

"To Be Born Again"
(John 3:1-21)
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March 18, 2018

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Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

We are continuing in John's gospel and in today's story, Jesus encounters a man named Nicodemus and engages in an important conversation with him. Let's dive right in.

Nicodemus, a religious seeker.

Nicodemus was a genuine and sincere religious seeker. He was a Pharisee. That would have meant that he was a part of the religious elite. He was well educated. He was respected in the community. He was a leader, a person who could speak with authority on all matters related to his religion. He would have been a teacher, so people would have gone to him to learn and receive religious advice and counsel. He was pious. As a member of the group of religious leaders known as the Pharisees, he would have fasted regularly, tithed his earnings faithfully, and would have known doctrine and theology inside and out.

But even though he was so accomplished as a person, as a leader, as a theologian, something about Jesus caught his attention that Nicodemus sought out an audience with him. What was it? It was a few things.

Something about his religion or the way he was doing his religion was lacking. How do we know that? Well, if your religion, if your faith completely satisfies you, leaving nothing else to be desired, you would not go seeking elsewhere for religious meaning or truth. If Nicodemus was completely content with his Judaism, he would not have sought out Jesus. So we know that there was something about Jesus that grabbed his attention.

Nicodemus heard his teaching. How do we know that? Well, he says, "We know that you are a teacher that has come from God." One of the many places Jesus taught was in the temple. So surely their paths would have crossed. Nicodemus was likely in the audience when Jesus was teaching. What were some of the things that Jesus would have taught? When we scan all four gospels two or three things become prominent.

1. The arrival of God's kingdom. Jesus would frequently teach that with his own arrival on the scene, God's kingdom had come. So he equated the coming of God's kingdom with his own coming. And because God's kingdom had dawned, people must strive to enter his kingdom and the means to do that is to repent. God's kingdom is a holy kingdom and only holy people can enter. And the only way to enter that kingdom is by having our sins washed and forgiven.
2. And then Jesus taught a new ethic of God's kingdom. We see this aspect most clearly in what's called the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew chapters 5-7. Some have called this sermon the sermon of the upsidedown kingdom because the teaching is so counter-cultural, not only to the culture of Jesus' day, but to all cultures of all time. Let me give you a few highlights from it.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **(Matthew 5:3)**

²⁷ You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **(Matthew 5:27-28)**

³⁸ You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." **(Matthew 5:38-39)**

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” **(Matthew 5:43–44)**

His ethical teaching was radical, unlike anything people had ever heard. It’s a teaching that’s still considered as the best ethical teaching ever, even today.

3. A lot of teaching about himself. Now this is the strange thing. Most teachers would teach about an ideal, about God, about an ethic, about a new way of life, and not really spend too much time, if any at all, talking about themselves. But Jesus was different. His teaching on the kingdom of God and his teaching on a new kingdom ethic, and his teaching about God, all of his teaching was essentially about himself. Let me give you just one example. Listen to how many times the first person pronoun is repeated in these words. (John 15:1–8) “1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

All religions contain great truths, but they’re certainly not all equal. Only the shallowest of understanding would lead someone to that conclusion. All of the other religious leaders of the major religions pointed to a way, they showed people to important truths, they also taught how to know God. But only in Jesus, do we find a person that says, I am the way, I am the truth, I am God. If someone teaches like that, you’d listen. And that’s why Nicodemus comes to him.

But then, Nicodemus also witnessed the signs that Jesus performed. Up to this point in the gospel the only miracle that Jesus performed was at a private wedding when he turned water into wine. But not every miracle that Jesus performed was recorded and each gospel writer’s goal was not to present a comprehensive catalogue of the miracles. They had the freedom to record the ones they thought were significant to the account they were trying to give. But in any case, Nicodemus had witnessed for himself or at least had heard eyewitness accounts of the signs and miracles that Jesus had been performing. And he correctly concludes from the teaching and from the signs that Jesus must be from God. God himself must be with this person.

For Nicodemus to make this conclusion is remarkable. Do you know why? Because on almost all other occasions, the religious leaders of the day, didn’t come to that conclusion. In fact, they came to the exact opposite, conclusion. They said he came from the devil and that he was doing these things by the power of the devil. Even though it was logically impossible for them to arrive at that conclusion, for them, that illogical conclusion was better than coming to the conclusion that Jesus was from God.

Now what about for some of you? I would think that some of you are here because you're not very different from Nicodemus. Like him, you also consider yourself to be religious and the life of Jesus and his teachings are compelling to you. Or perhaps you don't consider yourself to be very religious, well that's okay too. Both the religious and the irreligious are more than welcome to listen and learn and ask questions. And Jesus welcomes you and so do we.

There's one detail I forgot to mention that I think is important. John tells us that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. Now, I don't want to read too much into this, but scholars say that John is such a careful writer that this has to be more than just a time stamp. There's something significant about this detail. It's one of two things, or maybe both. One, Nicodemus came at night because he didn't want to make himself known. He didn't want to reveal himself to the public, that as one of the religious leaders, though he should have been against Jesus, he was intrigued with him. He wanted an audience with him and so he sought him out at night. The other meaning that John could be alluding to is that the night refers to the state of his soul. He had not yet seen the light. He had not yet come to see Jesus for who he really was. If we look down to verse 19 John writes, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed, but whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God."

Now even though Nicodemus comes slinking during the night, Jesus welcomes him and engages him. He doesn't say, "Go back under the rock from which you came!" He doesn't say, "You coward! Come back during business hours. We're closed for the day." No, he welcomes him. If you're not a Christian, then know that Jesus welcomes you to come and ask questions, as a genuine seeker. And if you are a Christian then this is the open-hearted, open-minded approach that we should take with all seekers.

The heart of the matter: you must be born again.

Now, how does Jesus respond? He says you have to be born again. Or born from above. If you want to see the Kingdom of God, which is another way of saying that if you want to be a citizen of the Kingdom, there is only one way and that is to be born again. But at the same time, Jesus says, "if you want to see the kingdom of God." And what he's saying is that it will require more than physical sight to see God's kingdom. It requires spiritual sight. And the way to gain that spiritual sight to see God's kingdom, is by being born again.

This stimulates a robust discussion about the idea of being born again. Nicodemus asks the expected questions. What does that exactly mean? How does one do that? And so on. Specifically he asks, "How can someone be born again when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" Most likely Nicodemus had no idea what Jesus was talking about and so he replies with some degree of sarcasm.

Jesus elaborates saying, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. What does that mean? Well one thing we know for sure is this. To be born again or to be born from above is the same as to be born of water and spirit. Does that make sense? To be born again is to be born of the water and spirit. What exactly does that phrase mean? The spirit part is a lot easier to understand. To be born of the spirit is to be reborn in our spirit, it's to be renewed, recreated in our spirit. In the Old Testament, water was symbolic of renewal or cleansing, especially when it's found alongside the word spirit. So to be born of water and spirit is to be spiritually renewed, cleansed, revived, and given new life.

Now why is this important? It's important because in describing spirituality with this 'born again' language, he's telling us something about how Christianity works. Many people view religion in one of two ways. One, getting out of hell and getting into heaven. Right? No one wants to end up in hell and everyone wants to end up in heaven, so we need religion to make sure we get to the right place. The other reason people seek religion is to become a better person. So, you may hear something like this, or you may have said it yourself. A person grew up in church as a child, but then eventually outgrew church when they became young adults, but once they get a little older, get married and have children, they come back to church, not for themselves, but for their children. Church is the place where they teach good morals. A little bit of religion, but not too much, will be good for the kids.

Well, when Jesus says you must be born again, he's throwing those two notions out the window. Look at Nicodemus. He's religious, in fact he's the most religious, and in and through his religion he wants to be a better person. And I'm certain he wants to make sure that when he dies and stands before his maker, he's be guided to the correct door that leads to heaven. Yet Jesus tells the most religious person in the land, "You must be born again!" Why? Because Christianity and life for that matter, is not about being religious, and it's not merely about getting to heaven, as important as those things are. It's not about getting a little religion. It's not about brushing up on my morals. It's not about my personal self-improvement project. Ravi Zacharias, the well-known Christian speaker and apologist said it like this, "Jesus didn't come to make bad people good. He came to make dead people live." I used to tell people that Christianity is like a person in the middle of an ocean, unable to reach shore, not having enough strength to make it to land, until a boat comes and throws him a life preserver. He grabs hold and Jesus pulls you in. I thought that was the right way to share the Christian message until I heard RC. Sproul say something like this. Christianity is not like a boat coming to save a drowning man. Christianity is a boat dragging the bottom of the lake for a dead man, finding him, bringing him to shore and breathing new life into him. That's what it means to be born again.

How then does one become born again?

I thought you'd never ask? Just as the child in the womb has no control over being born. She's subject to forces outside of herself. She doesn't bear herself. She is born, or her mother bore her. So, it is with being born again. We cannot bear ourselves again. We cannot renew ourselves, we cannot reborn ourselves. It must be done to us. We are the ones being born, someone else is "borning" us, is bearing us. So if we cannot make ourselves be born again, how then do we become born again? Believe! Look at verse 12.

¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you **believe** if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who **believes** may have eternal life in him." (**John 3:12–15**)

Jesus, incredulously says, unless you believe in me, you cannot be born again, you cannot have eternal life, you cannot enter the kingdom, but if you do believe in me, then you can have all these things. And in saying this he shares a story from the life and times of the Israelite people under the leadership of Moses in the book of Number, chapter 21. What happened there? Well, as usual the Israelites started to complain against God, regretting that they had been taken out of Egypt. They complain that they had no bread and no water and whatever food they had, they detested.

Then as a punishment, the Lord send venomous snakes that bit the people and many of the people died. This causes the people to repent of their rebellion against God. And God tells Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; and anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." Moses did what he was instructed. When the people were bit, they looked at the snake and they lived." What a strange story.

What was the sin? The sin of grumbling against God. What was the punishment? The punishment was death. Poisonous snakes. What was the cure? What was the solution? Just look at the bronze snake that was put on a pole. Just look at it. Believe the means that God provided for your healing, for your forgiveness. Just look at the snake.

Jesus tells us here, it really wasn't that there was any inherent power in a bronze statue of a snake that could heal. The snake was there to be an instrument of faith. The snake was provided so they could exercise faith. The snake was given to point to the ultimate thing that would be lifted up. The snake pointed to Jesus. Like the bronze snake, he too would be lifted up because of the sins of the people. And just as the Israelites only needed to look in faith upon the snake, so too all we need to do is to look upon Jesus, the Son of Man, on the cross, with faith. Then we too shall be saved. We too will be born again. Throw away your religion. Throw away your self-improvement projects. Throw away your attempts to improve your morality. Be born again, be born again by looking to Jesus.

Let's pray.