

John Series: Sermon 7

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[0:00] So today we will talk about the Gospel reading. Sort of. Plus. It's from John chapter 3 verses 1 to 15, which you just heard read a moment ago.

! Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, who was sympathetic to Jesus, comes to Jesus, it says, by night, verse 2.

Meaning he does so secretly, so that his fellow Pharisees don't know that he is approaching Jesus. And 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.

Note that Nicodemus does not really ask any questions of Jesus. Rather, he makes a statement. And in that statement he says, We, meaning that there must be more than one Pharisee who thinks this way, not just him. We know that you are a teacher come from God.

[1:27] Nicodemus then mentions the signs, in other words, miracles, that Jesus does, which prove to Nicodemus that Jesus is a teacher come from God.

So, without even a question from this sympathetic Pharisee, just a statement that he made, Jesus then says to Nicodemus this oft-quoted passage.

And you might follow this in your Bibles. John 3, it's page 1055 and following. I'm going to track through here.

He says this, Truly, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Now, when I became a Christian in college in the 70s, this born-again phrase was pretty much the rallying cry by Christians to non-Christians telling them what they needed to do.

[2:32] Accept Jesus into your life to take away your sins. Change your life to be different. Make Jesus the Lord of your life.

It was not uncommon for Christians to ask people, Are you born again? Chuck Colson's first of his many books on the Christian life was entitled, Born Again.

It recounted how a stint in prison for crimes that he committed while he was in the White House resulted in his finding Jesus and committing himself to the Lord.

This approach did not stop with the 1970s. Today, it is a common thing for people who attend some churches to look around to see who is born again and who is not.

When someone who's a Christian calls me, many of you know I'm an attorney, and so I talk to people all the time. They call me on the phone as a potential new client with a legal problem.

[3:36] And often they're trying to decide if they want me to be their lawyer, and it's quite common for them to ask me if I am born again. I can't count the number of times over the years that I've been asked that question on a first phone call from someone calling me with a legal problem.

They want to know, Is this guy one of us? And will he be able to understand my Christian perspective? This is not an altogether bad way to think about what Jesus said to Nicodemus in today's Gospel reading.

But if the term born again is used only as a badge of who is a Christian and who is not, we are overlooking an awfully lot of what Jesus is saying here.

After Jesus uses this born again comment in verse 3, he mentions it again in verse 7. So it's no accidental turn of the phrase that John writes here, but a very deliberate attempt by Jesus to explain something.

Let's try and unpack what he's saying. On one level, this Pharisee, Nicodemus, is very right to question Jesus about this phrase.

[5:00] Look at verse 4. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

It's a rather incredulous comment about what Jesus said. And in effect, he's saying that such a thing is impossible. But Jesus goes on and explains in verse 5, and I'm going to read 5 through 8. Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is Spirit. Do not marvel that I say to you, you must be born again.

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound. But you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

[6:04] So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. What on earth is he saying here? Well, the first point to make is that if we think about what on earth, we're missing the point.

It's not on earth that such a thing is even possible. The phrase, born again, we're reading this in English.

It was written in Greek. And it's an odd phrase in Greek, just like it's an odd phrase in English. In Greek, the phrase could just as easily be translated as, instead of born again, born from above. There are alternatives. If you look at any translation footnotes in your Bibles, not these Bibles, they don't have the footnotes, but any Bible that you have that has footnotes, they'll give you that alternative translation.

So what does this tell us? It tells us that if we think in earthly, physical terms, Nicodemus is 100% right in his skepticism.

[7:13] Such a thing is just not possible. But as God says in several places in Scripture, with God, all things are possible.

The first point about this born again thing is that we do not and cannot do it. Only God can do it. Secondly, it is not a physical, earthly thing.

It is a thing which comes, as the alternative translation of the phrase born again reads, born from above. If you look at the footnotes, you'll see that section in there.

Thirdly, it's a very radical thing. It is an overwhelming change in a person. If someone approaches this as a thing that they do, and then they move on with their life with no apparent difference from what there was before, they are kidding themselves about being born again.

I like Chuck Colson's example. You remember who Chuck Colson was? Some of you are a little younger. You won't remember him. I remember him from my college days. He was a lawyer.

[8:31] And he was on President Richard Nixon's staff. Now, Richard Nixon was hated by liberal Democrats, like what I was at the time, just about as much as Trump is hated today by liberal Democrats.

He once said, Chuck Colson once said, I'd walk over my grandmother for Richard Nixon. He was a very tough guy.

He was very smart, absolutely brilliant, and ruthless. But when he became embroiled in the Watergate scandal, he was criminally charged in federal court and convicted of federal felonies, and he went off to federal prison.

It was in prison that he found Jesus, and in his own words was, quote, born again. I remember at the time hearing about that, and I thought it was a joke.

I scoffed at it, and I said, oh boy, a jailhouse conversion. How convenient. So, I thought of this born-again experience.

[9:40] I blew it off. But after Chuck Colson left prison, a disbarred lawyer, totally disgraced, he turned his life around 100%.

Many people don't know this. He didn't talk about it a lot. But he spent every Easter Sunday for the rest of his life, he only died about five years ago, I don't remember quite when.

He spent every Easter Sunday for the rest of his life in jail or in a prison, talking to prisoners, as part of an organization which he founded, which is called Prison Fellowship.

It was a prison reform organization, but it was way more than that. It was a way to get into prisons to be able to present the gospel of Jesus to those who were without hope there.

Chuck Colson totally changed his life. That's how radical this born-again experience is meant to be. So, a good question for you to ask of yourself if you claim to be a Christian is, how radical of a change is my born-again experience?

[10:50] The fourth point about this phrase, and the one most often missed, that it is really far more than the start of a Christian life.

We tend to think of born-again as an introduction to one's journey. It's often thought as being the first milestone. If you're not born-again, you're not a Christian. And once you're born-again, you've arrived.

You've now made it into God's kingdom. And that way of thinking of born-again is a first step, but it's just the first step of part of your spiritual journey. It's an introductory step, and now it's behind you. It happened a while back. Perhaps you did it on a certain day of your life when you gave yourself to Jesus like I did. And then you move on. You go on.

For me, that would have been February 17th, 1974, when I was a young student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was standing at the foot of Bascom Hill on a Sunday afternoon.

[11:55] But if you carefully read what Jesus says here, you can see that such a reading of this born-again phrase would miss much of the point of what he's saying. How do we know this?

To whom is Jesus speaking this entire passage? He's speaking to a devout Jew. And not only that, but a devout leader among the Jews.

But more than that, to a guy to whom Jesus is speaking is one who sought Jesus out, who recognized that Jesus is a teacher of great insight and one who has come from God.

and who, using the power of God, worked miracles, the miracles that he did. Jesus was not talking to a pagan or one who's unfamiliar with the scriptures, but rather one who had dedicated his life to God and sought to follow the scriptures.

We know from the Old Testament and from what Jesus says about the Pharisees that Nicodemus tried to get close to God by doing the right thing, by following the rules.

[13:04] He sought to obey the law, meaning all of the religious and moral rules set forth in the first five books of the Bible, also known as the Torah.

But unlike the other Jewish leaders who were critical of Jesus, this guy realized that Jesus was from God and had an understanding of truth that he himself lacked.

Hence he came to Jesus and he asked him, So what did Jesus say to this sincerely inquiring Pharisee when the guy asked him to explain this born-again comment?

Jesus tells him about the Spirit. How many times in verses 5 through 8 does Jesus mention the Spirit? I'm going to read it again and I'm going to emphasize each time.

Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

[14:11] Do not marvel that I say to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Four times Jesus mentioned Spirit in this passage, which is an answer to Nicodemus' question about being what this born-again comment is all about.

In other words, if you're not thinking about the Spirit, you're completely missing the idea of born-again. That Spirit is not a one-time experience which ushers you in as a Christian and then it's history for you.

How do we know that? Well, look at the last verse of the ones that I read, verse 8. In the last part of John 3, 8, there's this very, very odd, hard-to-figure-out phrase.

But if we unpack it and understand what Jesus is saying, we can start to get a glimpse about what Jesus meant when he said, born again.

[15:23] John 3, 8 reads like this, The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. What on earth does that mean? Well, firstly, nothing. If you're looking for an earthly answer, you will not find one.

It is and must be an answer from above, that alternative reading for the word born again. Secondly, it is Spirit. Now, the Greek word for Spirit is the same as the Greek word for wind.

It's just one word. P-N-E-V-M-A. I don't know how you say it. Pneu. Something like that. The word pneumonia, which is an infection of the lungs, is the English cognate word derived from that Greek word.

All right? So if you read John 3, 8, literally in Greek, it sort of reads like this. The wind or Spirit blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

[16:39] So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit or wind. Same word. One word. So read that way, the word wind or Spirit appears not four times, but five times in verses 5 through 8 in John 3.

So what is this wind or Spirit? Well, let's look at what Jesus says as to how it functions in a person who is born again. The first sentence of John 3, 8 says, The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

This wind or Spirit has a will of its own, and you can't explain it or figure it out or know in advance what it is going to do.

You can only experience it at the moment. So you don't make this wind act. It acts on you. Imagine you're standing in a field or on a hilltop and the air is absolutely dead calm.

No wind at all. You look around, you don't see anything, you don't hear anything. But suddenly, you hear it blowing as you feel it coming suddenly from one direction as it touches your face and your hair.

[18:01] There's a dull, low, very subtle sound of the wind that you can hear as it touches things around you. Before the wind blew and you heard and felt it, you had no clue as to which direction it would blow from or where it was blowing to.

But once it touches you, you now hear and feel it. You still do not know where it goes, when it will stop, when it will start. You only notice the immediate effect on you at this particular time and place. And unless it's a hurricane-force wind, you can simply ignore it if you're so inclined. The wind of the Spirit does not force you to do anything.

It's just a little suggestion of a direction to you. Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to us, if you are born again, this is how it will be with you.

You must be open to this subtle direction from the Spirit, this wind which blows up against you. You will not be able to discern in advance where the Spirit will direct you.

[19:21] On any given day, it might blow softly against you in a different direction than it did on the previous day. You can't follow a rule or a law or a habit or a pattern of your life and know that you're doing what God ultimately wants of you.

Your job, if you are born from above, is a matter of constantly discerning where the Spirit wants you to go and what it wants you to do.

Nicodemus' whole life was obeying a strict set of written rules. That is how he sought to get close to God. And he was a good guy.

After all, he came to Jesus, didn't he? We know he was a good guy. But Jesus said to him, It's not like that. You must be open to constantly feeling this Spirit blowing you one way or another.

You might even find yourself doing some things that the rules seem to contradict. Even the rules of the law. You might even touch a leper and pronounce healing.

[20:36] Lepers were unclean. And the law did not allow anyone to touch a leper or they would become unclean. That didn't stop Jesus who touched the leper.

Jesus wasn't made unclean. It was the other way around. The leper became clean. John 3.8 is an explanation of how one lives the life of a devoted follower of God.

And that is why and how God spoke to me and has really burned this verse into my soul. I have a theory about this. You won't find it in the Bible, but take it for what it's worth.

How often does this wind, this spirit, gently and subtly touch me in a given day and give me a direction? I would guess that it's maybe a hundred times a day.

Maybe a thousand times a day. That God sends his spirit to speak to me and call me to one or another thing to do. On a really perceptive day of mine, I discern maybe two of those times.

[21:49] On most days, my score is closer to zero. He wants me, Jesus wants me to be born from above, to be open, discerning, and always listening to the touch of that spirit, that wind blowing.

But then, I need to do something else. I need to actually do or follow what he wants me to do. It's not enough that we discern the wind, but we must flow with that wind.

If we ignore it, it does us no good. Actually, it's worse than that. In fact, if we get in the habit of ignoring the touch of the wind on us, sooner or later, we'll never feel that again.

We'll be numb or hardened to it. Hence, in this kind of a situation, we can easily say, there's no God. Because, we'll never feel him work or see him work around us.

Caleb mentioned it last week. There have been several prominent, popular Christians claim in the last few weeks that they're no longer Christians. They've abandoned their faith. I accept that.

[23:01] they became so immune to the touch of the Spirit on their lives, so ignoring of the subtle push of God's wind seeking to direct them, that for them, God was simply not there.

It's no wonder that such people renounced their Christian faith. If you're doing something immoral or wrong, and you ignore God's Spirit telling you to stop it, sooner or later, you will not hear the Spirit speaking to you.

There's no wind directing me, you will say. There is no God. That way, you can justify what you're doing and justify your unbelief. Thinking of born again in this way, it has less to do with some historical event in my life when I gave myself to Jesus, as evangelical Christians like to say. It's much more of a matter of a daily or hourly discernment and following of the Spirit than it is of what happened to me on that Sunday afternoon in 1974.

Or, said another way, the expression which Jesus uses in his conversation with Nicodemus, born again, has far less to do with when in the life of a Christian he gave his life to Christ as Lord and Savior, and far more to do with the daily and hourly openness of the Spirit than he wants what God wants us to do here and now.

[24:34] Now, that is not to say that turning to Jesus in some point in your life is not important. It is critically important, as we'll see in a few minutes as we continue with John 3.

But the born again term which Jesus uses is not so much about that as it is a matter of how we get in touch with God's continual and daily presence through discerning his Spirit.

This is not what Nicodemus' Pharisee friends believed. They thought you'd get close to God by being a good person, by following the rules. Jesus says no to that.

It's by the subtle listening of where the Spirit blows you and by following it. That's how you get close to God. Now, does Jesus say that there is no importance to coming to him to save people from their sins and making a commitment to him?

Absolutely not. To do what most people call being born again. He certainly does, and he says this in the very same conversation with Nicodemus. Drop down to verses 14 and 15 in this passage, and there's this very, very strange comment.

[25:55] It reads, and this is Jesus talking to Nicodemus, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

What is this Moses lifted up the serpent all about, and why does Jesus say this here? Well, remember that Jesus is talking to a devout Jew who knew his Torah very well.

Nicodemus would have known immediately the reference, probably wouldn't have understood it, but knew immediately what he was talking about. This Moses lifted up the serpent comment comes from our first reading today, which is why I changed the reading, which is Numbers 21, 4 through 9. And it is a very odd story also. The people, as they came out of Egypt, became impatient with God and grumbled against him.

They were in the wilderness having left Egypt, and their lives were immediately not super cushy. So they complained to God and criticized Moses, who brought them out there.

[27:08] In response to that, God sent what the scripture calls fiery serpents to bite the people. and many got sick and some died. Fiery serpents in the desert?

What on earth is that? Well, there were probably poisonous scorpions, of which there are a lot in the desert. The Sinai Desert has them, the American Southwest has them.

There are plenty of these little devils who will sting you, and they hurt like the dickens, and I guess some of them can kill you. God's solution for the disobedient and sinful people of this Old Testament account was to have Moses make a bronze statue of one of these scorpions and stick it up on a pole.

And then when the person looked up at the image of the serpent on the pole, as it says in Numbers 21.8, and again in Numbers 21.9, that person would, quote, live.

in this very peculiar account in the law, this is how these people were cured and how they live. It seems sort of crazy for people to be healed like that, but it's said twice in those scriptures.

[28:24] And once again, like I said before, when God says something in scripture twice, he's trying to tell you, I want you to listen to this. you'd think that to atone for the sin of disobedience that you'd have to do something, like wash yourself, or fast, or perform some good act, or give something to God.

But God did not establish anything like that to make these disobedient people live. He wanted them to look up at a bronze scorpion on a pole. I'm sure Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was

saying because he probably did not really understand this crazy account of Moses and the bronze serpent on the pole.

But when Jesus died on the cross and people thereafter look up to him on that cross as the way to salvation, suddenly this crazy story in Numbers 21 starts to look a lot less crazy and make a lot of sense.

So if you want salvation, if you want to live, Jesus says, look up to me and my cross, it seems sort of crazy, just like the odd story of the disobedient people in the Old Testament.

But the Spirit of God, quote, blows where it wishes and you hear it sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. God works in this seemingly crazy way.

[29 : 55] We need to do that. We need to look up to Jesus crucified on a Roman cross in order that we may live. I am absolutely certain that Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was saying, referencing that story in Numbers.

After all, he had not yet been crucified. I guess during the course of his life, Nicodemus became a committed Christian, so tradition, scripture doesn't tell us, but tradition tells us and understood at that point.

But this guy knew that Jesus came from God, so despite the cryptic answers he got from him, he wanted to know more. And we should be like that too, seeking from the Spirit that which he wants to speak to us day by day.

If we do that, we will have two experiences just like that of Nicodemus. We will be puzzled by what God is telling us.

And we will unravel its meaning for our lives only, not just as we discern the work of this wind, the Spirit, but then as we follow it. And we will get life, or in the words of Jesus at the end of this passage, eternal life.

[31 : 15] So what does this mean to us? If you are one here who has never given your life to Jesus as salvation for your sin, you need to do that.

You need to do that today. Your very life depends on it. Or not. If you do not do this, you can keep trudging on to the next day.

You can watch TV, enjoy pleasures, make money, ultimately die. God. You can easily go through life and say that there is no God.

Many people, in fact, maybe most people, do just that. If you have not had an episode or moment in your life where you were, as we popularly use this expression, born again, where you looked up at the image of a broken man on a cross and asked him for life, do so and do so today.

Talk to someone here about what you are doing, but just don't sail on through life ignoring God. But what does this mean for those of us who have given our lives to Jesus and who have had at some point this experience?

[32 : 42] We need to listen to Jesus' words about the wind or the spirit in John 3.8 and start to be open to its touch on us.

We have to start discerning or perhaps we've started better discerning that which the wind blows on us on any given day and the next day to discern if the wind is maybe blowing us in a different way. This born again or born from above experience perhaps says even more to us as Christians than it does to a non-Christian. If we think of born again as just something those who do not know Jesus then we're missing the point of what Jesus said here to Nicodemus.

So let us pray for that here and now.