

What Does It Mean To Be Born Again

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[0 : 00] Well, it's nice to be here and I'm very grateful to see you. This story from John chapter 3 is...

Well, it's hard to know. I would like to think that none of you had ever heard it before, and I'll tell you about it for the first time, but I suspect some of you may have heard it.

And one of the difficulties is that, in a sense, it's become a kind of institution, this story of Nicodemus, and because it has the famous line about you must be born again, and because you must be born again has become a kind of 20th century slogan of what it means to be a Christian. And as an expression, it is constantly and consistently ridiculed by people, even as it was by Nicodemus himself, who said, shall I enter a second time into my mother's womb?

What are you talking about? And so that the reaction it got then is the reaction it still gets from lots of people, that being born again is rather a lower level of religious experience than I'm prepared to stoop to.

[1 : 25] And so I have to try and, in my mind at least, I have to try and look at it again and get you to look at it with me to see if, in fact, it can't accomplish what it describes.

In other words, that the experience of the Christian church is that as you read this story, the thing that it describes is the thing that happens to you.

That is, that it's possible that you could, by reading the story about being born again, in fact, be born again, so that the potential for that to happen is right here and right now.

I want you not to be nervous about that statement, because Nicodemus was very nervous about it too, and he was reluctant that it should happen to him.

And I've drawn these six things here to show you the sort of six people that we learn. You know, it's sort of, you can look at Nicodemus in six different ways, so that I think that you might be able to fairly strongly identify with him.

[2 : 58] And he was a brave man in that he recognized that there was something wrong, that there was a need for change, that the sum total of things added up to less than there is, you know, that there is a need for change in the world.

And that's why, in his experience of life, there's got to be something more. And when he put all the factors and all the dimensions of his life together, he was aware that there's got to be something more.

more and I think that's one of the ways in which we can all identify with him is if you look at your own life and you know add your your your salary and your house and your family and your assets and your experiences and your health and all those things together and saying this should be enough to make any person happy and you look at it closely and you say but somehow there's got to be something more well Nicodemus was that kind of person he recognized that with everything that he had and he was a man of honor a man of distinction a man who was held in respect a man who was a leader and ruler in his own community but he recognized that there was something more required he recognized in a sense that there had to be there had to be a change something had to happen because there was something more to this what happens to people in that situation is that they you know they tend to create we I should say we tend to create delusions for ourselves to make ourselves think that there is something more and we we create our delusions and then we live with them as though they were real but no deep in our hearts that they're not and that and that we have we have that problem to deal with so that's the first sort of phase of who of who Nicodemus is the the second thing he recognized in a sense was that this man Jesus Christ needed to be checked out personally it was there was he'd heard rumors about him and and he the the sort of street talk about him he had heard the members of the Sanhedrin had discussed it the power that

he had displayed he knew things about Jesus that aroused his curiosity I met somebody who was on holidays last week and

Tuesday when the famous announcement from Bill van der Zem was made and he made a point of being outside Bill van der Zem's office when Bill came out from having made when our late premier came out from having made the announcement he was right there on the spot which was an important point I guess in his memory now will be that that he was there at the moment and and and I think that Nicodemus was the kind of man who who wasn't prepared to accept what he heard what he read in the paper or what he saw on the television but wanted to know for himself and so he he went to find out who who Jesus was on a first-hand encounter he was he was a man to who had reservations and that he was quite clear that he didn't intend to become one of this man's disciples he wanted to know about him but he had no intention of committing himself as a disciple of him and certainly that's a demand that our society puts on us that any educated member of our society should know something about

Jesus but not enough that you might get too involved with him or come to put your faith and trust in him so you keep your reserves all clearly in place that you have no intention of going any further than uh... then uh... respectability demands you you uh... you go by night so that it's not made a public occasion you don't talk to anybody about it you don't tell anybody where you're going you just go and find out for yourself and a lot of people i guess and perhaps perhaps we could get a hundred stories from this room of people who made such investigations sometimes sometimes with fatal results uh...

[8 : 06] uh... in a good sense uh... the other thing about him was that that uh...

you you you might say that he was uh... he was a very religious man not not religious in in uh... in a way that is unfamiliar to you but uh... much more religious uh...

and much more uh... characteristic of who you are than you might be prepared to admit uh... he was he was religious in in that sense and that was that he he had a sense of what was good he had a sense of what was ethical he had a sense that uh...

that there was purpose and there was meaning and there was a reward for the good and probably some punishment for the evil and uh... that uh...

[9 : 08] it was better to be good than to be bad it was better to be honest than to be a liar it was those kind of basic religious instincts were built into him just as i suppose in mo in the case of most of you uh...

they're not lovely story in the globe and mail this morning for preachers anyway uh... about uh... uh... uh... a black mailer in japan did you read that story he he got lists of the most famous and prominent people in japan and wrote hundreds and hundreds of letters to them informing them that he knew about the dark side of their lives and he was prepared to reveal it unless they were prepared to send him some money and uh...

he collected thousands of dollars uh... until somebody found out that he didn't know anything about anybody well uh...

uh... that uh... that idea is patented by the way i don't want you to lie you've got to get my permission before you can use it here i the uh...

he was he was religious in in the sense in which our world thinks of religion religious religious in a sense that makes no distinction between whether you're a hindu or whether you're a sikh or whether you're a a protestant or whether you're a catholic or whether you're jewish or whether you're a muslim or whether you're a confucianist or whether you belong to the rotary club uh...

[10 : 56] it's uh... it's all the same thing basically and uh... and uh... that kind of general religiosity which i think has roots deep in our society and in our culture and to which we generally ascribe at least in terms of our public lives uh...

that religion was nicodemus's religion and uh... and uh... and uh... he was as you can learn from the second line of the passage you have in front of you he was a pharisee and uh...

i checked out what pharisees were pharisees were people who took the torah which is genesis, exodus, leviticus, numbers, and deuteronomy the first five books put the scribes to work on them to see what they said the scribes said they have these 613 commandments that you are required to obey you know and uh...

for 248 of these commandments were positive 365 of them were negative and uh... and you were to be taught and instructed so that there is no activity that you could possibly become involved in in which there was the slightest danger of your transgressing any one of these laws and so uh...

most of us are surrounded by laws and traditions like that and this became this became for the pharisees the way they live uh...

[12:41] there is in the anglican church and i don't want to be disrespectful in any way but uh... there's lots of anglicans who believe that you stay on your knees till the candles go out and uh...

don't get up before that point you know now that's that's a very that becomes a very important tradition you know and uh... the putting out of the candles becomes a very important ceremony that officially ends the service and if anybody breaks with that but you know what we think of people like that and so uh...

you can uh... you can get a whole community held together by traditions such as this and uh... they can exert considerable influence on one another by doing this and uh...

that's what the the pharisaical community did uh... and uh... and i'm not ridiculing it because basically most of the religious observances of our life are pharisaical it's just exactly the pattern we follow uh...

when a couple come to the church to get married they have the feeling that this minister who's going to solemnize the ceremony has a hundred and eighty three rules that he knows about that they don't know about and they try and get them out of them you know as to how do you do this and how do you do that and how do you do this and how do you do that and you have to work on all and what side do i stand on and who stands here and it goes on and on and on because it's generally felt that because i am a religious man and i am solemnizing the ceremony that i know all the hidden rules and they need to know them or else they won't be officially married it could be as bad as that and so uh...

[14:34] some people in revolt against that get married on sky trains and things like that you know but uh... the trouble is their kids will grow up thinking they're not married unless they got married on a sky train so you know the thing tends to backfire well this is this is who this this pharisee is i mean he is right in the mainstream of religious observance in his community uh...

one of one of the reason that a pharisee would not eat at the home of anybody who wasn't a pharisee here's a kind of nice little lesson in this uh...

uh... was because if he sat down to meat and potatoes in your house and you hadn't paid your tithe before you bought the meat and potatoes to put on the table then that food was contaminated because you were uh...

you were using tithe money you were eating money uh... food that really belonged to god because the tithe hadn't been paid on it you see how i could work that uh...

anyway it's a good point and i i uh... uh... but in that sense you have you have uh...

[16:07] uh... you have the picture of of a very religious man not not different from us but religious in this in the way that we are instinctively and culturally uh...

conditioned to be religious he was very much so so that uh... you have that that religious man uh... the other the other characteristic of him which i uh...

is that uh... that he was a man who was uh... looking for a kingdom you know uh... he had some vague notion that somewhere at some time everything was going to work out right and whatever it was it was going to work out right he thought of as the kingdom the kingdom will come and uh... so he he had that kind of basic human instinct that that would happen and again he's he's uh... he's very like us in that way he he had that uh...

that sense so that remember when uh... when paul was on trial uh... before uh... agrippa in the last part of the acts of the apostles and he was trying to explain why he was standing in front of them in chains he said well i was brought up in the jewish religion and i was taught morning and night to pray for the coming of the kingdom and paul said in effect it's come and they left him in chains you know because it's it's a kind of prospect that people like to have but they don't like to think it's going to happen to them you know it's something that's down the line in the future sometimes and uh...

[18:08] nicodemus had that but uh... he he wasn't prepared to think that that it could happen you know it's it's not unlike the encounter in the fourth chapter which i guess we get to next week uh...

where he's talking to the woman at the well and the woman says we know that when he comes then we will know the truth and jesus says i that speak to you am he you're in front of it right now the truth that you're looking for and uh...

nicodemus was a man who believed in it but kept it at a distance and the other thing about nicodemus which uh... his the last picture of him which i want that he was a literalist you know and

uh...

he he couldn't pick up this religious language the difficulty being you see that what uh... what uh... the difficulty that he was having was that jesus was talking about a kind of spiritual reality and nicodemus you know nicodemus immediately tried to turn fundamentalist on him and say if you said i gotta be born again that means i have to enter a second time into my mother's womb and be born and that is ridiculous in the extreme and of course a lot of people dismiss the spiritual reality of our lives by trying to interpret it literally and saying of course it wouldn't work it's meaningless it's outside the realm of our lives and so there's lots of reasons and i i try to put them in front of you there why nicodemus could be sitting right here and nobody would notice him because in many ways he would be like all of us he would be very easy to identify with we would know him we'd recognize him we'd respect him we'd understand him we would know who he was that's the man that comes to jesus and jesus says to him you must be born again and and nicodemus has real trouble he is jesus goes on to say you must be born again in the sense that you must be born of water and of the spirit and nicodemus was well informed enough to know that the water referred to the water of baptism of the kind that john the baptist had been using in the river jordan where people had gone out to him be baptized and to say yes if the kingdom is coming i want it to come and i want to be a part of it and i am prepared to be baptized into that faith i am prepared to accept the necessity of change i am prepared to put my faith and trust in god's provision for me i am prepared to recognize that my religion has not been and never will lead in and of itself and i am prepared to drop my reservations i am prepared to see the reality of the kingdom and i'm prepared to encounter the spiritual reality which is the ultimate reality and that's what had to happen and that's what jesus said to him there's got to be a kind of radical discontinuity nicodemus between the pattern of your life up to this point and what happens from this point on tom harper is in town pushing his book life after death and i heard him yesterday on the radio when i was traveling from vernaby back to vancouver and he made the point that people who have these near death experiences that it changes their life very radically you know they have the tunnel experience with the light at the end of the tunnel and so on they talk about all sorts of things but he says it changes them radically well he said more than many months with a psychiatrist could change you just facing that reality and what what jesus i think does for us and what he purposed to do for nicodemus in saying except you be born of water and of the spirit is to say that there needs to be a point of change

and that god by his spirit is able to affect that change in your life that god will do it that if he doesn't do it it's not worth playing around with because it's got to be of god it's got to be an activity of his holy spirit jesus says to nicodemus you you are a teacher of israel and you don't understand it you are a religious man and you don't know what i'm talking about and then he gives him the illustration of the wind blowing he says you can go to the realm of nature and you can experience the wind which can be a gentle zephyr on a summer evening or it can be a devastating tornado and you don't know where it comes from and you don't know where it goes to but you have an experience of it right now and jesus says so is everyone that is born of the spirit and you know that that word spirit and the word wind are the same in hebrew and they and that that jesus is describing this this wind of the spirit that moves through people's lives and they know that though they may not know where it comes from and they may not know where it's going to lead to they know the reality of the indwelling of the spirit which is expressed by a faith in jesus christ which is expressed by this person recognizing that we don't have a longing for change that is never going to be met but that longing for change is because there is a change which is affected by god holy spirit in our lives that that change concerns the person of jesus christ that it's that religion is very often for most of us the most serious problem in facing that change that you are looking for a reward for your religiosity instead of an infilling of the holy spirit as a gracious activity of god towards you instead of a reward for your activity towards him and that your reservations are gone your hope of the kingdom is realized and the literal reality you recognize to be the spiritual reality of god's spirit at work in your life so that's what it means to be born again that's what happens to people and sometimes people regret that it happens sometimes they fight against it happening sometimes they deny that it's happened

[25 : 42] I think what john tree teaches us is is to accept that it's happened and that that once god the spirit has moved in your heart and life to bring you to put your faith in jesus christ turning back may be a mental concept that you can entertain but it's not a reality that there is no other way and that this this faith in christ which you have been brought to by the work of the spirit is a work of god

in your life the consequences of which you've got to spend the rest of your life working out in the obedience of faith let me pray for you our god there are so many things that we learn to depend upon and uh things that we uh that we use to resist the gracious renewing work of your holy spirit in our lives making us as your gift into the people that you want us to be and that we are probably in some measure reluctant to be we ask that uh as each of us considers the story of of nicodemus being confronted by christ's ultimatum you must be born again that by your holy spirit you will work in each of our hearts and lives making us aware that we too must be born again and making us aware that perhaps having experienced that in the past we need the constant renewing power of the holy spirit to sustain us in in that life which is not of the flesh but which is of the spirit and so we commit one another to you now and ask that you will by your grace do that work of the spirit in all our lives in your own time in your own place in your own way but help us not to accept any substitutes but only the genuine work of your holy spirit in our lives we ask this in jesus christ's name amen yes you yes you yes