

John: Born-Again Christians

John 3:1-21

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We come now in our study to one of the most familiar passages in the Scripture in the third chapter of John. Hear now the inerrant, infallible word of God:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?' Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and 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 is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men

loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.'

Our Father in heaven, we ask now that Your blessing might attend our brief study of this passage of Scripture. Be our teacher, we pray, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Nicodemus, the new birth, born again Christians, that's what this great third chapter of John's gospel is all about. Nicodemus of Jerusalem, who came on this occasion to Jesus by night. Many commentators make a great deal of that, perhaps more than the text actually warrants, but it's a great thing to preach. He came by night, not in the day time, perhaps because he was afraid of being seen speaking with Jesus. There is certainly a transformation that takes place in Nicodemus, as we see him here in the third chapter of John's gospel, and then the Nicodemus who will appear again at the death and burial episodes and stories of Jesus at the end of the gospels. He was, in his own day, one of the most respected, no, the most respected teacher in all of Israel. You notice that Jesus calls him, not just a teacher of Israel, but "the teacher of Israel." Are you not the teacher of Israel? And some of the reasons for that are given to us in the opening verse of the passage. He's called a man of the Pharisees, a ruler of the Jews. He belongs to that select group of people, the Pharisees--technically the Sanhedrin--the Jewish ruling council. It speaks volumes as to the way in which was admired and respected and revered by his contemporaries. He was an outstanding teacher of God's words. Scrupulous, rigorous, one who, at least in the eyes of his contemporaries, understood the Scriptures, expounded the Scriptures, saw the relevant applications of the Scriptures.

If you had been in Jerusalem, say, visiting Jerusalem during one of the great feasts like Passover or Pentecost, it is said that Jerusalem might have swelled to three or four times its population size during one of those festivals. You are walking down the street, perhaps near to the temple precinct, and you might hear somebody saying, "Do you know who that man is?" And there would be a sense of awe and hush and reverence because *that* man is Nicodemus. That man is *the* teacher of Israel. And not from this passage but from other appearances in John, you cannot but admire this man, Nicodemus. He wasn't one of those antagonistic Pharisees.

He comes to Jesus, who as far as we know, was unschooled in the school of the Rabbis and addresses Jesus as *Rabbi*. He is this great man; this revered man, but he calls Jesus *Rabbi*. He respects Jesus' authority. He's heard something in the teaching of Jesus that draws from him this respect, this adoration, this adulation. He's seen, perhaps, some of the miracles Jesus has performed. Here is this man Nicodemus, worthy of respect and admiration; a good man, one admired by the whole of Israel for his intellect, for his powers of reasoning, and

for his ability to open up the Scriptures and expound them. They don't regard him as a hypocrite. They respect him; they admire him, but *this man—this man—*is outside the kingdom of God.

Now, if that doesn't shock you, you're not reading the same passage I'm reading. The third chapter of John's gospel is well known because it contains John 3:16, but this passage is shocking; it's absolutely shocking because the most respected teacher in all of Israel—the best preacher, the best communicator perhaps—the Billy Graham. Can I say that? We're experimenting, I can say that. The Billy Graham of Israel was not converted. Now, I didn't say that Billy Graham was not converted. I believe with all my heart that Billy Graham will be in heaven. But this man, Nicodemus, was not in the kingdom of heaven. He did not belong to the kingdom. He had not entered into the kingdom. He couldn't see the kingdom. He could talk about it and preach about it and expound about it, but in actual fact, Jesus says to him, and who said anything about always needing to be subtle? You know, there's nothing subtle about this passage. Jesus goes for the jugular. Do you note that? He says to this man, "Truly, truly I say unto you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." If ever there was a man in the New Testament who demonstrated what it was possible to be, in the most admirable terms in the community of God's people, and yet to be outside of that community, and yet to be outside of the kingdom of God—Nicodemus was that man. Three things I want us to see.

I. The absolute necessity of the new birth.

It's not because Nicodemus is a Pharisee that he needs to be born again. It's not because he belongs to a particular group of people that some despise that he needs to be born again. He needs to be born again because he is a fallen human being. Unless God works graciously in this man's life, to begin a new birth, then, verse 3, he will not be able to see, he will not be able to grasp, he will not be able to comprehend, he will not be able to understand the kingdom of God. Spiritually, he will be like a blind man.

Have you ever seen a blind man? Of course, you have. A man who is truly blind with a walking stick, a white cane, and he's going down the road and he's tapping things moving the stick back and forth from left to right. You don't read *USA Today*, I realized that just before I asked the question. I was on the plane and you know they give free papers, and I got *USA Today*. After Rosemary had read it, I read the sports section. You know, it's a long flight and you read the sports section. On the sports section is the picture of a young lady who is blind and she is intending to run the Chicago Marathon. Now, it may have been the New York Marathon because I'm not that interested in the sports pages, but this story grabbed me. This lady's husband runs alongside of her. It's the first time that this has ever been done, I think. In the course of this story was the incident where he had, for just a second or two, allowed his eyes to drift away not looking out for his

wife and shouting out, "Rain cover is open—or whatever." And she trips. There's an obstacle in her way and she trips and cuts herself rather badly. She's blind and she can't see. She needed somebody to point out to her every nook and cranny, every obstacle, every upturned stone in her path. Jesus is saying about Nicodemus, the teacher, the Billy Graham of Israel, He is saying to him, "You're blind, you cannot see the kingdom of God."

You see, belonging to the kingdom of God isn't a matter of intellectual qualification. It's a matter of spiritual understanding. "Lord, I was blind; I could not see in Thy marred visage any grace." That's *my* testimony. For eighteen years of my life I was blind; I couldn't see. I couldn't see Jesus as the Son of God. I couldn't see the way of salvation. I couldn't see the kingdom of God. I couldn't see any spiritual realities. Unless you receive the heavenly birth, you will not be able to enjoy or grasp what it means to belong to the kingdom of God.

You know, I was thinking as I was sitting next to Ligon while we were praying tonight, and you could hear—didn't you hear the choir singing below through whatever this floor is made of?—the sound of the choir was coming up. You couldn't see the choir but you could hear their tones and I thought, "You know, if we have faith we can hear the sounds of angels singing to the praise of God in heaven." Well, for eighteen years I didn't hear that. I never knew it existed. And Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, that by his speech he is actually revealing the blindness of his heart.

Do you get it? John is telling you a little story here. Because every time Jesus says something, Nicodemus is confirming what He says. Jesus says you will never be able to understand until the Spirit opens your eyes. And you know what Nicodemus says? "I don't understand." Unless God does something in your heart, you can't see the kingdom of God. And Nicodemus says, "I don't understand. What are you talking about?" I think John is having some fun here in a sort of way because John knows that Nicodemus was later converted. And you know the story of his conversion is this little dialogue in which Jesus is saying something and Nicodemus is saying, "I don't get it." And Jesus is nodding and saying, "Yes, exactly. Because you are spiritually blind." By his speech he reveals the blindness of his heart. There is an absolute necessity for the new birth, and not just for Nicodemus.

The point of the story is from the greater to the lesser. If it's true of Nicodemus, the greatest theologian of the first century up to that point, if it's true of the man who had spent his whole lifetime in the Old Testament Scriptures and his living was made by expounding those Scriptures, and if it was true of him, you know it is true of everybody. It's true of you, and you, and you, and you, and all of us. Unless you have been born again, unless you have experienced this spiritual rebirth, you're not in the kingdom of heaven. You may be a member of First Presbyterian Church, you may be an office bearer in First Presbyterian Church, you may be a deacon in First Presbyterian Church, you may be an elder in First

Presbyterian Church, you may be a minister in First Presbyterian Church, but if you haven't been born again, you're not a member of the kingdom of God. That shocks me. I'm shocked by what I'm saying, but that is exactly what Jesus is saying in John 3.

II. The extraordinary nature of the new birth.

The second thing. The extraordinary nature of the new birth. What is it that Jesus is speaking about that Nicodemus cannot understand? He is speaking of a work that God does in a sovereign and supernatural way. The language that John uses here is this: Unless a man is born again. Literally, it is *born from above*, as the margins in your Bibles will probably say to you. - And by the way, in this little experiment you will need to bring your own Bibles. That's what it means to be an evangelical Christian. You have a Bible of your own and you bring it. - Literally, it's born from above. Something supernatural has to come down, has to penetrate into this world. It brings a sense of humbling, doesn't it? Something that he needs, that he lacks, that he cannot provide for himself, that the salvation of God comes by grace, by grace alone, it comes from above, it doesn't come from some inner spiritual longing or yearning or aspiration.

On BBC recently, the thought for the day came from some Hindu mystic, an expert on the *Bhagava Gita*, giving his very sophisticated pontifications on the radio, all boiling down to this, that spirituality is some inner spark, that if only we stopped and meditated long enough, we would find. It's in you. And Jesus is saying, "It's not in you. It has to come from outside of you, from all together outside of you, that brings a work of spiritual illumination." That's what we're being taught in verses 1-17. There's a reference here to the Old Testament, to the story of when the people of God are being bitten by snakes, and Moses raises that symbolic brass snake, so that by looking at it, something outside of themselves, they would be healed. And Jesus is saying, just like they looked at that brass snake, so you must look at something outside of yourselves. There is life for a look at the crucified One. There is life at this moment for you. I know you know that hymn. It's a Baptist hymn but you know it. There is life for a look at the crucified One.

He also mentions, in verse 5, and there are a variety of metaphors that are weaved through this passage, but here it mentions water and the spirit, "And Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit." That's probably an allusion to Ezekiel 36-37 and the waters of purification that were used in Old Testament rituals in the whole process of confessing and pardoning of sin. And Jesus is saying here that a spiritual work of God from outside of yourselves, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is an absolute requirement for the new birth.

And what incentive or motivation do I have? How can I be persuaded that God

will grant me what I need? How do I know that He won't leave me in this destitute condition? John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." He loves the lost. He gives the best. He asks the least. All He asks for is faith, and even that faith, as Paul will go on to explain in the book of Ephesians, that faith is a gift of God. So before we even exercise faith, there has to be this spiritual work of renewal and regeneration within our hearts. Do you remember how John goes on to put it in his first epistle? "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God." What manner of love. And he uses a word, a Greek word, that has a very special meaning. In classical Greek, it's a word that means from 'out of this world' or from 'another country.' The love of God comes from outside of this world.

I was reading on the plane, not just the sports pages, a book about C.S. Lewis about his involvement with BBC, the British Broadcasting Company, during the Second World War. Lewis had written a book in 1938, part of that space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*. This is science fiction, about life on other planets, written at the outbreak of the Second World War, in very dark, somber days. And someone at BBC had just read *Out of The Silent Planet*, and she wrote to Lewis and said, "I began to think, really think, that there might be more to this universe than just this little earth of ours." Reading that book took her outside of herself, and in a sense, that's what Jesus is trying to get across to Nicodemus. Because the only hope that he has lies not in himself, and not in this world, but from above. The sovereign love and grace of God has to break through and take hold of that stony heart and transform it and make it into a new heart.

III. The essential evidence of the new birth.

In the third place, what is the essential evidence of the new birth? What happens when a man or woman is born again? New desires come, new affections are expressed, men and women and boys and girls who are born again, who experience this sovereign work of regeneration, they love God's word, they love God's people, they love to worship, they love to serve Jesus Christ. That's what Jesus is speaking about here. God comes, He gives a new heart, He drives out the old. Men and women are delivered from the bondage and addiction to all kinds of things, and what is the proof of that? Verse 18 says they are set free from condemnation and they are given His pardon. Verse 19 says they are brought out of darkness and they walk in His light. Verses 15-16 say they are raised from spiritual death and enter into the joy of experiencing eternal life.

The essential evidence that I've received that birth that comes down from heaven, is that I am trusting the Savior Jesus Christ, who came down from heaven to die for my sins, and to entrust myself to Him as my Lord and Master. Bishop J.C. Ryle writes of this chapter that "A man may be ignorant of many things and still be a Christian, but if a man is ignorant of the things that we find in

John 3, then he is on the high road that leads to destruction.”

But you know there are two sides to John 3:16, aren't there. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes should not perish but have everlasting life.”

But if you don't believe, you will perish. If you don't believe, you will go to hell. If you don't trust in the living Savior, the eternal Son of God, there is only perdition.

But you need not ever experience that perdition. You need not. Because the love of God has been revealed to you in Jesus Christ. Trust Him. Trust Him with all your heart, that's what Jesus is saying. He's saying it to Nicodemus, and He's saying it to you and to me. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, as we barely scratch the surface of this beautiful and wonderful chapter, we thank You for it and we thank You especially for Your love, Your love that is expressed to us in the coming and life and death and resurrection and ascension and coming again of Jesus Christ Your Son. We dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. Hear us, O Lord, as we cast ourselves upon You, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

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