

Born Again

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[0 : 0 0] I have to confess that when I first read John 3 this week to prepare for preaching on it, I instantly thought of a line from The Weatherman. I don't know how many people have seen that Nicolas Cage, Michael Caine movie, but Nicolas Cage plays a weatherman who's constantly getting the weather wrong.

And there's a behind-the-scenes time when he's with the producer, and he says, you know, they're saying, why do you get the weather wrong all the time? And he said, it's wind. It blows around. Who knows why it blows one way or the other?

How can I get it right? It's just wind. Anyway. But that's not a very helpful analogy to anything in the sermon. More seriously, you know, really, the sermon today is about the fact that you can't be half-pregnant.

Ask any of the women here who are currently carrying children. Lisa or Anne have carried children. You can't be half-pregnant. You're either pregnant or you're not.

And that really, this is the sort of, like, a crude idea on my part, to try to get behind, to try to get to what the gospel is telling us today. We human beings, we naturally want to think of Christianity as a religion, in religious terms, with things that are familiar to us as religious people, and we naturally drift towards desires for illumination, for insight, for spiritual experience, for ritual.

[1 : 3 6] And in the midst of these human and fallen desires for these things, Jesus insults us and insults our representative Nicodemus by saying it is more like pregnancy and you can't be half-pregnant.

Turn with me, if you could, to John chapter 3. John chapter 3, verse 1. If you're like me, using the Pew Bibles, it's on page 920.

And I'm going to begin, you know, with reading at verse 1. And this is how this story goes.

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 are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with them.

We'll just have to pause here for a second, put your fingers in the Bible, or you could keep reading it. Nicodemus, he has just said something that you could say on CBC radio, you could say it in the Globe and Mail, you could say it probably in the faculty club of the University of Ottawa, you could say it at a cocktail hour, and nobody would get upset with you.

[2 : 5 5] Who's Jesus? You know what? Jesus must be a great prophet, and he's done some really, really wonderful things. Like, that won't get you in trouble anywhere. And in a sense, what we have with Nicodemus is we have the type of guy who would effortlessly, he's had the fortunate, he's been fortunate to have had the right parents, and the right grandparents, and the right great-grandparents, and maybe currently he's on the board of directors of CBC, and he's also on the board of directors of the University of Toronto, and he's also on the board of directors of a prestigious charity, and he's probably a co-owner of a prestigious corporation here in Canada, and he's gone to the right universities in Canada with the appropriate amount of time out of the country, but back here in Canada.

And just as I paint this type of picture, that's the type of guy that Nicodemus is. He's the type of guy on one level that, you know, on one hand, we'd half suspect that a guy like that doesn't need God, and that if he ever showed any interest in our church, we'd want to, you know, give him some type of prestigious position, like not as the overhead guy, but something a little bit more prestigious than that.

And he's sort of, that's the type of guy that Nicodemus is. And you can just imagine that John is a guy who's always filled with symbolism. And so John, as he's maybe trying to think back on some story about Jesus that can try to communicate these truths, and he's already warned us, he has literally hundreds of thousands of stories he could tell about Jesus.

He thinks of this one story about Nicodemus that also has this other wonderful thing, is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. And that means something else about Nicodemus. It is that Nicodemus represents the seeker who is culturally and religiously secure, who is seeking the light, but is not prepared yet to leave the darkness.

And that describes so many of our generation, and maybe some of us, seeking the light, but not prepared to leave the darkness. And so he says something that will not get him in trouble anywhere, virtually in our culture.

[5 : 10] You know, Jesus, he's a prophet, he's a great man, he's done wonderful things. You could say that anywhere, and nobody would get really upset at you. So let's see how Jesus reacts to this type of guy.

Remember, he's like, you know, on the board of CBC, all of these things. How does Jesus react? Jesus reacts almost rude. He cuts him off, and changes the entire course of the conversation.

So Nicodemus, with his spiritual searching, his culturally correct and religiously correct sentiments and affirmations about Jesus, all of these types of things, Jesus, in a sense, cuts him off and says, you know what, these things will get you nowhere.

These things will get you nowhere. He says this, verse 3, Jesus answered and said to him, Amen, Amen. And in our version of the Bible, we see most assuredly, it's translating Amen, Amen.

In the King James Version, Verily, Verily. It's like a double, triple exclamation mark. In a sense, the things that follow could all be put in capital letters. Amen, Amen.

[6 : 14] And I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. You see, Nicodemus wants to start with religious quest.

He wants to start from his position of prestige and authority, his easy access to cultural arbiters. He wants to engage in a theological discussion and maybe from the basis of popular religious concepts, engage in a theological discussion with Jesus that might lead to greater illumination.

And in the midst of all of that, Jesus says, Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God. And this word, born again, has a very wonderful double meaning to it.

And you have to think that's one of the reasons that Jesus uses this word. First of all, born literally means born. I mean, it literally means, that's what I mean by the example of pregnancy, that Jesus is saying, Listen, you think that religious quest at the heart of it is a matter of ideas, talking about ideas and experiences, talking about experiences, getting an illumination, getting insight, building on concepts and all of these types of things.

And I tell you that it's not like that at all. It is like becoming pregnant. It is about getting a completely and utterly new life that you cannot possibly create on those terms.

[7 : 33] This new life is a life, instead of either being born again, or being born from above. That you can translate the word in both ways. He's saying, It is something that God has to intervene in and do a completely different and new work in your life.

It is as if you have a completely new life. It is like being born. It is completely and utterly different. Half of the human race can't become pregnant.

We're called men. And many of the rest of the human race can only become pregnant under certain circumstances and nobody can become pregnant completely and utterly by their own power.

They can't go and sit in a room and think themselves into pregnancy. They can't experience themselves into pregnancy. You can't do that. Something from outside has to enter in to create new life within.

And Jesus is saying that all of these attempts at spiritual quests, they will not work. It has to be something which God is going to create, give birth to in your life.

[8 : 46] And it has to come from above. It can't come from this horizontal plane. It has to come from God. And I read profound theological works all the time.

Many of you know that. I watch profound theological shows. I watch part of the English, England, Paraguay soccer match yesterday. And I'm reading Sue Grafton's S is for Silence and about a murder that took place 35 years earlier.

And one of the things in the beginning of her book, she sort of writes a little note saying to people, don't write me rude letters telling me how I got the streets wrong. And she said, I've rearranged all the streets whatever way I think because it's going to make the story better so don't write me any notes.

Because there really are, obviously, I'm not one of them very, very, very careful readers who notice things like that. I'm not one of them. But if you are one of these careful readers and you've been reading John, look back to the beginning of John's Gospel and remember what Jesus has just said, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And look to how John has given a clue to this in John 1, verses 12 and 13 on page 918. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God even to those who believe in his name who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God.

[10 : 20] And so the attentive readers of John's Gospel when he reads or she reads this passage about being born again they'll have to think that it has something connected to believing in the name of Jesus and being born of God and becoming children of God.

There has to be some type of connection between this. Let's continue reading back to chapter 3 verse 4 and page 920. Nicodemus gives sort of a literalistic answer to Jesus' comment because you know once again Nicodemus is expecting to have a spiritual conversation a theological dialogue and meeting of minds and Jesus has just told him that it's rubbish that it will get him nowhere that in fact that will take him he cannot see the kingdom of God on these terms that he must be born again and so Nicodemus like probably if I was talking to somebody like I described you know the board of directors of CBC and on and on and on and on and I was like that they'd be a little bit put off with me especially since I'm not a prophet from God and so Nicodemus is a little bit bothered and he gives this sort of snarky answer he says how can a man be born when he is old can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born verse 5

Jesus answered verily verily amen amen I say to you unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God let's sort of put your finger here for the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans and the Anglicans and the Presbyterians among us we have to be careful that we don't misunderstand this verse he's not talking about baptism okay if you folks were baptized as children you have to consummate your baptism because baptism alone isn't enough you have to consummate you have to consummate am I doing something here I should go to my lapel mic I don't know what people listening to this on the computer later on are going to think I have now switched we did that that was so flawlessly done well flawless for us right Andrew yeah where was

I oh get my glasses on so I can see the text verse 5 most assuredly I say to you unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God what Christians who read this as if it's referring to baptism are engaging in something called anachronism I probably didn't pronounce that very well and it's reading something from today back into the past it's like a friend of mine many years ago who said that the Bible supported smoking marijuana and I said why do you think that's the case and he talked about how God gave us the grass in the book of Genesis and I said to him no no no no that's not what they meant back then okay they didn't say they didn't you know and he he was not the smartest puppy in the pack and he had a hard time with that probably because he smoked a lot of grass but it was an anachronism you know and the same with it here in a sense what we understand as Christian baptism hasn't been invented when Jesus is talking to Nicodemus he's talking to a Jewish man and so however

Nicodemus is to understand this he can't understand it in terms of baptism later on he might you know after he you know Jesus had risen from the dead he might think about it in these terms and think oh you have to sort of be baptized and you have to do this it's not like that at all Jesus is bringing together two Old Testament themes verse five is exactly the same as verse three but now Jesus is bringing in some Old Testament themes remember in verse three he says unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God they're almost identical sentences only here Jesus is drawing together several Old Testament themes he's bringing together the Old Testament themes that there will come a time when God will cleanse his people from their sins that he will wash his people from their sins and he's bringing together the Old Testament idea that there will come a time sometime in the future and he's bringing together the

[15 : 09] Old Testament themes that there will become a time in the future when I will pour my Holy Spirit upon your people and even texts which they would not have understood is speaking to the future about being his children the children of Israel and the very children of God and Jesus is bringing together all of these Old Testament themes and says that they are coming together right now in my person as we are going to see in a moment all these things that God has promised in the Old Testament you can experience Nicodemus just and so verse six that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit now just notice earlier I missed this point in verse five he can remember Jesus now has twice said he cannot enter the kingdom of God twice he said that unless you're born again and then he says that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit and what he's saying here is you know what unless

God intervenes you're just going to have the same old same old same old keep leaning into the birth to flesh and what we need is God's Holy Spirit to intervene in our lives and create within us something we cannot create ourselves that's what we need and that's what God is able and willing to do I've shared with you before but I want to share it again one of the moments in my life that sort of turned around my life as a preacher

I still need a lot of turning around to do but turn turn with me in your Bibles to Ephesians chapter two some of you might remember this story but you know what in families you can tell stories more than once and as I get older I'll probably tell them a lot of times but Ephesians chapter two and in your Bibles it's page 1013 and I had just been in Eganfield for about a chapter two because it was going to be such a text that just fit with me as an evangelical and I was looking forward to preaching on it and I just as I was working on it and working on it and working on it I just couldn't get the sermon just wouldn't work and let's I'm going to read it right from verse one and you he made alive who are dead in trespasses and sins in which you once walked according to the course of this world according to the prince of the power of the air the spirit who now works in the sons and daughters of disobedience among whom also we also once conducted ourselves in the lust of our flesh fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind and were by nature children of wrath just as the others but

God who is rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in trespasses made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved and raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace and his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus for by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God not of works lest anyone should boast for we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them amen what a text amen and I couldn't preach on it and I couldn't figure out why I couldn't preach on it I just couldn't get it it just wouldn't come and I went out for a run Saturday afternoon and I had like one of these moments where it was as if God spoke to me and you know what he said he said to me George the reason you can't preach on that text is you are afraid to tell people that apart from

Christ they are like a corpse in a funeral home that's what the text says and it was as if God spoke to me and said that and a second he said it I knew it was completely and utterly true and I said to God I said God I can't tell a whole pile of people in 1997 in Canada that apart from if they're not in Christ they are no different than a corpse in a funeral home I can't say that but that's what the text says and I acknowledge that within myself I like to tell people you know folks you're okay you know you're pretty okay and all of us you know there's just a few screws in our heads and our hearts that are a little bit wobbly and a sixteenth of a turn here and a sixteenth of a turn there and you'll that's all that's needed I'm a Canadian that's what I wanted to say and so my problem with the text is I kept trying to get the text to support that and the text kept making rubbish of that idea because the text says that I can't tell a bunch of

[20 : 49] Canadians either if it's 2006 or 1997 it wouldn't have been 97 that would have been 87 sorry I'm off by 10 whole years and I'm saying to myself I can't tell people that and God said George you have to tell people that otherwise there's no good news that's that's that's that's why we need a savior we don't need some good ideas we don't need a little bit of helpful advice we don't need a little bit of help with evolution or illumination we need new life because apart from Christ we are like a corpse and that and I got up and I told them that and I just told you and I tell myself and that's what's undergoing this entire text that's why Jesus says that apart from being born again you cannot enter the kingdom of God it's impossible we need a completely new life that comes from

God do not marvel verse 7 I said to you that you must be born again the wind blows verse 8 of John chapter 3 where it wills but cannot tell you where it comes from and where so is everyone who is born of the spirit Nicodemus answered verse 9 and said to him how can these things be Jesus answered and said to him are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things verily verily I say to you we speak of what we know and testify what we have seen in other words he's been in heaven itself and you do not receive our witness if I have told you earthly things start with the first step and that is you have to be born again you have to be open to this profound life changing intervention of the Holy Spirit in your life as he will come in and create where there is deadness a new life that will go on into all eternity verse 14 and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life we see here that this gift that comes from

God that must come from above this actual creation of a new life within us is connected to having a belief in Jesus who just as the source of death to the Israelites in the wilderness the snakes that was put up on a stake and people who look to that would be saved when we look to Jesus who bears our sin upon the cross and trust in him we will not perish but have eternal life you know some of you maybe have been coming to church for years and years and years and you know you think maybe it's just a matter of illumination it's just a matter of doing a few religious rituals it's just a matter of getting you know of being properly Anglican and knowing how to fit into church and you know it's not like that at all it's the whole Christian life begins when we experience this new birth for those of us who are baptized as infants it's when you consummate your baptism in baptism we are pledged to

Christ the Holy Spirit starts to work in our lives but the Holy Spirit starts to work in our lives and we are pledged to Christ to that point where we say to Jesus Jesus yes all that is talked about in the scriptures all that my parents or god parents promised for me and I had no say over that or no control over that I want that to be true I want you to come into my life and be my savior and that is when baptism is consummated that is when the Christian life begins and you know there's no time better than right now to make that deal with God and open yourself up to God in that way I can tell you right now not because you know I'm an optimist I'm not those of thinking books occasionally to help I am a pessimist by nature it you know it's because as a young age I was a Toronto Maple Leaf fan and they are in the 39th year of their five year rebuilding plan and so you know if you ever go to synod if you want to know how the vote is going to go if

I speak to emotion everybody in the room is going to vote the opposite way and so I'm not an optimist I am a pessimist but by the authority of scripture and as a minister of the gospel I can tell you right now that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is present in the room he in a sense spiritually is looking you right in the eye and he would love it if right now at this place you said Jesus thank you I want this new birth I need this new birth and I turn away from everything in my life that is connected to evil or death may your Holy Spirit intervene in my life and give me this there is no better time than right now to say a prayer like that and the Christian life truly begins when we say such a prayer and you know God is so shameless when it comes to salvation if all you can manage is

[26 : 40] God John 3 may that be me that'll work God starts out the details but it starts with a prayer with your heart saying this is what I want and I'm just going to invite those of you who might be a little bit tongue tied in a moment we're going to pray and if you silently what I've just described if you know that you are apart from Christ that you need to no longer have that be the case that you'd like to be born again I'm going to say a prayer slowly and you can quietly in your own heart follow along with me and God will hear that prayer the Holy Spirit will intervene in a decisive and powerful way in your life and you will know what Jesus is talking about in John 3 today I'm not going to ask you to come to the front or anything like that this is just something privately this is your moment if you have not done this and maybe if some of you have really your lives have been characterized by seeking evolution and illumination and you forgotten that which at one time characterized your life this is a good time to say that prayer silently with me and

I'll leave a few moments of silence as you consider if this is something you would like to do and then just silently in your heart feel free to follow along I'll speak slowly so you can follow dear God thank you for Jesus please give me the new life that I may be born again I turn from all evil I turn from all that is not you may Jesus be my savior and Lord and may your holy spirit fill me to the brim forever forever in

Jesus name amen loving father for everyone who just prayed that prayer for those of us who at some time in the past have prayed a similar type of prayer father father may your holy spirit fall afresh upon us with might and power and deep conviction father thank you for the gift of your son thank you for the gift of new life help us father to grow in our ability to surrender to you may all of our life be one yes to your son Jesus Christ may all of our life be one yes to your holy spirit and father for those who still are seeking may your holy spirit fall afresh upon them even today drawing them closer to your son in Jesus name we pray amen