank God it is not come. It is yet the day of grace. Christ brings salvation, by preaching, the Word of God goes out, the Spirit of God applies it, and what is the result? The man that hears the Word of God is born again. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; but that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," said the Lord to Nicodemus (ver. 6). Have you been born of the Spirit yet? What do you mean? you say. Ah! the very fact that you have asked the question shows that you have not gone through it. The man who is born of the Spirit can say, "Thank God, I know what it is to be born of the Spirit," and he can very probably tell you the year, the week, the day, and even the hour when the change took place.

Without doubt the Lord's statement greatly puzzled Nicodemus. The necessity of new birth had never entered his soul before. Even then it would seem as if he had but half believed it. His face expressed his profound astonishment, and that led the Lord to say, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN" (ver. 7). This inexorable "must" applies to the whole world; to the highest and lowest, to peer and peasant, to prince and pauper, to old and young, rich and poor. The Lord Jesus addresses these words to this religious man, but they have a universal application to every soul. Have you weighed them?

The new birth is a real thing, and there will be soul exercise till the gospel is really known. Perhaps there is a young man here who says, I thought when a man became a Christian he got very happy. No, do not make any mistake about that. The first effect of the gospel upon a man is not to make him joyous, but serious. He faces God — he faces his sins — he faces the reality of

God's judgment, and therefore the first effect of the gospel is to make a man grave. Afterwards it fills him with joy. When God's Spirit and Word first affect a man his conscience is awakened, and he becomes repentant and self-judged. Then he wakes up to the discovery of the goodness of God, and coming to the Saviour, gets forgiveness and pardon. Then joy and peace set in, and deepen as the years roll on. Of the seven-and-thirty years since I was converted this is the happiest of my life. Every year is better than the last, because there is more of Christ and of His grace in it. When first I began to think conscience was at work, and I saw my sin and unfitness for God. I was not happy until I got the sense — the Lord has forgiven me. That is the experience of every one that is born of the Spirit.

I pray you to carefully note what Christ says, "Ye must be born again!" You will say, How does it come about? God takes the most wonderful way of reaching the soul. Marvellously diverse is His acting, but it is always by the Word, perhaps heard years before, and lying, like seed, forgotten in the ground. I know of a man who was living at a place four miles from where I was born in Devonshire. When a lad of seventeen he went into Dartmouth parish church one Sunday, and the pious old minister preached from that text, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha" i.e., "cursed when he comes" (1 Cor. 16: 22). He passed out of the church, and God added another eighty-three years to his life. He lived to be a hundred, and was then in the backwoods of America, a very hale specimen of a man one hundred years old. He had felled a tree, and sat down in the heat of the day to rest, and eat his mid-day meal, and as he sat on a log he began to think, "I have had a long life, for I am a hundred years of age today." He then began to think of the past, and travelled back the eighty-three years to that church in Dartmouth, and suddenly remembered the text used by good John Flavel, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha" — cursed when He comes. Then the old man said: "I have not loved the Lord Jesus. I shall be cursed when He comes." He was a convicted sinner, and, thank God, became a converted man. God used that word, which had been buried for eighty-three years in his memory, as the means of his conversion. This is always God's way, for a man is ever born again by His Word and Spirit; but as to the when, and where, and how, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit," for God is sovereign.

Do you know how an infidel was once converted? God likes to convert infidels. He likes to convert those who have been defiantly shaking their fists in His face. Yes, instead of condemning such, He meets them, and forces them in grace to acknowledge Him. This is just what He wants to do with you. This infidel was a jeering scoffer, who denied the existence of God. One Sunday he went out into his grounds to while his time, for Sunday is usually a dull miserable day for the godless man, and this infidel found it so. He went for a walk in his park, and in a field adjoining was his favourite cow. The beast, when she saw her master, marched toward him. His hand was resting on the pailing, and the beast came up and licked the back of his hand. And he was converted through that cow. How? Did the cow preach? Yes, the cow preached by touching his memory. "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider" (Isa. 1: 3). The ox brought to his memory that striking verse, which he had learned as a boy, and it went like an arrow to his conscience. "The Bible is true after all," he said to himself. "That beast knows me, and I do not know God." He was converted.

New birth and conversion are always by the Word of God — by some bit of it. You perhaps have been brought to the point of asking, How can this be? It is a grand thing when man asks, How can it be? I like when a man flings down his arguments, and begins to inquire. I never argue. Not even with the infidels? No, I would not waste my breath. Argument never converted a man yet, but Holy-Ghost-applied Scripture does. If I can only get a bit of Scripture in, it is like a sword, it goes through. If a bit of God's Word gets into your conscience, you will never get it out. It is like a two-edged sword. It is the sword of the Spirit, quick and powerful. I was talking to a man the other day, who said he did not believe it was the Word of God. When God applies it to him, it will cut him all to bits. You may say it has no edge. Let me try it on you. It has no point, you say. If it transfixed you, you would know it had a point; because when the light of the Word of God goes through a man, it cuts him down, and he sees it is God's Word.

"How can these things be?" says Nicodemus, and Jesus tells him, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (vers. 14, 15). It is very simple. Jesus therein tells the story of His own death. Look at the two "musts" of this chapter. "Ye MUST be born again" (ver. 7), and, "Even so MUST the Son of Man be lifted up" (ver. 14). If you are to live, I must die, says Jesus. You MUST get life, and I MUST go into death to give you life. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." And who does "whosoever" mean? It means what the boy told the blind man, who inquired whom it meant, "You, and me, and everybody." That is what "whosoever" means. God opens the storehouses of His grace to whosoever believes in him."

Will you believe in Him? I ask you, Will you believe in the Son of Man? I think you will feel an awful fool by-and-by, when the Lord has to say of you — There is a man who would not trust Me, there is a man who would not believe in Me. Note that God says that "whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Mark, it is an absolute present possession, the possession of faith. Eternal life is the gift of God. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3: 16). Oh, that is a beautiful verse, the 16th verse of John 3. Look at it. It begins with God, and ends with life. You cannot get life save from God, but "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that *whosoever believeth* in him should not perish, but HAVE everlasting life." You may have it I have it You have in this verse God's side of the action, and man's side also. God's side, loving and giving; and on man's side — my, and your side — believing and having. Really, my dear fellows, the gospel is wonderfully simple. God, loving, and giving; and man, believing, and having. I believe His love, I believe His grace, I believe what He says, I believe on His Son, and what is the result? I get eternal life as His own free gift.

Nicodemus went away from Jesus with his difficulty partly solved; but I do not think he was very happy just then. I think his conscience told him, "I am all wrong, and I shall never be right until I believe in, and then stand up for Him." That is exactly the case with you, if you have not come to Christ, and come out for Christ too. You are all wrong, and my exhortation is, Let in the light, and do not be ashamed to confess the Lord Jesus. Nicodemus came boldly out for Christ, when he had been lifted up, and I hope that you will say, henceforth, "It has been

midnight with me hitherto, but, thank God, it is daylight now, I believe in the Son of God, and I have got Christ as my Saviour." Many of us can say that tonight; will you not join us in the confession of His blessed name?