

From BIOS to ZOE

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[0 : 00] Living God, we believe that you enabled the Apostle John to remember this interchange and write it down for us accurately.

I pray now in your mercy and grace that you would take these words, which are very familiar to many people, that you would take these words and make them come alive in our experience as never before.

For I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. As I was planning this current series of sermons on the space in which Jesus calls us to follow him, I kept being drawn to this text we just read, to the story of Jesus and Nicodemus.

I have felt that right now we are supposed to make our way through John chapters 14 to 16, the so-called upper room discourse. And we have been doing that and we will continue doing that.

But as I planned this series, I kept feeling constrained, constrained to also work with this text. Now, I regularly feel led to a text.

[1 : 23] But only once in a while do I feel constrained to a text. For some reason, the Lord really wants us to give our attention to what he said to Nicodemus.

Someone recently said to me, If one has been a Christian for more than five years, very likely they have lost touch with the wonder of what happened to them.

So let's go through this text again. Whenever Jesus begins a sentence, Truly, I say to you, we need to listen very carefully, or we will be very sorry.

Whenever Jesus begins a sentence, Truly, truly, we need to listen very, very carefully, or we will be very, very sorry.

Whenever Jesus restates something three times, we need to listen very, very, very carefully, or we will be very, very, very sorry.

[2 : 41] So listen again. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he or she cannot see the kingdom of God.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he or she cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born anew. Must. Must. Jesus uses this word must many times in reference to himself.

I must be about my father's business. I must preach the gospel of the kingdom to other cities, for I was sent for this purpose. The Son of Man must go to Jerusalem.

All things written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled. And here in this story with Nicodemus, in verse 14, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

[3 : 47] But only two times that I know of in the gospel record does Jesus use the word must in relationship to others, in relationship to us.

In John 4, where he tells the woman at the well, God is spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth. And here in John 3, where he tells Nicodemus, you, and the you there is plural, referring not only to Nicodemus, but to every other human being, you must be born anew.

Born anew, or born again, as it's traditionally rendered. A phrase that's used both in religious and secular circles, triggering all kinds of different ideas and different reactions.

So what does it mean? Well, the word that's used here in John 3 is the Greek word *anōthen*. For those of you who are taking notes, it's spelled A-N-O-T-H-E-N.

A-N-O-T-H-E-N. *Anōthen*. Now, the primary meaning of *anōthen* is from above. Matthew uses this word when he's describing the crucifixion.

[5 : 08] As Jesus dies on the cross, he tells us that the veil in the temple is torn *anōthen* from above, from the top to bottom. John will use this word later when he is reporting Jesus' words to Pontius Pilate.

Jesus says to Pilate, you would have no authority over me unless it had been given you *anōthen* from above. You must be born *anōthen* from above.

Why then the traditional translations born anew or born again? Well, because anyone who is born from above will consequently have been born anew and born again.

Do not marvel that I say to you, you must be born *anōthen* from above. John tells us that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night.

Is this because Nicodemus didn't want to be seen by the other Pharisees going to Jesus? Is it because the night time afforded a leisurely opportunity for conversation?

[6 : 18] Or, is John making a theological observation about what is happening in Nicodemus? Is John saying that in visiting Jesus, Nicodemus is coming out of the night of spiritual darkness and moving into the light of new life?

What is amazing is that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, should go to Jesus at all. The Pharisees were the elite folk. They were the separated people.

Jesus comes from the ordinary folk, from Galilee of all places. Jesus had not studied at any of the prestigious synagogue schools. He had no impressive academic credentials.

Yet, Nicodemus sought out the Galilean carpenter. There was something about the way Jesus spoke and the way Jesus acted that tugged at the deep recesses of Nicodemus' being.

So impressed is Nicodemus with Jesus that Nicodemus salutes Jesus with the title Rabbi. Thereby, thereby, treating him as an equal.

[7 : 28] Jesus then caught Nicodemus by surprise. Nicodemus, you cannot even see the kingdom for which you have been longing.

You cannot enter the kingdom that is breaking into the world unless you are born *anōthen* from above.

I think it's important to take a little bit of time and think about the kind of person Nicodemus is.

He is what most of us would call a good man. Loved his wife, loved his children, paid his taxes. He's furthermore a religious man.

Mark that. He's probably one of the most religious men of his time. He was born into a Jewish home. He believed in God, no doubt about that. He grew up in the synagogue.

[8 : 27] He went to Sabbath school in the youth group. He sang the hymns and the choruses. He recited the creeds. He served on the committees and boards of his community.

And he was committed to obeying all of God's rules. He's furthermore a spiritually sensitive man. Although he does not know everything about Jesus, I mean, who does?

He's at least realizing that no one can say what Jesus says and no one can do what Jesus does unless somehow the living God is with him. He realizes that Jesus, untrained though he may be, was no ordinary teacher.

Now, some of Nicodemus' contemporaries came to other conclusions. that Jesus, though he was a sincere preacher, was sincerely misguided. Or that Jesus was even under the control of the evil one.

You have come from God, Nicodemus says to Jesus. Spiritually insightful. He is furthermore a leader in the religious community.

[9 : 33] John calls him a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, a member of the Jewish Supreme Court. Jesus calls him the teacher, verse 10, the teacher of Israel, the rabbi, in our order of things, a tenured professor at a ranking theological seminary, an expert in doctrine, a master of the scrolls, the leading theologian of the day, Reverend Dr.

Professor Nicodemus. And it is to that good, religious, spiritually sensitive, leading theologian of the day that Jesus first speaks his must.

Truly, truly, I say to you, if you want to see and enter the kingdom of God, you must be born anothén from above.

The kingdom of God, you know that that's the major theme of Jesus' preaching in the other Gospels. In the Gospel of John, the kingdom of God is synonymous with being a child of God.

It's also synonymous with eternal life. To say the least, Nicodemus was not prepared for Jesus' words that night. If you want to witness and participate in the kingdom of God, if you want to experience the full blessing of being a child of God, if you want to know eternal life, now and beyond the grave, you must be born anothén.

[11 : 17] You must be generated again from above. Nicodemus then understandably asks, how?

How can a man be born when he's old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he? Note carefully the content of his question.

Not why, but how. Nicodemus realizes that Jesus is right. There is a need for this new beginning, this radical new beginning, this new genesis.

Many people, of course, would argue with Jesus about the necessity for this new genesis. Many good, religious, spiritually sensitive people, even many leading theologians would disagree with Jesus.

Listen, for instance, to what a former president of a theological seminary in the United States once said. The doctrine of divine imminence, which is now generally accepted, ascribes divinity to humanity.

[12 : 25] Since it is supposed that man's nature is one with God and man needs simply to awaken to that fact, this means, of course, a revolution in the old concept of salvation.

What a person requires is not regeneration in the old sense or change of nature, but simply an awakening to what he or she really is, namely divine.

That theologian has obviously stopped reading the newspaper. Probably doesn't have kids. Lives in an ivory tower, out of touch with the world where we live.

Nicodemus was in touch with life as it really is. He's in touch with human nature as it really is. And when Jesus tells him that he and everyone else must be regenerated, reborn from above, he did not ask why.

He asked how. How can a man be born when he's old? That's a good question. By the way, when I look at my kids, I don't think bad things anyway.

[13 : 42] Now, I hear in Nicodemus' question deep frustration. It's the frustration I hear in many of you and in many of our contemporaries.

William Barclay paraphrases Nicodemus' words this way. You talk about being born anew. You talk about this radical fundamental change that's so necessary. I know that it is necessary, but in my experience, it's impossible.

There's nothing I would like more, but you might as well tell me, a full-grown man, to enter into my mother's womb and be born all over again. Or come at it the way Leon Morris of Australia does.

We're the sum of our yesterdays, he imagines Nicodemus saying. We're the sum of our yesterdays. I am what I am today because of all the things that have happened to me throughout my years.

I'm the product of my fears and hopes and joys and doubts, the good and bad habits. It would be wonderful to make a completely fresh start. I believe such a new genesis is necessary, but how, oh Lord, how can a man be born when he is old?

[14 : 52] So, Jesus restates the matter. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he or she cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Water and the Spirit. This being born anothren from above somehow involves being born of water and the Spirit. Water and the Spirit. Water and the Spirit.

Jesus put it that way because it echoes text of the Old Testament which would ring a bell in Nicodemus' mind. The phrase, of water and of the Spirit, would take Nicodemus to the opening verse of the Bible, to Genesis 1-1, where we read of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, bringing the world into being.

The Spirit of God hovering over waters, bringing the world into being. And the phrase would also draw Nicodemus to a great promise that God made in the prophet Ezekiel.

Through Ezekiel, God promised that one day God would renew the covenant people, that God would come and recreate humanity. Listen, it's Ezekiel 36, verse 25.

[16 : 07] I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. A new spirit I will put within you. What a tremendous promise. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean and I will put a new spirit in you.

This new spirit turns out to be none other than the Spirit of God for God says, I will put my spirit within you. And then God gave Ezekiel an illustration to understand what all of this would mean.

In a vision, which Ezekiel records in the 37th chapter of his prophecy, God takes Ezekiel out into the middle of a valley. The valley is full of dry bones.

The dry bones of dead human beings. everywhere you look, there is decay, dryness, and death. Then God commands Ezekiel to prophesy over the dry bones.

And I've always wondered, did Ezekiel feel silly doing that? Speak to that which is death, is dead. Prophesy over the bones, God says.

[17 : 16] Prophesy to the breath, the wind, or the spirit. Prophesy, son of man, say to the breath, thus says the Lord God, come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.

Ezekiel obeys the command, and the wind blows, the spirit breathes, and these dead human beings begin to have flesh and muscles, and they come to life.

The wind blew. Is that why Jesus says to Nicodemus, the wind blows wherever it wishes, you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it is coming from or where it is going, so is it with everyone born of the spirit.

Water and spirit. By the first century, the cleansing by water came to be symbolized in the rite of water baptism.

Whenever Gentiles, non-Jews, wanted to join the covenant people of God, they had to be baptized, symbolizing their turning from and being cleansed of their sinful ways.

[18 : 21] Now, what surprised the Jews of the first century, though, was that John the Baptist had them, true Jews, also be baptized. John was clear that his baptism in water, however, was only a sign of the real thing to come.

John points to the one who comes after him who baptizes not only in water, but who baptizes in and with the Holy Spirit. Water and spirit. So, I think we can paraphrase Jesus' words to Nicodemus this way.

Nicodemus, you want to be changed, to have a new life, to live the kingdom of God, but you cannot change yourself. I did not say you must change yourself to see and enter the kingdom.

Being born from above does mean being born of water. So, yes, you must repent and be baptized, as John said, but being born from above means being born by the Spirit of God.

The radical change is the work of God, just as in the vision of Ezekiel. Then Jesus explains why this new Genesis can only be the work of the Spirit of God.

[19 : 32] John 3, 6. John 3, 6 is a critical text for us to know. Jesus says, that which is flesh that which is born of flesh, sorry, that which is born of flesh is flesh.

That which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Say it again. That which is born of flesh is flesh. That which is born of Spirit is the Spirit.

Now, here, flesh simply means human nature, whether bad or good is not in the picture. And the point is, like begets like. Human nature can only give birth to human nature.

As creative as our flesh is, it can only give birth to more flesh. And much of the frustration of the Christian life lies right there.

Much of the frustration of Christian ministry lies right there. We're not taking Jesus seriously here. We are trying to produce the life of the kingdom. We're trying to produce the life of the children of God.

[20 : 42] We're trying to produce eternal life. We're trying to produce intimacy with God and others in the power of the flesh. Flesh only begets flesh. Kingdom life, spiritual life, does not evolve from the flesh.

It does not evolve from human nature, no matter how much effort human nature puts into it. You will never get from flesh to spirit.

Which is why the only hope, and I use the word only deliberately, the only hope for our churches, for our cities, for our nations, is a spiritual revolution.

A radical change in human nature from above affected by the spirit of God. Flesh, be it east or west, occidental or oriental, first world or third world, NDP, liberal, conservative, flesh can never pull off the peace and justice and healing of the kingdom of God.

But the spirit of God can. And when the wind blows, human beings come to life. that is the wonder of grace that Jesus is opening up to Nicodemus.

[22 : 06] You know the name C.S. Lewis. C.S. Lewis is the brilliant British scholar who experienced this new genesis in midlife and is therefore uniquely able to understand it and articulate it for us.

I want you to listen to how he expresses it in a BBC broadcast. As I read this, imagine this was on the radio, a BBC broadcast which later was worked into his book Mere Christianity.

He's explaining why this new birth is necessary and he's working with the image of statues. A statue has the shape of a man but it is not alive.

Right? In the same way man has, in the sense I'm going to explain, the shape or likeness of God but he has not got the kind of life God has.

Let us take the first point, man's resemblance to God first. Everything God has made has some likeness to himself. Space is like him in its hugeness. Not that the greatness of space is the same kind of greatness as God's but it's a sort of symbol of it or a translation of it into non-spiritual terms.

[23 : 17] Matter is like God in having energy though again of course, physical energy is a different kind of thing from the power of God. The vegetable world is like him because it is alive and he's the living God but life in this biological sense is not the same as the life there is in God.

It's only a kind of a symbol or shadow of it. When we come on to the animals we find other kinds of resemblances in addition to biological life. The intense activity and fertility of insects for example is the first dim resemblance to the unceasing activity and creativeness of God.

In the higher mammals we get the beginnings of instinctive affection. That's not the same thing as the love that exists in God but it is like it rather in a way that a picture drawn on a flat piece of paper can nevertheless be like a landscape.

When we come to man the highest of the animals we get the completest resemblance to God we know of. Then he writes there may be creatures in other worlds who are more like God than man but we don't know about them.

Man not only lives but loves and reason. Biological life reach its highest known level in the human. But what man in his natural condition has not got is spiritual life.

[24 : 32] The life and different sort of life that exists in God. We use the same word life for both but if you thought that both therefore must be the same sort of thing that would be like thinking that the greatness of space and the greatness of God were the same sort of greatness.

In reality the difference between biological life and spiritual life is so important I'm going to give them two distinct names and these names he gets from the New Testament. The biological sort which comes to us through nature and which like everything else in nature is always tending to run down and decay so that it can only be kept up by incessant subsidies from nature in the form of air, water, food etc.

is bios. The spiritual life which is in God from all eternity and which made the whole natural universe is Zoe. Bios has to be sure a certain shadowy symbolic resemblance to Zoe but only the sort of resemblance there is between a photo and a place or a statue and a man.

And then here's the line. A man who changed or a woman who changed from having bios to having Zoe would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real human.

That is what being born an open from above is all about. A new genesis literally from carved stones to real humans from bios to Zoe.

[26 : 15] When we were born of human parents we were initiated into the only kind of life parents can give into bios the life that inherently decays.

When we are reborn by water in the spirit we are initiated into a kind of life only the spirit can give we are initiated into Zoe a life that never decays.

flesh gives birth to flesh to life that ends bios spirit gives life to spirit to the life that God has to the life that God is to Zoe to the life that cannot end to eternal life do not marvel that I said to you you must be born an open anew from above now I can imagine at this point of the conversation that Nicodemus mind is whirling and his heart is pounding and so he asks for a second time how can these things be Jesus responds then with what Leslie Newbigin calls a very full exposition of the central themes of the gospel the reason this wonderful new genesis is possible is that the son of man has come son of man is Jesus favorite way of referring to himself he says to Nicodemus in verse 13 no one has ascended into heaven but the son of man who has descended from heaven that is the gospel the son of man has descended from heaven and in his descending from heaven he has brought

Zoe to the world he claims later in John's gospel to have Zoe in himself he later claims that he is Zoe I'm the way the truth and the Zoe he will say that I have come to give Zoe and to give it abundantly and what must Nicodemus or you or I do to get in on Zoe well Jesus uses another Old Testament to illustrate this this is something Jesus regularly does when he wants to explain something he takes something from the Old Testament verse 14 as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must I the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in me might have eternal life now to what is Jesus referring here he's referring to that time in the wilderness when the people are making their way across the wilderness when there are these fiery serpents that came along the people and when they would bite people there was poison in them and people would die from the bite those who had not been bitten went to

Moses and asked Moses to intercede for God for help and God told Moses to make a bronze serpent put it on a pole put the pole in the middle of the community and lift this pole high and if anyone who had not been bitten would look up at the uplifted serpent they would live now FF Bruce makes the point best when he says if any of those bitten Israelites who looked and lived when they were at death's door had been asked how they felt they might have said that they felt as if they had been born all over again and received a new lease on life but that new lease on life was only the renewal of bios the renewal of flesh what Jesus is telling Nicodemus is that when any of us look up at the uplifted Jesus there is literally a regeneration and we become new the very spirit of God that dwells in the uplifted

[30 : 03] Jesus comes into us Zoe comes to us and we are enabled to then see and enter the kingdom of God that is the wonder of grace John then offers his own theological commentary on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 6 316 for God so loved the world oh that is an amazing line because as you know in the gospel of John the word for world means human society organizing itself in rebellion against God world means we don't want anything to do with God it doesn't bother God God says he still loves the world God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish because that's what Bios does it perishes but have eternal Zoe the life that does not end that is the space in which he now calls us to follow this space full of

Zoe whereby he's bringing Bios into Zoe now having been born another is not the end all of the Christian life it is after all the beginning and there's a whole new life to be lived but being born anew from above does mean we have entered into a qualitatively different order of life life that cannot decay and life that interestingly gets better as you get older how does it happen we do not know Jesus says the wind blows where it wills but whenever the wind blows there's something new in some cases the spirit blows gently quietly working this miracle of regeneration in other times he comes rushing in dramatically turning things upside down however he comes there is something new and we are changed and the new testament says the change is measurable there are objective manifestations of this move from bios to zoe which is what the rest of the new testament is describing vital signs if you will vital signs that the miracle has happened did it happen to nicodemus was he born another anew again i think so and later in the gospel of john we see two vital signs first when the opposition against jesus began to build nicodemus dared to stand against the other pharisees and raise concerns he says our law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing does it and the other sign is that nicodemus joined joseph of arimathea and took jesus body down from the cross a huge risk for a pharisee it meant he risked his title as the reverend doctor professor but it didn't matter to nicodemus anymore he'd gotten zoe all that mattered now was jesus so where are you with this truly truly must do you know yourself to experience this new genesis to be alive in a new way to be alive in the life-giving spirit do you want more look up at the uplifted jesus now when i read the paragraph from c.s.

lewis i stopped just before the punch line the last line i read was a man who changed from having bios to having zoe would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real man here's the punch line and that is precisely what christianity is about this world is a great sculptor shop we are the statues and there's a rumor going around the shop that some of us are someday going to come to life living lord your love for us is always unfolding it just gets bigger and richer and some of us are here today and years ago we we experienced this new beginning but we've gotten stuck along the way it's gotten dusty and we've lost the wonder will you restore that some of us here today have been holding all of this at arm's length for fear that we might become something we don't want to become or we're just suspicious that it could really happen for us and would you today just overcome any of that and bring about this new life and some of us today have heard this for the very first time we don't understand everything we've heard but it sure is inviting so will you work the miracle in us today to think that you really want us to share in the life that you have amazing amen