The Man in Transition

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[0:00] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, amen. Please be seated. Let me just add my welcome to Nicole's. Welcome. It's lovely to see you all here this evening. If you're brand new, my name's Aaron and I look after this service.

Jesus had some fascinating ways of interacting with people, and he had some fascinating interactions with people. And in all of these interactions, we tend to learn two things. We learn something about God and Christ and his mission, and we learn something about ourselves. So this series starting today, taking us through to Easter, what we're going to do is we're going to be looking at people meeting Jesus in the Gospels. And we're going to learn about ourselves, and we're going to learn about God. And we're going to start with this really great passage here, John 3, looking at Nicodemus.

And if I was to summarize this story, here's what I'd say. The passage is about the human problem and about the divine solution. The human problem and the divine solution. So the human problem is actually twofold, we see in the passage. Firstly, we have a legal problem with God, a legal problem. The legal problem is this, is we have sinned, and there must be justice. The passage talks about that. More in the second half of talks about that. But we also have a moral problem. There is corruption in our hearts. There's selfishness in there. And you only have to be moderately self-aware to know that there is selfishness in our hearts. And in describing this problem, Jesus does not mess around. He uses lots of sort of word pictures to describe this moral problem that we have.

He says that people with that problem, he says, you love the darkness. He says, you love the darkness. And it's a strong love here. It's agape love. And he goes on to say, we resist the light. Why?

[2:20] Because light exposes. We love the darkness. It hides. Light exposes. All of a sudden, your Google search feed is just out there. Everyone's seeing it. And we don't want that. So we resist the light.

We love the darkness. We love the shadows because darkness covers things. And we don't want people to see what we really do, what we really think. And it's not just that we're embarrassed by it, because we actually don't want people to tell us not to do it anymore.

This is a universal problem. This is humanity's problem. No matter where you are in society. There's a famous story about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He was the guy who wrote the Sherlock Holmes novels. And he was a bit of a practical joker, apparently. And he wrote a telegram to some of his friends, the 12 most respected people that he knew in England. Wrote a telegram to the 12 most respected people he knew in England. And the telegram had four words. It simply said this. It said, flee, all is known. That's all it said. Flee, all is known. That's a true story. Eight of them left the country within 24 hours. We love the darkness, right? We hate being exposed.

So Christianity, how does it deal with this heart problem? And that's what the first half of the passage is about. And the solution, Jesus says, is that you need to be born again. Now Jesus really wants to get this idea across. He is desperate to get this idea across that we need to be born again.

[4:12] And the way he does that is very surprising. Let me explain. If you wanted to expose the idea that people love darkness and are sinful, how would you do that? You'd probably point to the worst people in society, the worst people in history. You'd point the finger at Hitler and Pol Pot, or you'd talk about the serial abuser in your city, or internet trolls. That's how you'd make your case. You'd be like, look at these people. They're terrible. Look at them. Humanity, we have this huge problem. It's terrible.

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It's terrible. You'd use the example of the worst people you could think of. Who does Jesus pick to make his big point that people are all a bit messed up? We have a heart problem. And here's the shock.
He doesn't point the finger at the worst people in the world. He picks the best person. He picks Nicodemus, a man at the top of his game. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a super respected person in the community, politically very powerful. And the passages says he was the, definite article the, the teacher of Israel. That's verse 10. So he was a big name, likely a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing council, very wealthy, a man who lived to a strict moral code. And Nicodemus is this guy who perhaps has seen Jesus or heard about Jesus' miracles and signs, and he comes to him for some religious dialogue, because he's an open sort of guy, believes in Jesus in his own way. Sounds amazing, doesn't he? Sounds like a great guy. And here's the shock of the passage. The human problem, our, our heart corruption is symbolized not by the worst in society, but by the best human.
This amazing guy, the best society has to offer, moral, humble, powerful. And Jesus points the finger at him and he says, you live in darkness and you need to be transformed. It's quite an astounding interaction here. So Nicodemus meets him and he says, let's talk about religion. Let's talk about your ideas and you're, seems like you're doing quite well. I mean, it's the voice of the establishment, isn't it? Powerful old white men, right? It's the establishment. You seem to be doing well, young man. We should talk about this. And Jesus just tears him apart. And in verse 10, he says, you have no idea what's going on, Nicodemus. And you should get this, he says. You should understand this, Nicodemus. Because you know your Hebrew Bible and you should understand this, but you don't.
And you don't because your heart, your heart is corrupt. And then Jesus says, and the solution, there's only one, and it's that you must be born again. And then there's this great line, verse 13, trust me on this, Nicodemus, I've been to heaven and back. I have a pretty good idea about this.
[7:12] We get a clue that this is sort of coming early in the passage in verse two. Did you notice what it says? It says about Nicodemus, it says, this man came to Jesus by night.

Now, John is not just sort of timestamping this event. John, who wrote this gospel, loves symbol-laden language. You'll notice it all over his gospel.
And one of the things you'll notice in the gospel of John is he's huge on dichotomies between day and night and black and white and dark and light. So this night is not this timestamp thing. It's trying to say something about Nicodemus. We see the same thing in John 13, when Jesus is interacting with Judas. In John chapter 13, after passing Judas a piece of bread, Jesus said to Judas, do it quickly.
You know, get on with it. I know you're going to betray me. I know you've just given your life over to Satan. You know, so just get her done, you know. And then it says this. So after receiving the morsel of bread, Judas immediately went out and it was night. It's a picture of Judas who's given himself over to darkness. So Nicodemus here, this really stand-up guy, by saying that he came at night, it's more than just, oh, he was a bit embarrassed to meet Jesus, or it just happened to be when he had a slot in his sort of day. He's saying that this guy, this stand-up, well-respected member of the community, was actually spiritually lost, was actually spiritually in darkness. So we have this human problem embodied shockingly in this really stand-up guy, a well-respected member of the community. And the divine solution is be born again. Okay, let's start talking about that.
What does that mean, be born again? It's a pretty maligned term nowadays. If you went to a dinner party and someone says that they'd been exploring Buddhism, Buddhism, people would say, oh, that's very interesting.
[9:32] And someone else pipes up and says, I've been reading Eckhart Tolle recently and Kahil Gibran, and I find it fascinating. People would be, oh, tell us more. And then you pipe up and go, you know, actually, I'm a born-again Christian.

That's going to ruin the party, isn't it? Like that will just, that's just crickets after that. So it's a maligned term. So let's get back to what the passage actually says it means.
You have a heart problem, a moral problem, you need to be born again. What does that mean? Well, it doesn't mean a do-over. I don't know if you guys have ever had that fantasy about doing your life again, and you sort of, you fantasize about, you know, I'd have a second chance, and I wouldn't. It's like, I would not date that person. I should have taken that job.

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I should have done this. I shouldn't have done that. Everything would be so much better, right? You think it through, right? I'd be in such a better place.
Folks, if you could do it again, you would, you might change some things, man, but you would still make, you'd still make a lot of the same mistakes. You would morally fail. You could have a million start overs, and the result would basically be the same. And that's because of our hearts. We have this heart problem. So born again doesn't mean a do-over. It doesn't mean that God gives you a second chance.
[11:02] It's sort of like, here's your second chance. Give it a college try. And it doesn't mean more information. So you make better decisions. That's what Nicodemus wanted, I think. I think he just wanted dialogue and information. No. When Jesus talks about being born again, he's talking about regeneration. He's saying that you get a whole new nature. But again, what do we actually mean by this? Let's dig into a little bit more. How does it work? It works like this. When you give your life to Christ, it's God putting his spirit in you, which is the very life of God in you, and you are changed. You are made alive to God. You see things differently. You have different priorities. The affections of your heart are changed. You have a different identity. You read the Bible, and you believe it. It moves you. I used to catch a bus to school when I was a kid, and I caught the bus for like 10 years. And I'd go past this church, own some property in the city, and on one four-story building, they'd painted John 3.16, which is in our passage tonight. And after passing it so many years, I'd learned it off by heart. And when we'd come up Queen

Street in Auckland City, I'd see it, and I'd turn my head, and I'd shout to the person beside me, for God's the love of the word, I knew it off by heart. It was a game. It meant nothing to me. Absolutely nothing. It meant nothing to me because I wasn't born again. See, being born again doesn't mean that Jesus becomes like this addition to your life. No, it's as if you were born a second time with a new heart, a new nature, a nature that's oriented to God and wanting to serve him. Augustine was this fourth-century theologian, a bishop in North Africa. And before his conversion, he was a bit of a sex addict, it would seem.
And there's a story of Augustine. He runs into a former girlfriend, a former mistress on the street, and he sees her coming from a distance, right? And he recognizes her, and he turns around and starts going in the opposite direction. And the woman is quite surprised, seeing her ex-lover walking away from her and yells out, Augustine, it is I! And Augustine continues to walk away and yells back, yes, but it is not I. See, being born again is being created again with a new heart.
God. That's what it means. And it's such a great metaphor, this birth metaphor is such a great metaphor for what God does, because it makes it very clear that it's nothing to do with your efforts. It's not like you're turning over a new leaf. It's not like you're really sticking to your New Year's resolutions this year. See, the rebirth is not something I do. It's something that God does in us, and he does it through his spirit. And that's what verse 5 is about. Verse 5, Jesus says, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That's a reference to Ezekiel 36. Ezekiel is describing a moment at some point when God will restore his people. And he says this, verse 25 of Ezekiel 36, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. And from all your idols, I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. And I'll put it within you, and I'll remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh. And I'll put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to obey my rules. God is saying, I'm going to transform my people by changing their hearts. I'm going to put my life in theirs. So it's not self-illumination.
[15:12] It's not self-transformation. It's God's work, which is why the metaphor, which is why this phrase, born again, is so perfect. I was at the birth of my three kids, and I mean, I'm useless, right? Like, I'm just holding, giving cups of water to my wife, trying not to faint. You know, that's basically your job.

But the main point I'm trying to get at here is babies. Amy's doing all the work. I'm not doing anything. Baby's not doing anything. These babies don't get themselves born. It's the work of somebody else. Somebody else suffers. Somebody else bleeds to make it happen. And at the end, there's life, and it's beautiful. That's what's such an amazing metaphor to use. Being born again is not the result of you trying harder. It's God's Spirit changing your heart. And what is so remarkable about this is the subject, the object of God's attention, us. It's not like we're jonesing for this rebirth either before it happens. John 3, 16.

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For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believed in him would not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world. The technical sort of theological definition of the world that God loves is a society organized in opposition to God.
For God so loved his enemies who did not want to be changed, who wanted the darkness, not the light.
God so loved his enemies. God so loved people who could not save themselves and did not want to be saved. God loved his people. He loved them so much he gave them the most precious thing in the world to him.
[17:07] God gave them the most precious thing in the world to him. He gave them his son so they could be born again. His enemies.

So being born again, being made new is God's work. We didn't want it but we desperately needed it. It's God's work and it was a costly work. Let me sort of start to bring this to a pointy end here. The passage you may have noticed uses the word believe a lot and that's very important. About seven or eight times. The tense, the grammatical tense of that word is present continuous.
So now and ongoing. So it's this continuous action. So this born again business is something we need to keep believing in. Why is that important? Because when we forget it, what happens?
It's very easy to become a religious observer. You become a functional Christian, right? You sort of do this stuff. You know like a Christian who understands what it means that they were born again, the miracle of that, the grace of that compared to the religious observer.
[18:14] Their experience of faith is going to be very different. I'll give you a few examples and finish up here. A Christian who knows they're born again obeys God because they want to be more like Jesus. Because they want to please God.

Because they think God is beautiful. The religious obey God. The person who has forgotten this. There's so much insecurity there around their salvation.
They obey to be accepted. But the gospel says, you're accepted, so you obey. The born again Christian prays to God.
Why? To get God. The reward of prayer is God. God. The religious, the observer, the person who's forgotten they're born again, forgotten that amazing work.
Prayer is a resource for controlling their environment. The born again Christian wants others to experience faith.
[19:14] And it's an overflow from their own experience. The person who's forgotten this, the practitioner, has no great desire for others to experience faith because they haven't experienced it.

The born again Christian knows the miracle of the rebirth, is constantly renewed by hope, believes in real change for themselves, believes the Spirit of God who gave them life, is the engine for ongoing change.
The religious person is cynical and often just holds to the form of faith, the artifacts of religion, loves the structural stuff, loves the institutional stuff. Folks, let's keep remembering what it is to be born again.
Now, if you are here and you are not a Christian, let me say this as plainly as possible. Jesus cannot be just a helpful spiritual addition to your life. Somebody you dialogue with, somebody you gain some more information from, and then go off and make your own decisions.
Your life will not change. You must be born again. Your heart must be renewed. Ask God for that to happen to you.
[20:34] And if you are here and you are a Christian and you have drifted and you have forgotten the miracle that it is, the wonder that God has put His life in you, His very life in you, folks, come back to that.

That's where the life is, man. That's where the treasure is. That's where the gold is right there. Amen.

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