DEVOTIONAL READING

Philip Yancey Devotional

Late-night Conversation

John 3

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" (John 3:4)

Reading Mark 2 and John 3 back-to-back reveals a chief difference between Mark's and John's gospels. Mark gives the panoramic view: action, crowds, short scenes spliced together to create an overall impact. John tightens the camera angle, closing in on a few individual faces—a woman at a well, a blind man, a member of the Jewish ruling council—to compose a more intimate, in-depth portrait.

A simple word or phrase with a profound meaning—that is the style of Jesus' teaching as presented in John. No biblical author used simpler, more commonplace words: water, world, light, life, birth, love, truth. Yet John used them with such depth and skill that hundreds of authors since have tried to plumb their meaning.

Take this conversation with Nicodemus, for instance. He came to Jesus at night, in order to avoid detection. He risked his reputation and safety by even meeting with Jesus, whom his fellow Pharisees had sworn to kill. But Nicodemus had questions, burning questions, the most important questions anyone could ask: Who are you, Jesus? Have you really come from God? Jesus responded with the image of a second birth, in words we now recognize as among the most familiar in the Bible.

Evidently, some of Jesus' words to Nicodemus must have sunk in. Later he would stand up for Jesus at the Jewish ruling council and, after the crucifixion, help prepare Jesus' body for burial.

John follows this conversation with a report from John the Baptist. People were questioning him, too, about the new teacher across the river who was drawing all the crowds. In words that echo Jesus' own, John confirmed that Jesus held the keys to eternal life. He was indeed the one John had come to announce: "He must become greater; I must become less."

Life Question: How would you explain the phrase "born again" to someone who had never heard it?