

A Triptych of Prayer: Session 2

By J. Vernon McGee

Speaker 1:

Torrey Memorial Bible Conference, Biola College, January 1979. This is a tape by Dr. J. Vernon McGee entitled "A Triptych of Prayer: Part Two."

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Now, I'm harnessed up. It's a real joy for me to have part in this conference, and it's rather nostalgic and it's been a little embarrassing. I've had quite a few students that have come up and said, "My mother, my father, my mother and father, they attended the Bible Institute when you were teaching." And that puts it back a long way. And if you really want to know how far back, Dr. Curtis Mitchell was in my classes and you know that's a long time ago.

I taught about 42 to 50. And it was during that period that World War II took place and the boys came back from the war. They had left as boys. They came back men. And I do believe that at that time we had some of the finest young men, some of the finest students that's ever been my privilege to teach. Dr. Curtis Mitchell was one of them, by the way, during that period and Royal blew up at Redding. And there are quite a few I meet when I'm out on the mission field, and I have a notion that there may be some here tonight. I wonder if there's anyone here tonight is willing to admit you attended Bible Institute when I taught. Would you be willing to lift your hand? Yes, I see two or three and all of them are old. It makes me feel bad.

I'll dedicate a little bit of dog roll here to you. It's not Shakespeare or Shelley and it's not pentomic hexameter either, but here it is. "My glasses fit me dandy. My false teeth fit me fine. My hearing aid comes in handy, but I sure do miss my mind."

Tonight I'd like to read some verses beginning actually in the second chapter of the Gospel of John and reading right on into the third, because here's a place that it was unfortunate. We had a chapter break beginning with verse 23 of chapter two and reading into the third chapter. "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover," and I can change that just a little. That might be helpful. "Now, when he was in Jerusalem during the feast of Passover, many believed in his name when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them." It actually really could be translated: "They believed in Jesus, but he did not believe in them." "But Jesus did not commit himself unto them because he knew all man, and he needed not that any should testify of man, for he knew what was in man."

I think we can insert now a connective here. "Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. The same came to Jesus that 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.' Jesus answered and said unto him, 'Verily, Verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.' Nicodemus sayeth unto him, 'How can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's room and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit of spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, ye must be born again.

The wind bloweth where it listeth. Thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit.'

"Nicodemus answered and said unto him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered and said unto him, 'Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things unto thee? We speak that we do know and testify that we've seen, and you receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you believe not, how shall you believe if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man, which is in heaven. And 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 everlasting life, 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.'"

And I'll break off the reading at that particular point, although I do not think that is the end of the interview with this man Nicodemus, we need to see that this incident took place on the background of the first visit that the Lord Jesus made to Jerusalem, and at that time when he performed miracles, we're told that many believed on him. And I'm sure that there'd be many of us today. I know that there are many in our camp that would jump up and down and say, we're having a revival. Look at the people that are coming forward.

But the strange thing is it says Jesus did not believe in them. He did not commit himself to them because he knew that they were the same crowd that when he said the multitude wanted to make him King, he slipped out away and got away from them because he didn't come to be King of

men's stomachs. He didn't come to make that appeal. Actually, he didn't come as a wonder worker, miracle worker, or [inaudible]. That was not his purpose, but they authenticate who he was, but nevertheless they believed on him. But it wasn't genuine faith and we've been looking at the group that I've had, we've been talking about this matter of faith. But there are people who believe that they weren't genuine at all. And the Lord Jesus knew their hearts and he knew they were not genuine at all. And the amazing thing is he does not need that anyone testify of man, for he knows what is in man.

When you and I come before the judgment seat of Christ, there'll be no witnesses there. He already knows us. And at the great white throne, there'll be no witnesses. He knows man. That would save a whole lot of court cost today if the judges had more sense than they got today. We got a lot of soft-hearted and soft-headed judges. And that's the reason that some of these cases stay in court sometimes for two or three years. Why? Because they do not receive the evidence and do not act upon the evidence that is turned in.

The Lord Jesus won't need witnesses. He already knows. Now, in contrast to this crowd, there is this man, Nicodemus, and actually the little Greek word, delta Epsilon is in the text. It wasn't translated in order to make a break for a new chapter, but it ought to be there because there really is no break here. And it means now, in contrast to those that he did not believe in, there is a man that came to him that I believe was genuine. And Nicodemus has had rough treatment in the hands of a great many [inaudible]. And the thing that seems to be the basis of it, that he came to Jesus by night.

And I've never felt that's a justification for blaming him. If you're going to find fault with him for coming at night, then you surely ought to find fault with the Communion service because it was instituted at night, not at 11:00 morning service. It was begun at night. And this man came at night. He was a busy man. The Lord Jesus was busy. He came at a time when he could have an interview. I see no other reason to add to that.

Now, I'd like to introduce this man to you tonight. He's a very interesting individual. We're told that he's a man of the Pharisees, and that is a character that actually it's a mask that he wore, a man of the Pharisees. And then it says he's a ruler of the Jews. And that's another mask that this man wore. But down underneath those masks, this man, Nicodemus, he was just a human being. And when he came to the Lord Jesus, he put up two masks. He came first, as we're going to see, as a man of the Pharisees. And then when the Lord tore that mask off, he had another one.

He put up the ruler of the Jews, and the Lord tore that one off. And then he had nothing left. He was just plain little old Nicky. And then our Lord began to deal with him as Nicodemus, the human being. And that, by the way, is the way he deals with us. Most of us are carrying masks around with us. And I think this is true psychologically today, at least a psychologist, a friend of mine, tells me that it's accurate. And he taught at USC so he must be all right.

First of all, this man was a man of the Pharisees. That's the way he came to the Lord Jesus Christ, and then a ruler, and then Nicodemus. Now, I think that's highly consistent with today. Here is the average businessman today that has a business of his own. He walks into his office of morning and there are several of the employees. The secretary is there. He walks in. Good

morning, Ms. Jones. Good morning. And he is the boss. And he adopts that attitude with him. Everybody calls him Mister.

At noon he goes to his club to have lunch with some of the other businessmen. They are his friends and members of the same club. And they pat each other on the back and they say, "Bill, how's business?" He says, "Fine, great, just going great." And when he's at the office, why, somebody says to him, "How's business?" And he says, "Great, everything's fine." But that evening at 4 o'clock, he goes home. And when he drives up in his Cadillac, he walks into the house, closes the door, and he drops into a chair.

He's an altogether different man. His wife comes over, put her hand on his shoulder and says, "What's the matter, Bill? Business is not good?" He looks up. He says "It's lousy." Different man altogether. And do we say he's being hypocritical? No, he's not. That's the way that we function today. Most of us carry a mask around with us and we put that up for a certain crowd, put another one up. And so Nicodemus was that kind of a man. When he walked out on the streets why, he was a different man than when he met with the other Pharisees. With the other Pharisees, it was first name. He called them Abe and Jake, he knew them and they knew him. All first name basis.

And they could speak to each other out frankly. But when he opened the door and walked out on the street, he's a ruler of the Jews. And he walked down with all of the philosophy that he has. And as he goes down, why, two are approaching him and they step to the side, one whispers to the other, "That's Nicodemus, he's one of the rulers here." They looked up to him. The interesting

thing is that the Pharisees that thought they knew him, they did not know him. And the very interesting thing is that when he walked down the street and the people looked at him and said he's the ruler of the Jews, they didn't know him either.

And down underneath there was that human being, plain little old Nicky, and the Lord Jesus is going to get to him before you'll deal with him at all. Now, when you notice the interview they had, it says the same came to Jesus by night. Let's not fault him on that one. And said unto him, "Rabbi, we know." Who's "we"? Why, "we Pharisees." Now this, I don't know, but I have a notion that the Pharisees had had a meeting. They needed some help.

They wanted somehow or another to throw off the yoke of Rome and bring the Kingdom of heaven down here on Earth. There's still a lot of people trying to bring the Kingdom of heaven down here on Earth. The Liberals has been doing it for years. The denomination I was brought up in, why, they tried to do it, we met quarterly, and it was great. All the preachers, the elders met always. We had a Kingdom building going on. And the best thing we ever were able to turn up was something about the size of a chicken coop. That was about the extent of our work.

But we were in the Kingdom building and the Pharisees were in that. They wanted to get rid of Rome. They were a religious political party. As a religio-political party, they were the best in Israel. We'd call them fundamentalists. They believed in the inspiration of the Old Testament. They believed in the resurrection. They believed in miracles. They believed in going through the ritual of the Mosaic system. They were regular, I think, at the Temple, they represented the best

in Israel. And they were the ones that you would expect would take notice of a new prophet that had just come down from Galilee.

The people are following him. And I don't know this, but I think in the meeting they said, it'll be good if we can get that young prophet to go along with us. The thing to do, if we could get him to go with us, then we could tie our wagon onto his car and we'd go places. So the thing to do is to make contact with him. And I think one man said, well, how about having Nicodemus do that? He's an outstanding man. I think he probably was the leader. Let's have him go. And they voted that's Nicodemus, you be sure to see this young prophet and talk to him about coming over and joining our group. And let's see where we can go. It looks like this young prophet is really taking off.

And so he came to the Lord Jesus and he said, "We know." Who's we? We, Pharisees. We know that you are a prophet come from God. Now, at the beginning, that was the estimation of the Pharisees. They were willing to put down that he was a prophet come from God. That was evident. And it's evident to them that he was a prophet come from God. "We know thou art a prophet, a teacher that has come from God. For no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him."

The miracles of Jesus have been explained away in many different manners, but they never really dismissed them. Even I went first to my denominational seminary, Liberal seminary. It's always amusing to me that every time we come to a miracle, why the professor, he really had to strain himself to explain it away. And everyone would explain it away. Jesus walking on the water. He

said, "Well, it was a stormy night. He was really walking along the seashore. And they thought that he was walking on the water, but he was walking on the seashore."

Well, that one's a hard one to swallow. I'll tell you that. Storm and night, they wouldn't dare brought that little boat in close to the shore. It's been washed up on the beach or it would have been washed up on the rocks, had been destroyed. They got out as far as they could. They kept it pointed into the storm. And then since they agree it was a stormy night, how far can you see in a stormy night on water? And so there are some problems in that, but that's the best they've come up with. So they tempt to explain the miracles away.

But the Pharisees at the beginning said he is performing miracles. You see, they were there. And it's quite interesting that the objections that were raised against the Lord Jesus in his lifetime during his 3 years ministry, nobody questioned his miracles. Nobody. After all, if you're looking at the thing, it's mighty hard to walk away from it and say you didn't see it. And so they had to admit that. And that's what he's doing here.

Now, Lord Jesus seems to be very rude here. He seems to do a thing that's certainly not a very gracious thing to do. He interrupts him. "Jesus answered and said unto him, 'Verily, Verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.'" Now, he didn't let Nicodemus finish. Nicodemus had a little speech together and he got through one verse and that was all. He just sang one verse and sat down that's that was the extent of it. And the Lord Jesus broke in and said to him, "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God."

Why did he say that? Two things, we'll come back to that strange expression, born again, but the Kingdom of God. What did he mean by that? Why did he interject that? Well, because, friends, that obviously was what Nicodemus wanted to talk about, was the Kingdom of God. How we can build a Kingdom of God down here on Earth, how we can bring it to pass. That was the prophecy of the Old Testament. That was the hope of the Old Testament, that a Kingdom was coming here on this Earth.

The minute that God promised that to David, every prophet made it his song. And every Prophet sounds like a stuck record. Over and over again, they see a Kingdom that is coming. And now Nicodemus wants to talk about the Kingdom. Maybe we can get it underway. Maybe we can build it. Maybe we can get rid of Rome. The Lord Jesus made it very clear that he was not here to talk about that. He was not here to build a Kingdom at that time. He was here to do something else altogether. And then he says this strange thing, and it's the first time it was said, "Except a man be born again."

Now, I must say that that is a strange expression. Nicodemus did not know what it meant, and that's not unusual. I don't follow him for that either, because a lot of folks today don't seem to know what it means. But they use an expression. Now, I want to say this, and it's unlovely of me to say this, but I'm leaving here after tomorrow morning. I'm tired of hearing people talk about being born again. I'm sick and tired of it. I'm tired of the rhetoric.

I'd like to see some reality today. I'd like to see the evidence of it. Somebody says, well, we're not to judge others. We are not to judge others. I don't want to judge others. But the Lord Jesus

said, by their fruit, you shall know them. And I am a fruit inspector. And I'd like to see some fruit. All this talk about being born again. Now it's time we're seeing the fruits. So now that everybody's using the expression and are talking about it, let's look at it for just a few moments and see what the Lord Jesus had in mind. Nicodemus didn't know what it meant, and it was one that was not used. I never heard Nicodemus use it after this.

Never heard him say he was born again. I believe he was born again. He didn't say it. He didn't have to say it. He had fruit, had the evidence. Now, note here, it says to him, "Verily, Verily I say unto thee, take off your mask. I'm talking to you, Nicodemus. I'm not talking to a Pharisee. We're not going to talk about the Kingdom of God. We are going to talk to you about your needs. Verily, verily I say unto thee." When the Lord Jesus Christ said "verily" one time that means it's important. When he said it twice, you better listen. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, [inaudible] from above," it's what it is. "Except the man be born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God, let alone talk about it. He can't even see it. He knows nothing about it. It's an area in which he can't even enter." Now, this man Nicodemus, it was very rude of the Lord. He tore the mask to the Pharisee off of him right away. But this fella has got another mask and he comes up with it in a hurry.

Nicodemus says unto him, "Now listen to the ruler of the Jews. How can a man be born when he's old? Don't you know that if this is something that is in God's plan and purpose, that old Nicodemus would know all about it? Well, I'm a ruler of the Jews. I'm the leader. And you're trying to tell me something I don't know?" Nicodemus sayeth unto him, "How can a man be born

when he's old?" And notice his viewpoint. "Can he enter the second time into his mother's room and be born?"

And he says that to show how ridiculous it is to say to be born again. And if the Lord was talking about a physical birth, it would be utterly preposterous, or if he was even talking about that which was psychological, it'd be absolutely a ridiculous thing. Now the Lord Jesus is going to take off the other mask. Jesus answered, "Verily, verily I say unto thee," and here he goes again with that "verily, verily." Except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. Now, what does it mean, therefore, to be born again?

He's going to discuss that now. And he says that this birth comes about by water and the spirit. Now, what does he mean by the water? And of course, this is the controversial issue. Many of the day say that the water, of course, means water baptism, and they mean baptismal regeneration by it. And there are those that will insist that this is medical. My very good friend Dr. De Haan felt like the water is the water that's in the womb and that the Lord Jesus was referring to that. May I say to you that I'm not a doctor like a medical doctor like Dr. De Haan, but I can't see that that could be possible at all because he makes it abundantly clear that he's not talking about anything that is physical at all, that he's talking about that which is spiritual. And I believe that the water refers to the word of God.

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Lord Jesus himself used the word water as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. You're clean through the words that I have spoken unto you and that we are washed by the word of God. And then Peter, I think, makes it very clear, born again, not of corruptible seed, but of the word of God that liveth and abideth forever. Now, let me just give you my viewpoint here. I do not believe that anyone can be born again apart from the word of God.

Now we have come into a new framework today. I was back last week at the National Religious Broadcasters Convention, and the speaker two nights before I was there, he certainly stirred up the group. He said that we are living in a new day. We're going to have to have a new vocabulary. I'm hearing out a great deal today. We've got to have a new approach and all that sort of thing. And my point is why don't we try the old approach? It hasn't been tried much yet, and see how it'll work. And then if it's been tried and if it doesn't work, the trouble of it is it's not being tried.

But anyway, we got to have a new vocabulary. And this man made the statement, man can be saved today apart from the Bible, we don't need to use the Bible today. After all, unsaved world is not going to listen to the Bible, and therefore, we must have a different approach today. And believe me, we are moving into an orbit that is very strange as far as I'm concerned. I believe that no one can be born again apart from the word of God.

Born again by the word of God. I used to make a practice years ago when anyone in the church, especially in a testimony meeting, got up and said I was listening to a certain song, and that song caused me to make a decision for Christ. I but hold them as quickly as I could. As I said, the man

now, you gave this very sentimental testimony about this song. I want you tell me how you got converted. Well, when he sat down and told me the story, I was converted. I was convinced the man had been converted. I was sure of that. But then he let the cat out of the bag.

He said, well, to tell the truth, that song was a song, a tune set to a verse of Scripture that my mother gave me when I was a boy. And the singer just kept singing that verse over again, and it was just sung right into my heart. Well, may I say to you he was converted high by song? No, he was converted by the word of God, converted by the word of God. And we're finding today that and I'll be honest with you, I have faith that the Bible would take care of itself, but I never knew. So we just started to make it just a clear cut.

We just teach the Bible and nothing else, and we don't even have music. We're criticized for that. Why don't you have songs? Why don't you have some singing? Well, I can't sing, I tell them. There's no use having that in the program. The only thing I know, the only thing I was ever taught to do, is just take the word of God and look at it. And I've been amazed at what it'll do. We average about 100 letters a month of those who accept Christ. And right now in the [inaudible] and in the Hindi, we just got letters in from the Hindi broadcast in India.

We're seeing the same thing happen that took place in our Spanish broadcast in South America, there's just an avalanche of letters. The [inaudible] broadcast is receiving 200 letters a day, even in India, of those that are studying the word of God on an island out in the Bay [inaudible] where 50 families live. They meet when the broadcast comes on with their Bibles and they're studying in the [inaudible]. They're all 50 families and several have been converted.

A chief of police in the town got converted and he's now getting the other police to listen to the broadcast. You say you're doing that? No, you're not. The word of God's doing that, not even my language. Somebody said the problem is if you put it in something except that crazy Southern accent you got, nobody listened to you, but they listen better in another language than they do in English. And so it's the word of God. I don't think from my viewpoint, I don't think anybody can be converted to Christ apart from the word of God. It's when the Holy Spirit born of water into the Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit takes the word of God and applies it to the heart of a sinner.

You have a son of God and that's the only way it can come to pass. And I don't propose to explain the birth. I don't understand the natural birth and I certainly don't understand the supernatural birth. I just know that when you give the word of God and the Holy Spirit takes it and applies it to the heart, it makes a change in an individual.

I played golf this summer with a man who was a contractor, that he was the most godless man up here in Oakland you've ever seen. He was Godless. He was terrible. He still has a bad company. He'll throw a golf club even yet, and we've got him toned down some. But he said to me, when I listened to you in Oakland, if I could have got to you, when you kept telling me I was a sinner and needed to be converted, he says, I was going to confession every night you try and tell me I'm a sinner and I wasn't a sinner, but he says, you just kept saying it. And one day I came to conclusion I was a sinner. And he says, I turned to Christ and that Godless fella, what a different man he became.

Always a joy of me to play golf with him and see what a change is done in a man. Before he could cross roof. But now when he messes up, he doesn't curse. He doesn't like it, but he doesn't curse. May I say to you that the word of God has to be used and I do not personally believe you can have a conversion. If you have one, then may I say that I think it's an abnormal birth because it certainly isn't according to the word of God. The Lord Jesus said, accept a man be born of water and of the spirit. He cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.

Now, why is the new birth essential? He makes that clear. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. You can improve man, no question about that. We all can stand improvement. We need to be educated. I don't know about you. When I was born I didn't know my ABCs. I had to be taught to ABC and I had so many things I had to learn. I used to walk in the house my cap on. My mother said take your cap off, you're in the house and I guess here you must be polite I didn't know you're supposed to do that.

I would say today that we have today a citizenry today that could stand a lesson in manners. They've gone out of style. They used to tell a story over in Los Angeles About a lady got on a bus and as usual men had all the seats and she stood there for a few moments. Expected to hang on the strap the rest of the way and all of a sudden a man got up and he said to her, have this seat. And it was such a shock to her, she fainted. Just fainted right that way and they began to work with her to revive her and when they brought her to she looked up at the man and she said thank you and he fainted.

I could make it ridiculous and say that when he came to that he said, you're welcome and she fainted again. But I won't do that. May I say to you that we do need today, we need manners and you can do a great deal. And I used to hang around Agnes Scott College of Girls school in Decatur, Georgia I was taking a campus course there and they taught those girls how to hold a teacup. Actually that was part of the course that you have to know. You really don't know how to hold a tea cup, I found out I didn't know how to hold one.

You can improve man a great deal. But after you've educated him, after you trained him, after you've done everything you can for man, he is still flesh. And that's all he is