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JOHN 3:1-17

“BORN AGAIN: HOW CAN THESE THINGS BE?”

The main point of this sermon is that God has provided the provision for the new birth through the giving up of His only Son, who came down from above, to go up on the cross, so that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life.

Introduction

The conversation with Nicodemus is one of the more well-known conversations in all the Gospels. It is also perhaps one of the more challenging or confusing. Hopefully, that won't be the case after this morning. While it is confusing, it is remarkably consistent with all of Jesus' conversations. How so, you ask?

When Jesus met someone, whether a rich young man or a cheating tax collector, or a prostitute, what was he looking for? He was looking for a change. More than that, he was looking for a radical conversion. He was looking for some deep transformation to happen at the root of the person.

The point is that Jesus never spoke with anyone, and at the end of the conversation said, “You know what? You're perfectly fine as you are. Never seen anyone healthier or more put together than you.”

Instead, here's what we see and learn from Jesus' ministry: Our problem is at our core. We aren't healthy. We don't have it together. The Bible's answer is that there's something so deeply wrong with us that no biological or psychological or sociological explanation will suffice. No amount of improvement or self-help or social engineering will get at the root of the problem. But that's what Jesus came to do. He came to attack the root.

Here's how Lewis put it: “God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature.”¹

You'll never really understand Jesus if you think he came to improve you. As if that's all you needed—just a few minor adjustments here and there. You'll always get him wrong if you think his job is simply to soften your hard edges (or your spouse's hard edges). No. He came to make you a new creature. One that can soar over fences and do things that the natural “horse” could never do.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1952), 216.

And what we learn in this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is that becoming new means being born anew. It means being born from above. It requires a second birth. So, that's what we are going to look at this morning. We're going to answer four questions about the new birth: (1) Who is it for? (2) Why is it necessary? (3) How does it happen? And, (4) How can I know if I've been born again?

Who Is It For? Or, What Kind of Man is Nicodemus?

It's true that if you've had a decent enough upbringing and education, a certain level of good conduct comes fairly easy. Most people don't totally wreck their lives and make a mess of things, so it's easy to think that only the worst of the worst, the really bad apples, the people you see on the news, would need some sort of radical change.

The rest of us are quite well adjusted. Quite comfortable. Nothing glaringly wrong like a horrid temper or crippling addiction. And so, culturally, we might concede that if you've really loused things up, you might need God to set you straight. Or, if you're one of those people with a weak constitution who can't get his feet under him, perhaps a little religion will do you good.

But what if you've risen to the top of your field? What if you've kept yourself from the really bad stuff in the world? What if you've made the right connections? And what if you come from the right family? What more do you need?

You see, Nicodemus wasn't a man who made a mess of his life. John tells us he was a Pharisee, and what do we know about Pharisees? They "were strict and precise in regard to the law."² They didn't swindle people or throw away their money on prostitutes. Their agenda was to reform Judaism. They advocated a stricter adherence not just to the law, but the expanded interpretation of the law that had built up over centuries. They were the type of folks who knew the rules, kept the rules, and knew who broke the rules.

We also know this about the Pharisees: They weren't politically connected. They were more of a grassroots movement. But notice what we're told about Nicodemus. We're told that he was "a leader of the Jews." That makes Nicodemus unusual. He's unique. And on top of that, his name is Greek.

Richard Bauckham is a New Testament scholar, and he's looked at ancient sources and found that "only four Palestinian Jews between 330 BC and AD 200 had the name Nicodemus, and all four belonged to the same family: the Gurion family."³ And what Bauckham found is that the Gurion family was one of the wealthiest and most prominent families in Jerusalem.

So, what kind of man is Nicodemus? He came from a wealthy, powerful, connected family. He was religiously meticulous and observant and recognized as an influential, educated leader among his people.

² Edward W. Klink III, *John: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, General Editor: Clinton E. Arnold, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

³ Ibid.

Nicodemus was a decent enough fellow. Nothing glaringly wrong. He was a success in all the important categories. Categories we still prize today. The point is that it isn't wrong to come from a wealthy, powerful, connected family. And it isn't wrong to keep your life in order and have influence. The point also is that none of those things make you right with God. Nicodemus, by every measure of his day and our own, had it together. He was on the right track supposedly. But what does he say to Nicodemus? "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew/from above." And if Jesus says that to a man like Nicodemus, he's saying it everyone. No matter how far you've risen or fallen in life.

Why Is It Necessary? Or, What Can't I Do I Do Apart from the New Birth?

Jesus gives Nicodemus two reasons why it is necessary to be born anew/from above. And both reasons have to do with what? The kingdom of God. In verse 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus he cannot *see* the kingdom of God without it. And in verse 5 Jesus tells him no one can *enter* the kingdom of God without it.

Now, what exactly is the kingdom of God? That's important if we're going to understand what Jesus is saying. And Dallas Willard gives this helpful definition. He says, "God's own 'kingdom,' or 'rule' is the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done. The person of God himself and the action of his will are the organizing principles of his kingdom, and everything that obeys these principles whether by nature or by choice is within his kingdom."⁴

Now, what does that mean? Imagine a football team that has had several disappointing seasons under one coach. What happens? The coach is fired, and the school then makes a big announcement that they've hired a new coach who is known for turning things around. He's known for bringing discipline and organization and accountability to programs. He's a proven winner with a strong presence. And so, what happens over time? The entire football program begins to take on the character and priorities and personality of the coach. The players and staff begin doing his will even when he isn't around. They do everything according to his organizational principles. And so, the football program is his kingdom, because what he wants done is done.

So, here's what I think Jesus is saying to Nicodemus: Apart from being born anew/from above, Nicodemus, you'll never be able to truly *see* what it is to obey God. You'll think that all the external conformity amounts to obedience. And apart from being born anew/from above, you'll never be able to do what I truly command. You'll never truly organize your life according my principles and come into my kingdom.

And Nicodemus's response to all that? Shock. Bewilderment. Confusion. Why? He would have never considered himself blind and disobedient to God's rule. Remember, he was a religiously, powerful man. He was a good person by all measurements of the day. But what Jesus is saying

⁴ Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life with God*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 25.

here is that Nicodemus is a rebel to God's kingdom. He's an outlaw. He's like a thief and a murderer and an adulterer even if he can't see it.

And that doesn't mean that Nicodemus would have thought himself perfect. Of course, he knew there were flaws, just as most of us know there are flaws within us. But what Nicodemus seems to miss like so many people is that these flaws need something more than effort and trying harder. Underneath Nicodemus's confusion is his belief, a belief that we all have and must fight, that whatever needs to be done he's up to the task.

If he needs to reform some things, he'll do the reforming. If he needs to do a bit of housekeeping, he'll get out the broom and do the sweeping. But the new birth rejects all that. It says you can't do what is required. Something must be done and provided for you.

How Does It Happen, Or, What's My Role?

And so, how does the new birth happen? Nicodemus knows it is impossible to be physically reborn. No one can enter the womb a second time. So, how does Jesus answer Nicodemus's confusion?

I think it's helpful to first look at the analogy Jesus gives in verse 8. He says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The point is that both the wind and Spirit are mysterious. Both are unseen, powerful forces that we cannot control. So, at a foundational and important level, being born of the Spirit "is nothing less than a mysterious, supernatural creation of God."⁵ It is something we do not control just like our physical birth. Ask your mother. Someone else was doing all the work when you were born.

And what makes Nicodemus stumble is that he doesn't know where to look. In verse 5 Jesus says, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of *water* and Spirit." What's with the reference to water? Water cleanses. But also, where does water come from? Or, where does the rain come from? It comes from above, just as the Spirit comes from above. The new birth is a cleansing from above.

You see, Nicodemus doesn't know where to look. He isn't looking up. He isn't seeing that the new birth is something that can only be given by God who is above all things. And so, is the point that Nicodemus and the rest of us are supposed to just stare up at the sky and wait?

Not at all. We just need to know where to look. What Jesus is saying in verse 13 is that we are to look at the one who came down from above—the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And in verses 14-15 Jesus tells us why he came down. And he does so by referring to a passage out of the book of Numbers. In that passage, the Israelites were making their journey to the Promised Land through the wilderness. And we're told that "the people became impatient on the

⁵ Klink, *John*.

way. The people spoke against God and against Moses” (21:4-5). They were rebelling. So, the Lord “sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died” (21:6).

Maybe that seems somewhat strange but think about how a snake’s poison kills someone. It does so by getting into one’s blood. And when someone says that something is in her blood, what does she mean? The point is this: *something* is integrally a part of them. It is who they are. So, you see, the Lord was teaching the people that the poison—their rebellion—was in their blood. They weren’t just rebelling. They were rebels. Sin wasn’t just something they did. They were sinners at the core. And what does sin do? It destroys. It kills. It brings God’s curse.

And the only relief they had is that the Lord told Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole and have everyone look at it to be healed. You see, the thing that represented their rebellion became the source of their healing when it was lifted up on a pole and people looked up to it.

So, Jesus is telling Nicodemus where to look to be born again. He’s pointing him to his cross. Do you see what happened? On the cross, Jesus became our rebellion. He came under God’s curse and took the rebels’ punishment in our place. You see, Jesus drank every drop of our poison. And what does he give us? The cup of forgiveness.

You see, Jesus was cast out into the ultimate spiritual wilderness, so we could come into the kingdom. That’s why the new birth isn’t something we do. It was Jesus who bled and cried and went through the greatest suffering to give sinners a new birth. This is something only God can give and produce. But that doesn’t mean we aren’t to investigate and search and ask whether we’ve been born again.

How Can I Know if I’ve Been Born Again? Or, What Should I See in My Life?

And the question we ask is, where are we looking? What are we rooted in? Other words, where do you find your completeness? What makes you secure? What assures you that you are a “right” person? Career? Relationships? Money? Power? Health? Independence? To be born again is to see that your life—your completeness, your security, your health, your everything—is Christ. Don’t you see it? He’s your victory. He’s your success. If you have him, you have everything. You are new *in him*.

But remember, God became man to turn us into new creatures. So, what do these new creatures do? Well, again, Nicodemus is helpful. Because after the crucifixion, we’re told that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus came to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body, so that they could prepare the body of burial.

Think about that. These two men approached the man who had just ordered Jesus’ death and asked for his body. They were openly identifying with a man who was crucified on the charge of treason against the world’s greatest power.

You see, Joseph and Nicodemus undertook a courageous act of love on behalf of Jesus. These were two wealthy, powerful men who risked their lives to serve Christ. They lowered themselves

to do the work normally reserved to slaves. And the only real explanation for what they did was that they had become new men because of Jesus. At their core, they were different. They soared to greater heights than ever before, because in their new lives, they served Christ confidently and in love.

There's nothing in this world that can ultimately and radically make us new. It's like trying to get clean with dirty water. Nothing within us can ever get at the root of our flaw. Our only hope is to look up to the one who came down from heaven to go up on a cross. And keep our eyes on him.

How can these things be, you ask? Lewis gives good advice: "Look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."⁶

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 227.

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