

You Must Be Born Again

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[0 : 00] If you have your Bible with you, please open it up to the Gospel of John, the Gospel of John chapter 3. Well, I've been looking forward to this particular message for a little while now.

We're talking this morning about being born again. And it's one of those terms that has come to mean a lot of different things.

It's not just used inside the church, but it's used outside the church now. I wonder what you think of when you hear the term born again. I know some people might be thinking back to Watergate and Charles Coulson and his book, *Born Again*, to former presidents who have said that they were born again, to some of the more controversial ways that that term has been used, especially down in the States, to refer to, I guess we could say, fundamentalists, some would say.

It's a very loaded term, born again. Even within the church, there's a lot of different meaning by it. Some people simply mean those who are Christians, those who have professed faith in Jesus. Others mean, very specifically, those who aren't just people who say that they're Christians, but those who are the real deal, true followers of Jesus, those who have been born again.

[1 : 39] Others, again, have that kind of negative connotation. You know, it's that sect of Christianity that maybe takes things a little bit too seriously.

You know, one of those born-again Christians. You know, so what does it really mean to be born again? And to answer that, we're going to go back to the source. We're going to go back to Jesus. He's the one who said it the first time. What did he mean when he said that? What does it mean to be born again? So, we're in John chapter 3.

And this follows really closely to what we looked at last Sunday too. Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover festival.

He had done the cleansing of the temple there. It says in verse 23, John continues on.

[2 : 55] Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus. And so, what John's about to tell us, this story of Nicodemus is actually an example.

John has already just said, many were believing in Jesus because of the signs that he was doing, but Jesus wouldn't entrust himself to them. And we kind of wonder, well, why not?

They believed, or was it not genuine belief? Was it superficial? He said that Jesus knows what's in a man.

He didn't need anybody else to come give a report about so-and-so. He knew what was in that person, or in each person, as my translation says. And so, this is really an example of this.

John's saying, now there was a man who Jesus knew some things about. And we're going to see how this unfolds. This man's name was Nicodemus.

[3 : 53] Chapter 3, verse 1. Now, there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night.

So, Nicodemus is a Pharisee. The Pharisees, probably all of you know quite well who they are. Jesus had lots of run-ins with them.

They were that denomination of Judaism, which kind of really put forward strict adherence to the law of Moses, and even added all kinds of rules and things that you needed to do to be right with God.

But we also know that Jesus had many run-ins with the Pharisees, in which he kind of denounced them and their empty religion, their hypocrisy.

They had all these rules, and yet, on the inside, they didn't have a love for God. They wanted to look good on the outside to other people. They loved the praise of men.

[4 : 55] They were the kind of mentality, and Les kind of hit it on the head this morning in Sunday school, where, you know, we, to be right with God, to be righteous, we need to obey.

We need to do works. We need to observe the law. And the better we do that, the more righteous we are, the better we are in God's sight. Well, Nicodemus was one of these guys, and probably a high-up guy in this order as well.

He was also a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Now, there were some other representation on there of the Sadducees and others, perhaps.

But this is no... This is a man of reputation. I'll say it that way. He's come to pay Jesus a visit at night. And this is what Nicodemus says to Jesus in verse 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.

[6 : 02] Now, this is such a loaded thing to say to Jesus. He starts with a term of respect, Rabbi, teacher. We know.

It's interesting that he uses the plural. We. You kind of get the sense. He's not just speaking for himself. He's speaking on behalf, probably, of some of his other religious colleagues of the Pharisees or in the ruling council.

And what does he have to say for himself and on their behalf? He says, 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.

In other words, me and some of the other religious leaders have seen the signs that you have been doing here in Jerusalem.

And Nicodemus actually just straight up admits no one could do these kinds of things unless God was with him. In other words, they were miraculous things.

[7 : 14] There's probably things that just weren't recorded in the Gospels here for us. I mean, the cleansing of the temple itself wasn't really a miracle. It was a sign. But there were probably other things that Jesus did.

And the religious leaders, including Nicodemus, are looking at these things and thinking, That's impossible. The only way that he could do those things is if God was with him.

So they saw the signs that Jesus was doing, the miraculous signs. And not only did they see the signs, but they kind of reasoned it out to the right conclusion or to something that was right.

What was the conclusion that they came to? He says, We know that you are a teacher who has come from God. That word know is a strong word.

You know, we know. Interesting words here. And I wonder, even as Nicodemus says this, I wonder what the other members of the Pharisees and the ruling council would have thought about him saying this.

[8 : 29] It's almost like an admission that we know that you're from God because how else could you do these things? We've seen the signs. I wonder, would some of the other members be quick to say, Well, yeah, I agree.

Or is it more of kind of an admission of the conversations that they had had together as religious leaders in the back room? I mean, look at the things this guy is doing.

How else could he do it? Well, he must be from God. Otherwise, there's just no other way. I think perhaps Nicodemus speaks to what they knew deep down inside.

That yes, Jesus has come from God. But perhaps something that others were not ready to admit. I mean, we're going to see this as the Pharisees kind of come into connection with Jesus.

Tensions are going to rise. But even as those tensions rise, it's not because the Pharisees are completely ignorant and just came to the wrong conclusion about him.

[9 : 36] I mean, what Nicodemus says here is, We know. We've seen the miracles. We know that you are from God. But what's interesting is just when we look at this confession, this admission, at first, it really does seem like, Wow, Nicodemus, you hit the nail on the head.

You're on the right track. He has come from God, which has big implications. If he is a teacher from God, then we must listen to him. We should follow his teaching and do what he says.

And so we're kind of left with this question of, So Nicodemus, do you believe? Do you believe that Jesus is who they've been saying?

But when we kind of compare this to some of the other things that have been said about Jesus by his disciples, all of a sudden, it kind of just puts it in perspective. We see just how far short this falls. Notice, I mean, back, we looked at this. Nathanael said, Rabbi, you are the son of God. You are the king of Israel. Philip and Andrew, you are the Messiah, the one spoken of by the prophets long ago.

[10:57] And now we come to Nicodemus. Well, we've seen the signs, the miraculous signs that only God could do. So we know that you're a teacher. That's it?

Just a teacher? How about a prophet? How about the Messiah? You know, like it falls short. And so we're kind of left with this question. Do you believe, Nicodemus?

Do you really believe? We're going to find out not this Sunday, but next Sunday as we explore more of this.

But we want to get into this discussion of being born again. And this is where the conversation goes. Nicodemus says this to him and then Jesus replies in verse three. He says, Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

Now you might read that and wonder, well, what does that have to do with what Nicodemus just said? We know you're a teacher who comes from God. Nobody could do the signs. I tell you, you must, to see the kingdom of God, you must be born again.

[12:10] At first I kind of thought, well, maybe Jesus is just ignoring him and just kind of going straight to the heart or something like that. Actually, if you look really closely, it's not as though Jesus just ignored him.

He heard what Nicodemus said. Jesus actually structures his statement in the exact same way that Nicodemus did his. For no one could perform the signs you are doing unless God were with him. Jesus says back to him, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. It seems as if Jesus just kind of decides to take over the conversation and steer it the direction that he wants it to go.

Maybe I'm, I don't want to speculate too much, but reading between the lines a little bit here, it's almost as if Nicodemus has come to Jesus saying, let's talk about you.

We've seen the signs you're doing. And Jesus' reply almost seems to be, first, let's talk about you, Nicodemus.

[13:19] Let's talk about you and how you must be born again. Verse six. As Jesus says this, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

He's including Nicodemus in it. No one, including you, Nicodemus, can see the kingdom of God unless they're born again.

Why does he say this to Nicodemus? My best guess is because Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He's one of those people who very much with the order of that day has this mentality of, I can get a right standing with God.

I am a part of the kingdom of God. I can, I will enter by doing enough good works, by observing the law well enough. And I have done it very well. And so, I'm in.

It's almost as if Jesus just kind of strikes right to the heart of that with this word. No one, including you, Nicodemus, doesn't matter how good a life you've lived, how well you've kept the law, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

[14:35] Now, what does Jesus mean by see the kingdom of God? Does he mean perceive the kingdom of God as in it's invisible, like understand it?

Or does he mean enter the kingdom of God? I think that the answer comes as we keep reading.

Verse 4, Nicodemus responds, he says, how can someone be born when they are old?

Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered, very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit.

Okay, so Jesus kind of clarifies what he means by see. He means enter, enter into the kingdom of God. That's what Jesus is talking about. In this language, he uses it elsewhere too in verse 36.

Whoever rejects the sun will not see life. He's using it kind of metaphorically. He's talking about entrance into the kingdom of God.

[15:45] What is the kingdom of God? What is Jesus really getting at here for Nicodemus? It's not the easiest thing to describe or define or to sum up.

Those of you who've read through the gospels know that Jesus taught a lot about the kingdom of God. He told many parables about it. Like earthly kingdoms, it's a kingdom that has a king.

God's chosen king, the Christ. Jesus is that king. And like earthly kingdoms, it too has citizens. People who belong to this kingdom.

But unlike earthly kingdoms, these citizens, these people of the kingdom, they kind of stretch through time. They're God's people throughout generations, throughout the generations.

And they're not necessarily confined to a specific spot. I mean, it kind of seemed to start that way with the Israelites in the Old Testament, with the descendants of Israel. Israel. But then, it kind of grows and expands from there to include people from among the nations, all who belong to God through faith in Christ.

[17:02] Jesus talked about how this kingdom is, it's got like this invisible aspect to it. It's hard to see. It's like yeast in the dough. But that one day, we will see the kingdom of God.

There will be this day when the kingdom breaks forth into our world in all its glory, in all its greatness. Isaiah speaks about how, you know, it'll be a time when justice is brought, when God's king brings peace, and that peace will last forever.

No other kingdom will challenge this kingdom. This is the kingdom of God. This is the kingdom of heaven. One of the places where Jesus had quite a lot to say about it, but the parables that I love is in Matthew 13, the parable of the weeds.

Some of you may recall that story. A farmer or a landowner sows seed into his field, and then an enemy comes and sows weeds into the field, or false wheat.

And when they finally realize what has happened, it's, you know, it would threaten the good wheat to just rip out the false wheat, and so they decide to let both grow until the harvest.

[18:18] And Jesus talks in that parable about how the field is the world, and the good wheat represents the sons of the kingdom. And those who are false wheat are those who are not sons of the kingdom.

And one day, for now, they're growing together in the world. They live among each other. But one day, there will come a day where he will do the separation. He will send forth his angels, and they will take those who are not sons of the kingdom, and they will be ripped out and thrown into the blazing furnace.

Judgment. The judgment. There's a future aspect to the kingdom of God. And the question is, are you a true son of the kingdom?

That's really what's at stake here as Jesus talks to Nicodemus. You think you're in. You think you're a true son of the kingdom.

That you are one of those who will remain at the end. But no one will enter the kingdom of heaven. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

[19:29] Says Jesus. Unless they are born again. Nicodemus, I think, does his best to try to figure out what Jesus is talking about.

Like, what do you mean born again? I try to give him the benefit of the doubt a little bit that he didn't actually think Jesus meant an old man climbing back into his mother's womb a second time.

I think these are rhetorical questions. You know, how can someone be born when they are old?

Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born.

It can't be physical birth that you're talking about. So what do you mean, Jesus? What kind of birth do you mean born again? We've heard that term so many times, it almost, we don't hear it the same way that Nicodemus hear it.

Perhaps we could paraphrase it like this. No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are birthed again. That's what Nicodemus is hearing. And he's trying to wrestle through what do you mean by this?

[20:38] Jesus answers in verse 5 and he clarifies. But in many ways he says the same thing again. Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Born of the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, says Jesus, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. So Nicodemus, I think, was on the right track.

It's not a physical rebirth that Jesus is talking about. It's a spiritual birth. It's a spiritual birth. The birth that is flesh in nature kind of comes from a person who is flesh just like we were born from our mothers.

But the birth that is Spirit in nature, the birth that Jesus is talking about comes from a person who is Spirit. Spirit. The Spirit of God. It's a spiritual birth.

And Nicodemus is probably thinking what we're all thinking. What does that mean? What is a spiritual birth?

[21:51] It says in verse 7, Jesus says, you should not be surprised or you should not wonder at my saying. Nicodemus is wondering, like, what are you talking about? In verse 9, Nicodemus says,

how can these things be?

What do you mean? This is not something that's easy to understand. And I think part of the reason for that is that we're creatures of flesh and blood.

We have an immaterial part to us too, soul or spirit. But we're creatures of flesh and blood. And we take the world in through our physical, material senses. Taste, touch, sight.

Jesus is talking about a whole nother realm. A whole nother reality. A spiritual birth. A birth that is not material. And so we are right to be kind of perplexed.

And like, how do we describe that? What does that mean? What does it look like? Jesus even seems to acknowledge that it's not the, it's not easy to understand.

[23 : 01] He goes on to say this, you should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. And then he gives a bit of an analogy. He says, 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. The wind is kind of a mysterious thing. It's something that we can't see. It's invisible.

It just kind of comes and goes. It's unpredictable. One day, I'm on my way to the church, walking down Third Street, and it's calm.

It's wonderful. The next morning, I'm walking down the same street and I'm getting blasted like I'm in a wind tunnel. How do we know what day, what's going to happen on what day?

We don't. It's a mystery. Some of you may have seen some of those golf shots or those field goal kicks which were, they were lined up perfect to be right on mark and hit the target.

[24 : 07] And then at the last minute, out of nowhere, a gust of wind carries it off course and they miss. The wind is like that.

I mean, we see its effects. We can hear it. We see how it blows things. But we don't understand it. We can put a windsock up and we can figure out what direction it's blowing at any given moment. but we can't really predict with any certainty where it's going, what it's going to do in the next five minutes. If it's going to switch or blow hard or just stop.

Jesus uses this as an analogy. It's the same. So it is with everyone born of the spirit. The spiritual is something that's invisible to us.

We can't see it. It's mysterious. It's unpredictable. We can see the effects of it. We see the effects of the spirit on a person's life.

[25 : 09] We see that radical transformation. But we couldn't tell you, well, who's going to be next? Who's going to be born again next? We couldn't tell you just what the spirit of God is going to do next because we just simply don't understand that.

So what is the new birth? There are a number of other passages that speak to it.

Drawing from all of them, trying to bring them together. That's kind of what systematic theology is, they call it, in school. And I'm borrowing from another guy here, Wayne Grudem.

This is his explanation. He says, or definition, the new birth is a secret work in which God gives new spiritual life to his people.

people. It's a secret work in which God gives new spiritual life to his people. And if you look at some of those other passages, you see that this is first, this is, I'd say, even 100%, this is something that God does to people.

[26 : 25] It's not something that we do for ourselves, just like we can't give birth to ourselves. it's something God, by his spirit, does to people.

He gives them new life. It's not something that we can earn. It's a gift, as we've been looking at in 1 Peter, who, praise be to God, who, in his great mercy, has given us new birth.

It's a gift, and it's undeserved. There are other passages that speak to the reality of the new birth in different ways.

Paul says, you know, you were dead in your sins, but God, in his mercy, in his grace, made you alive with Christ. It involves us being united to Christ and having new life in Christ.

Ezekiel, in his prophecies, he kind of spoke of it in this way. He said, there will come a day when I will give you a new spirit. I will put a new spirit in you, and I will take out your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

[27 : 37] The people had been unresponsive to God, and so God was going to perform surgery on them, so to speak. This is what the new birth is.

It's God's secret work upon us to give us new life, to join us to Christ, to put his own spirit in us, to live within us, and its results are things like a change of heart, a change of desires.

We begin to love what is good and hate what is evil. We begin to see and hear and value the word of God and the words of Christ.

We take them seriously. It's like the blinders have been lifted off. This is God's work that he does through the spirit, the new birth.

And one of the things that really strikes me most about it is just this simple, simple truth that it's something God does to us and in us. It's not something you can do for yourself.

[28 : 45] Our world will use the term born again in that way. You know, like I had a massive life change, just a change of perspective, you know, or turned a new leaf. That's not what Jesus is referring to here.

He's referring to the spirit coming and giving us new life where there was none. It's not by works. It's a gift of God's grace to his people. We're going to go on and look at the rest of this conversation with Nicodemus next Sunday.

But I want to focus just for the rest of our few minutes here on what I think Jesus would say if he was here. What John is really getting at.

And that's that question that we ought to ask ourselves. Are you born again? Jesus has said this is crucial.

[29 : 45] This is critical. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again. This is the difference maker between heaven and hell.

Between life, eternal life, and death. Are you born again? no one.

Doesn't matter how good they've been, what they've done, will see the kingdom of God unless this reality has happened in their life. Unless they have undergone this new birth.

How do I get the new birth? death. How do I get that? Well, we've already said you can't earn it. You can't do this for yourself.

It's God's work. If you flip back just a page, I think John has given us the answer right out of the start of his gospel. John 1, verses 11 to 13.

[30 : 54] Jesus, the word, the son of God came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet, to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but born of God. There it is. The effects of the new birth, the result of it, is that we become children of God.

He's not talking about children born in the human flesh way. He makes that clear. Born of God. And the way to get that, to receive that, to get that right, to all who did receive Jesus, to those who believed in his name.

We get it simply by believing, by receiving him for who he truly is, the son of God. the Christ. By believing, by taking his words seriously, yes, embracing, you are the one, just like Nathaniel said, you are the son of God.

That's the way. We didn't look at this yet in Sunday school, but we're coming to it. It's through the word. It's through the word of the gospel that we, that we, we put our trust in that and, and we receive this gift.

[32 : 29] And it's still mysterious. We don't necessarily see or understand that moment, but we know something's different on the other side. It's like the lights have gone on.

The world is different. We see everything different. We see Christ differently. It's a beautiful thing. And I know probably most of you, I believe, are born again and have experienced that.

But, I hope that just looking at this again is, is just encouragement and reminder of this wonderful gift of grace that God has done for all of us, giving us new life by his spirit through faith in Jesus.

Lastly, I want to just draw our attention to, to the, to this one thing that Nicodemus said. He said, Rabbi, we know that you are the teacher who has come from God.

Just kept hitting me. If, if you know it, will you listen to his teaching? Will you obey? Will you do what Jesus says?

[33 : 46] And the good news is that those of us who are born again, we know that Jesus is more than a teacher. We know that he is the Messiah and that he is the Son of God.

The good news is this, we're not left to ourselves to try to obey him, to try to do what he says. We have the Spirit of God within us who enables us, who has changed our hearts, who gives us new

desires to do what is good, what is right, to love.

It's an amazing gift and it's, it's a gift of grace. Praise be to God who in his great mercy has given us new birth into a living hope.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord Jesus, we thank you for your Spirit and his work in our lives.

We don't want to think about what life would be without that. We confess and we admit freely to you that apart from you and your work in us and Christ and how he has lived, we'd be lost.

[35 : 10] Thank you for the new birth. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.