

John's Gospel - How to Be Born Again

by John Vissers

Jesus teaches Nicodemus that he must experience a radical spiritual change, a new birth, to see the kingdom of God.

Duration: 33:30

Scripture: John 3:1-8

Topics: "Born Again"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the passage from John's Gospel, specifically verses 1-3. The sermon begins by introducing Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council, who comes to Jesus at night. The preacher highlights the significance of Nicodemus seeking Jesus and acknowledging him as a teacher from God. Jesus responds to Nicodemus by declaring the necessity of being born again in order to see the kingdom of God. The preacher emphasizes the concept of spiritual rebirth and the opportunity for a fresh start in life through Jesus.

Transcript

John's Gospel, where we're going to read the first eight verses, although this evening I'm only going to get as far as verse 3, the end of verse 3 in the message tonight. I was working diligently this week on this marvelous passage, one of the richest passages in all of the New Testament, and I came out after a number of hours and realized I had two or three sermons, and I decided I better not preach them all tonight. So we're only going to take the first three verses tonight, but for our reading, as listed in the bulletin, we'll read to the end of the eighth verse.

So let's hear God's Word as we read from this marvelous passage. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.

In reply, Jesus declared, I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. 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.

Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at

my saying, you must be born again.

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.

Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word tonight. Let's pray together. Prepare our hearts and our minds, O Lord, to receive your word this night.

Silence within us any voice but your own voice, that hearing your word we may also obey your will for our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

During the past two weeks the world has marveled at the birth of the septuplets which were born to a young couple south of the border. And the birth of these seven babies has been heralded as nothing less than a medical miracle, and indeed in many ways it is. And one of the wonderful things that seems to have been picked up in the media is something of the Christian testimony of the family, of the parents and the grandparents of this family.

These are folks who seem to have faith in Christ and whose faith has sustained them. And so if ever the phrase the miracle of birth somehow meant anything, it seems to mean something with reference to this spectacular event which we've all witnessed and which we've all read about and seen reported in the media. But as miraculous as the birth of seven babies at one time may seem to be to us, our passage tonight introduces us to an even greater miracle.

Because it introduces us to the miracle of rebirth. It introduces us to the miracle of being born again. Jesus says that a person must be born again, that a person can be born again, that a person can have a spiritual rebirth, that a person can have a new beginning, a fresh start in life.

And that's what we want to look at this evening as we come to the third chapter of John's Gospel and particularly verses 1 to 3. And I want us to work through just a few questions together as we seek to unfold the first part of this passage. First of all, who comes to Jesus? Secondly, when does he come to Jesus? Thirdly, why does he come to Jesus? And then fourthly, what does Jesus tell him? And these are the four questions I think on which we can hang our understanding of the opening verses of this third chapter of John's Gospel. First of all then, who comes to see Jesus? The passage opens by introducing us to Nicodemus.

Verse 1, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. Now Nicodemus is mentioned at least three times in the Gospel of John. In John chapter 7 and verse 50, it's Nicodemus who defends Jesus when the other Pharisees and the chief priests want to bring Jesus in and want to charge him.

It's Nicodemus who speaks up and who wonders whether this is such a good idea and comes, as it were, to Jesus' defense. And then at the end, or towards the end of John's Gospel, in chapter 19 and verse 39, it's Nicodemus who accompanies Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus. After Jesus has been taken down from the cross, it's Nicodemus who comes with Joseph and he brings myrrh and aloes, it says, that were required for the burial.

So this is Nicodemus, but it's in this chapter, in chapter 3, that Nicodemus is introduced to us for the first time. Now the first thing that we learn about Nicodemus is that he was a Pharisee. He was a Pharisee.

Now we usually think of the Pharisees in a negative way. We usually think of the word Pharisee as a synonym for the word hypocrite. And it's true that the Pharisees get a lot of bad press in the New Testament.

They're often criticized by Jesus, and rightly so, and indeed, justly so. But one of the things we need to understand is that the Pharisees were serious about their faith. They were serious about their religion.

They believed that the Old Testament was the revealed Word of God. They believed that the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of the law, contained an inspired code of conduct, which was to be interpreted, which was to be believed, which was to be practiced literally, that it was to be kept at every point along the way. And of course, this is precisely what often tied them up in knots, because they would be so intent on trying to keep the rules and the regulations that sometimes they ended up distorting the real meaning of God's law.

And so the rules and the regulations were modified and added to rules and regulations which laid all kinds of burdens on people, rules and regulations for which all kinds of exceptions had to be made. And it was the job of the Pharisees to see that they were kept and that they kept them themselves. And it was often their zeal, in their zeal, that they went too far.

Nicodemus, it says, was a Pharisee. But notice that he's also a member of the Jewish ruling council. He was a ruler of the Jews.

This means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. Now the Sanhedrin, we need to understand, was the highest legislative, judicial, administrative body in Jerusalem. Now it was true that under Roman rule they had lost a great deal of their power, but make no mistake, they still held a great deal of power and exercised that power over the people in Jerusalem and in the surrounding environs.

They were a powerful group. This was the place where power politics was played out in Jerusalem. Nicodemus, you see, was an insider.

Nicodemus was someone who was in the loop. He knew what was going on. He knew the comings and the goings of people.

And so it's important for us to understand who this Nicodemus was. He was a Pharisee. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

So when Nicodemus is told by Jesus that he must be born again, we need to understand that he's talking to someone who is powerful. He's talking to someone who is well-educated. He's talking to someone who has a great deal of authority.

He's talking to someone who is highly respected. He's talking to someone who has substance and who has means. He's not talking to someone who's given up on life, who has nothing to lose by coming to Jesus.

In fact, Nicodemus has everything to lose. He's talking to someone who's made a life for himself, someone who takes pride in looking after himself, in meeting his obligations, and seeing that his responsibilities are fulfilled at every point along the way. Someone who looks after those for whom he's responsible.

Someone who feels that he can justify himself. And Jesus says to this man, you must be born again. You must start over.

Because unless you are born again, you're not going to see the kingdom of God. Unless you start over, unless you are born again, you're not going to enter into the kingdom of God. And suddenly, you see, we begin to realize just how radical is Jesus teaching.

Because Jesus is saying, everyone, without exception, there are no exceptions here, everyone must experience this spiritual rebirth if they're going to enter into the kingdom of God. This is just not for people who've hit rock bottom and have nowhere else to go. This is not just for people who want a second chance, who can't make it any longer on their own.

This is for people who think they're going to get into the kingdom of God because of who they are. That somehow they think they can do it themselves. Those are the people, Jesus says, who must be born again.

So Jesus says a person has to experience this spiritual rebirth. And we begin now to understand, you see, the real meaning of this passage if we identify with Nicodemus. We like to put Nicodemus at arm's length, but if we understand this passage right, we begin to see that we are Nicodemus.

And Nicodemus is us. When does Nicodemus come to see Jesus? Verse two says, this man came to Jesus by night. Now this may just be an interesting note on the part of John the Gospel writer, but it seems to me that there is some significance to this.

Because in John chapter 19 and verse 39, one of the places where Nicodemus is mentioned, Nicodemus is identified there as someone who came, who had earlier visited Jesus at night. He was the one who had come to Jesus at night. He was known, in other words, by this nocturnal conversation that he had with Jesus.

Now a number of reasons have been advanced as to why, in fact, the commentators think this is significant. A number of reasons have been advanced by them concerning the significance of this fact. Some suggest that Nicodemus may have come under cover of darkness because, in fact, he didn't want to be seen.

He didn't want to be seen associating with Jesus. He had a great deal to lose if he had been seen in the wrong company. He wanted to keep his conversation with Jesus a secret.

He wanted to talk to Jesus off the record, so to speak, so he wouldn't compromise his own position. He was afraid of what his colleagues, what his friends may have thought. That's one possibility.

Another possibility is simply that Nicodemus may have come at night because this was the most convenient time to have a conversation with Jesus. During the day, Jesus was busy in ministry, preaching and teaching and healing, busy with the crowds out in public, people pressing up against him all of the time, flocking around him, and there simply seemed to be no opportunity to sit down and have a long heart-to-heart conversation with Jesus. And so Nicodemus comes at night.

Another possibility, and this is advanced by a number of the studies of the Gospel of John, is that Nicodemus comes at night because this was the traditional time when conversations took place concerning the interpretation of the law of God. This was the time that the rabbis and the scholars and the

teachers would sit around together and discuss the meaning of the law. This is when there was serious study that took place in the long, uninterrupted hours of the evening.

So it would only seem natural that this rabbi Jesus would be involved in such conversations in the evening and that Nicodemus might come by night to speak to him. Well, I don't know what you make of each of those possibilities. All of them may indeed well be true, but I want to suggest to you that there's something more going on here, because in John's Gospel, the idea of the night and the idea of darkness symbolizes something, and it symbolizes evil, and particular events are often said against the background of the night, and indeed the fact that they happen at night is emphasized in the text of John's Gospel.

The most obvious example of this is in John chapter 13. In John chapter 13 and verse 30, Jesus is eating with his disciples in the upper room. He predicts his betrayal.

He points to Judas as the possible one who will betray him. Judas eats some bread and then he leaves, and this is how John the Gospel writer describes it. After Judas goes, the end of the paragraph reads as follows, It was night.

Now it was night, but there's something more going on here, because the darkness is beginning to descend. The evil of betrayal is beginning to unfold. The Son of God was going to be betrayed, and so in the Gospel of John, you see this idea of the night carries with it this reality of evil, this reality of the darkness, the kingdom of darkness, and in contrast, throughout the Gospel, Jesus is described as the light.

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. Chapter 1 verse 5. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. Chapter 1 verse 9. I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of light. Chapter 8 and verse 12. I want to suggest to you that Nicodemus comes at night, and John the Gospel writer is emphasizing to us that this represents his spiritual state.

He is groping in the dark, and Jesus is about to explode his darkness with an unbelievable ray of light when he says, you must be born again. Those words drop like a light into the midst of the darkness of Nicodemus's life. Spiritual rebirth is like being delivered from darkness into light, and Nicodemus is about to experience, about to understand, about to hear Jesus say that his darkness will be pierced by the light of the reality of Jesus.

And again, I want to suggest to you that if we understand this text aright, if we understand this passage aright, we begin to understand that we are Nicodemus, not only in the sense of his being a Pharisee, not only in the sense of all that he brings, but as he comes in the night, so we too find ourselves often in spiritual darkness, needing the light of Jesus to shine in upon us. Why does he come to see Jesus? Verse 2, Nicodemus says to Jesus, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. Nicodemus, you see, recognizes that there is something special about Jesus.

He's been hearing about Jesus, no doubt, in John chapter 2. Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. He clears the temple of the money changers and the merchants at the end of chapter 2. These were dramatic acts, but Nicodemus seems to understand that these are more than simply dramatic acts, that these are signs, that these are more than spectacular events, that there is

something going on here, that these are signs that are pointing to some greater reality, that there's something going on here in the life and ministry of Jesus, that God has to be at work in the midst of all of this. No one, Nicodemus says, can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

And we need to understand at this point that Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, that Nicodemus, as a ruler of the Jews, that Nicodemus, as one coming in the night, coming in the midst of spiritual darkness, nevertheless is a genuine seeker. There's no indication in this passage that Nicodemus has come to argue with Jesus, that he's come somehow to set a trap for Jesus in some religious controversy. He seems rather to be genuinely impressed with Jesus, genuinely seeking after Jesus, genuinely wanting to know more.

He wants to have some of his questions answered. He wants to find out more about who this Jesus is, and so he takes this risk and he decides to find out more about this Jesus, and he decides to talk to Jesus directly. And Jesus doesn't turn him away.

Jesus never turns a genuine seeker away. He engages Nicodemus in conversation. He opens himself to be found by Nicodemus.

And now we come to the very heart of the passage, for the fourth question is, what does Jesus tell Nicodemus? Verse 3, truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Let those words fall into your mind as if you had never heard them before. One of the things, of course, that has happened in our culture and in our world today is these words, born again, have been used again and again and again, so they somehow seem to have lost their meaning, or people speak them with disdain upon their lips.

But listen to what Jesus says, truly, truly I say to you, unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God. Do you see what's happened here? Nicodemus has come for a quiet evening conversation with Jesus. He's come as a genuine seeker, but very quickly Jesus has turned the tables on the inquirer.

And this is a pattern that we see again and again as Jesus encounters people in the New Testament. Jesus gets right to the point. He cuts right to the chase.

He gets right to the bottom line. And he says, the miracles that I'm performing, the signs that are taking place, are not really the point. The point is what happens inside of you.

The point is what happens inside a person's spiritual life, a person's inner life. And the statement seems strange at first. And Jesus speaks a phrase which is hard to understand.

You must be born again. Now what do these words mean? Well, in the Greek, the way that they're used, they indicate clearly two aspects or two different things. First of all, to be born again means to begin again.

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is you have to begin again. You have to begin your life over. Everything that you bring to this point is not going to enable you to see the kingdom of God.

You must begin again. It means that you have to go undergo such a radical change. It's like a new birth.

It's like starting life over again. It is something which happens to your soul, which can only be described with this marvelous language of rebirth, the language of new life, the language of eternal life. Because you see, Jesus wants us to understand that beginning again is like beginning life from the very starting point.

It is Christ recreating us, making us into new people, giving us a fresh start. It is the language of regeneration, of new birth, of new life, of bringing death from death, new life. It is the language of conversion, of turning around, moving in one direction and turning around and moving in an other direction, turning from self and turning to Christ in faith.

And Jesus says that's how you see the kingdom of God. You have to start over again. You have to set aside everything that you bring and start over again.

And the second aspect of this phrase, to be born again, means to be born from above. It not only connotes the idea of getting a fresh start, of starting from the beginning again, but it's also being born from above. The phrase clearly indicates that it is being born from above.

In other words, this is something that God does. To be born again means to be born by the Spirit of God from above. You don't enter the kingdom of God through physical birth.

You enter the kingdom of God through spiritual birth. Jesus says you have to be born of water and the Spirit, and we'll come back in a later message to see what that means. But it means basically you have to be cleansed by the Word of God and recreated by the Spirit of God.

Now I want you to think about what this meant for this man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus, Jesus says, you know the law. You know the law of God.

You've spent your life, you spend your life trying to interpret the law, trying to understand the law of God, trying to meet the obligations of the law at every point. You are a man of power, Nicodemus. You sit in the Sanhedrin.

You snap your fingers and people's lives are changed. You live, however, in darkness. You may be a genuine seeker, but you live in darkness.

And the only way to enter the kingdom of God, Nicodemus, is through this radical spiritual change which must take place in the very depths of your heart and your soul. You must be born again. You have to become a new person, and that's something that you can never do for yourself, Nicodemus.

You can't fix yourself up. You can't recreate yourself. You can't somehow slap another coat of paint over your life and think that everything is going to be okay and that you'll make it in the end.

But Nicodemus, you have to be born again. You have to begin again and you have to be born again by the Spirit of God. And I don't know where you are tonight in your spiritual journey or what you bring tonight as you come to this service and as we prepare to come to the Lord's table, but I know that there's that tendency in all of us to somehow think that there's something in us, that there's something that we can do that's going to make it all work out in the end all right.

That somehow, if we just try a little harder, that somehow if we just learn the right things, that somehow if we just do the right things, if we just read the right books, if we just get into the right relationship, if somehow we just do something, then we'll find ourselves on that firm foundation that will allow us to enter into the kingdom of God and to see the fullness of life and to experience the fullness of life. And what Jesus is saying in this passage, my friends, is that that's a fool's game. Because the only way that one can enter in to the kingdom of God is through spiritual rebirth.

And if we want to experience the fullness of life, that life for which we all long in the kingdom of God, it's something which God does in our hearts and in our lives. We have to be born from above by the Spirit of God who recreates us, who gives us not a fixed up old life, but a new life. A new life.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come. And that's what this table is about.

It is about beginning again. It is about being born from above. It is about finding the fullness of life from turning from our own sin and turning to trust in Christ.

And if you've never made that commitment tonight, may I invite you to do it as we prepare to come to the Lord's table. Let's pray. Lord, these are such familiar words to so many of us.

We read them. We hear them. We think we understand them.

But help us tonight, oh God, to be open to the work of your Holy Spirit in our lives. Perhaps some of us need to come to you for the first time and to open our lives and to say to you, Lord Jesus, I need you. I confess my sin.

I confess that I've been trying to work out my own life thinking that somehow that's going to work out. And I need to let you come in and by your Spirit recreate me and give me new life. And Lord, some of us are here tonight and we've been Christians for a long time perhaps.

And we realize that we have fallen into a pattern where we have forgotten that the reality of this new life is the work of your Spirit in us. And so we pray that you would help us to open our lives to you. And as we come to this table, that you would work in us, help us to confess and by faith to receive you anew.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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