

Nicodemus

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[0 : 00] And there's no felt pen to do any pictures on. And I can go and get one if you don't mind me. I'm looped.

So I'm hooked. Has everybody got a Bible in front of them so they can... You what?

Oh, do they? Well, I can read it for you. I can come and interpret it for you. Good.

The passage that we're going to be working on is John 3, verses 1 to 9. And those are found in the Bible, which you have in front of you, on page 89 of the New Testament section.

Is that right? Yeah. Good. And it's the story of Nicodemus.

[1 : 38] And I will read it for you. And then down as far as verse 9. There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God. No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, that's translated born again or born from above, unless one is born again.

But we probably know it in the vernacular of our contemporary society, mostly as the term born again. Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus said to him, Jesus answered, truly, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

[3 : 16] That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born anew.

The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus said to him, how can this be?

Now, this is a very familiar passage of scripture, and yet, for most of us, the very familiarity of scripture is one of the biggest obstacles we have, because we've heard it over and over again, and we consider it very unlikely that there is anything in it which we don't already know.

And so I would like to remind you that if you are thinking that way, you are wrong. And that the nature of scripture is that what you find written on the page, what diligent scholars of the New Testament pour over in every syllable, in every language, in every one of hundreds of manuscripts to find out what is on the page, that the page only serves to introduce you to the person of Jesus Christ.

[5 : 05] And as you know, in every human encounter, person to person, there is always something new. So that even though the words may be familiar, and the manuscripts may be all known and carefully classified, and the sum total of all that the scholars down through 20 centuries have had to say about this passage, it nevertheless comes alive again for us right now in this place because of the nature of scripture that Christ taught us when he said, you search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life.

He said, the function of the scriptures is to introduce you to me. The verse goes, you search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, but they are they which testify of me.

So that what we do is use the scriptures to encounter a fresh and a new, in the new circumstances of our lives, the person of Jesus Christ.

That's the function. And that's very important because, and you'll see why it's important as we go along.

What I want you to do is I want you to see in this passage the fact that who you are and who Nicodemus was, that there is a great deal in common between you and Nicodemus.

[7 : 05] And I want us to use this to give you sort of six, six pictures of the one person of Nicodemus.

I want you to know six things about him that we learn from the, from the passage that's in front of you. The first thing I want you to recognize is that when this man, an old man, full of seniority, full of honor, full of dignity, full of authority, having come, you know, to all that mature years in a lifetime can bring a man, here he was, recognizing that something was radically wrong.

that there was, there was still a need for change. And so I want you to see Nicodemus first as somebody for whom, who was, who was looking for, said that there must be something different. Just in the same way that, that you might say of, of reading this morning's paper, there's something radically wrong in our world.

The, the situation of teachers on strike, the situation of refugees in Kurdistan, the situation of enmity between people, all the situations that you read about give you a deep sense that somehow the sum total of things is less than there really is.

[9 : 01] You know, that after you've seen all that there is in the newspaper for today, you recognize that there's got to be something more. This does not explain what's happening.

You see corruption on this side, you see insight, you see cataloging of facts and figures, you see all those kinds of things, but you have a sense that ultimately there must be something more.

It's the sense that, a kind of sense that on a beautiful day like this, in a beautiful city like this, that there is something wonderfully good about life, which is hard to get in touch with, but you're sort of reassured on a day like this that it must be there.

It's, you know, that you talk about the sum being, that the, what is the sum being, the sum is more than the, how's it go?

No, the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Now what Nicodemus was saying is that, that the whole, that the sum of the parts is less than the whole.

[10 : 13] You know, that putting it the other way around, I've got it, I've got you thoroughly mixed up on the subject. What, what I think Nicodemus is saying is that there has got to be something more.

There is all that there is in terms of human experience, human history, human understanding, human achievement, human technology, all that. But there is a deep sense that there needs to be something more.

and that's why Nicodemus left his home after dark and went and sought Jesus. Because he knew that there had to be something more.

He didn't know where it was going to come from. And I think one of the difficulties of when we get older and most of what life has for us we've already experienced, you are more than convinced that there's got to be something more.

So this may be the phenomena of an older man coming to the point, you know. If you, if you read, there's an article actually on the back page of the Globe this morning about aging, you know, and the man talking about reaching the apex of his career as the vice president of an association and that he was frankly disappointed.

[11 : 36] You know, he realized that he was at the top of all that he was ever going to be. And yet, that wasn't enough. He recognized there needed to be something more.

And, and that was one way that I think we can identify with Nicodemus is that in terms of our own life experience, we know that there needs to be something more.

whatever it is we're here for, there needs to be something more. Well, that leads to the, to the second Nicodemus whom I'll put over here.

This is, this is always the same person, you know. And the thing that had come into his life was that he, he now was investigating the remote possibility that whatever there was that there, that was more than, than all he had experienced as yet, whatever there was, might somehow possibly be connected with the person of Jesus Christ.

And he was, the, his awareness of Jesus Christ had come, as you read here, because of the signs he had done. So that he goes to Jesus and he, he says, uh, Rabbi, that was giving him a name which was probably more than Jesus deserved by, you know, uh, had more honor in it than, than Jesus rightly could claim, except from the loyalty of friends.

[13 : 15] 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. and so he was, he was really curious, you might almost say that

the, the, the, the cross was in the shape of a question mark, see, that he was, he was curious to find out how it was that this itinerant preacher from Galilee could do the things that he had heard he had done.

He probably hadn't witnessed anything, but he had heard that he had done them. when you go through the gospel of John, there are seven signs and it's called the book of signs, the gospel of John is.

The seven signs in John, and I'll try and tell you as many as I can remember and you can tell me what the rest are. The seven signs in John are the changing of the water into wine, the healing of the nobleman's son, the man who was healed at the pool of Siloam, remember, who was waiting for the waters to be disturbed, Jesus walking on the water, Jesus feeding the five thousand, Jesus raising Lazarus.

You nailed me, Beth. I'm asking you for the next one. The next one is let me think what it is.

We've done water and wine, nobleman's son, the Siloam, the feeding of the five thousand, the walking on water, the blind man in John chapter nine. Those are the seven signs.

[15:09] And you remember when you get the story of the changing of the water into wine, it says this first sign Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, manifesting forth his glory and his disciples believed on him.

That's in chapter two. Well, it's these signs that had come to the attention of Nicodemus when he goes to him and he says, Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

So, whatever it was, he recognized that there needed to be something more, he recognized that in Jesus, there was something more because he was doing things that just weren't part of human experience or human activity.

Humans didn't know about those things. So, he recognized in Jesus someone who needed to be investigated. The third thing that you've got to recognize is that Nicodemus was very careful to say no, you know, to make it very clear that though I am coming to you and though I am talking to you, I have no intention of becoming a disciple of yours, which makes him very like most of us.

We'd like to know about Christianity, but we don't want to get involved in it. and you see that when he comes to him and he comes at night, he comes anonymously, so to speak, and he's not prepared to become a disciple.

[17:02] You can see in everything he does that kind of reservation. And that kind of reservation is built into most of us. We don't want to commit ourselves.

We would like to be able to understand Christianity or understand the teachings of Jesus or understand the phenomena of who Jesus is and what he did, but still to keep our distance so that we're not committed.

I mean, that's what people do all the time. They want to know Jesus without becoming involved with him. And that was another aspect of the different manifestations of who Nicodemus was.

He was one who wanted to know about Jesus without becoming involved with him. the next thing that he wanted to know was, and that I want you to, if you want, to see Nicodemus in this way, that he was a very religious man.

And he was religious in the same way that all of us are religious. I mean, because I think we all are. I think one of the profound problems of humanity is that we are all so terribly religious.

[18:32] And it's so unhelpful to us to be religious in this way, because ultimately it is religion that keeps us from hearing the gospel.

Religion makes it very difficult because religion generally is understood as building up within yourself a certain equity, a certain spiritual equity in which you have worked hard, you have serious questions you want to ask God, you have done all that you could possibly be expected to do, you have done more than it is your share to do, you have observed certain religious events and certain things, and you build up this kind of spiritual equity so that when the gospel comes along and says all your righteousnesses are as filthy rags, as Jeremiah said to his people, we are somewhat incensed.

You say, what's wrong with him? I'm reconnected. All right. Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

Remember I was talking to you about this a little earlier when I was talking about the scriptures. The Pharisees were the people who had the Torah.

And the Torah was the first five books of Moses, what we call Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers.

[20 : 21] Those were the books. And the Pharisees paid very close attention to what was written in the book. And they felt that God had committed himself to this book.

And if they could properly understand what this book said, and if they could properly do what they were told to do in the book, then they would have to be right with God.

So they went at the book and just tore it to pieces in terms of finding out everything that it said. and they had the scribes working on it all the time.

If you've read any of those Asher Lev books, you know what I mean, those novels about the boy who's brought up in a Jewish home and how he's trained by the rabbis and they discuss and they go over passages and they look at them and they get every possible nuance of meaning out of them.

Well, that's what was done to the five books of Moses which were the Torah and they knew exactly what the Torah had to say. They knew that in the Torah you could from the Torah you could extract 613 commandments so that you knew that you had not ten commandments but you had 613 things that you were told to do and they did this by going over every syllable of the Torah.

[21 : 58] Of these 613 commandments 248 were things that you should do, do this and 365 where don't do this.

So they were told what to do and what not to do. And they took these 613 commandments and then they sort of built a hedge around them so that you never by accident would knowingly fail to do what you were told to do or do what you were not told to do.

So they sort of hedged them about and it became acutely important to observe the commandments. Now, you see, you may think that that's extraordinary but it's exactly what we do because we are religious in the same way.

I suspect that I will create misunderstanding by telling you this, but a church like this is just abounding in people who think that my job is to tell them what to do, that it matters a great deal to me that the bride should come up on the left arm of her father and not the right arm.

And you go on and on and on with details of traditions that have been established, that you do it this way and not that way, and you don't do this and you do do this.

[23 : 37] And people build up around a church like this a whole sense of this is the right way and this is the wrong way to do it. Now, traditions are very helpful and they save us an enormous amount of time.

Because I say, yes, that's right, the bride comes up on the left hand of her father and goes down on the left side of her groom. That's all. And this is all, as everybody knows, because the groom has to pull his sword out with his right arm, to defend his bride.

So it's all worked out. Well, that's the kind of thing, that those kinds of traditions, which are totally benign as far as I'm concerned and probably helpful, we have lots of them.

But they don't get you anywhere in themselves. They sometimes are helpful and all right, but they don't accomplish anything.

And to know all of them and to observe all of them adds up to what somebody calls diddly squat.

[24 : 46] It doesn't lead anywhere. But that's, in a sense, how people tend to do it. And that's what happened here.

We had a man in the congregation a few years ago who's left for the United States somewhere. But he used to go at a kind of public invitation to a gathering of Jewish people here in Vancouver on a Friday night.

And he told me that on one occasion, the hall in which they were meeting, that somebody had failed to turn the lights on. and because it was already past sundown, and so was the beginning of the Sabbath.

And they didn't want to transgress the Sabbath law. And knowing that he was a Gentile, they tried to casually persuade him to turn the lights on so that they didn't break the Sabbath by pushing the switch.

Well, you see, that's what I mean. Those are lovely things, but they don't add up very much in terms of the ultimate significance. And that's what happens, you see, to the religious person, that he gets caught in that.

[26 : 12] There's one actually illustration that one of the commentaries gives, which I thought was quite interesting. One of the reasons the Pharisees wouldn't go to a Gentile home to share roast beef and potatoes with you at supper is because you probably had not paid your tithe to God.

And so the food that you put on the table was bought with money which belonged to God and therefore was not available to anybody to eat.

And so they weren't prepared to eat food which was purchased with money which had not been tithed. In other words, unless your tithe comes off the top of everything, then what you might buy could in fact be robbing God because you paid for it with money that you should have already given to God.

So you can see how in a very profound sense Nicodemus, like us, was a very religious man.

And unfortunately, well, you see what happened to it when you see how Jesus dealt with him.

[27 : 53] So the next thing that I want you to see about him is that he was somebody who you, I mean, this really isn't very much help, but it's fun for me.

But here he was, here you see. He was a man who was looking for the kingdom, you know, and because Christ refers to it.

And this is quite close to this idea in that that the idea that there is going to be a kingdom of God, something quite different.

from the kingdoms of this earth, that there is going to be a kingdom. And that was built right into Nicodemus' thinking, as it is to ours.

I mean, when we say, thy kingdom come, what do we mean? What are we thinking? What do we think those words mean? Why do we say them? What kind of hope does it engender in our hearts and lives?

[29 : 12] What do we do with that? Well, that was what Nicodemus did. He said, and that's why Jesus said to him, you won't even see the kingdom unless something very peculiar happens to you.

And so there he was. He was somebody who looked for a kingdom in almost the same sense in which Paul talks about it when he's on trial in Caesarea before King Agrippa.

And he says, he says in his defense as he stands before them in chains, he said, do you know why I'm here? Do you know why I've got these chains on?

He said, because I have been brought up praying for the coming of the kingdom. We pray in the morning, we pray at night, we pray day after day after day for the coming of the kingdom.

And he said, with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the kingdom has come. So why am I in chains? Well, it's the kind of peculiar reality of our religious experience that we expect this thing, but we don't let it happen to us.

[30 : 34] You know, we don't want it to happen. Like the woman at the well who, when she was really cornered by Jesus, and we'll probably get to her next week, when she was really cornered by him, and she said, well, the only way out of this situation is to say, I know there's going to be a day when he will come, and when that day comes, I want to be there.

And Jesus said, I would speak to you of me, for you, madam, the day has come right now. And that's something that Nicodemus had problems with, too.

He wanted there to be a kingdom, but he wanted it to be somewhere way off from the distance. The last thing about Nicodemus is that he was a literalist.

You know, that's a... And when Jesus spoke to him and said, you must be born again, he... he said, he said, you know, I should enter a second time into my mother's womb and be born?

What are you saying? How ridiculous. You know, that that's... He simply didn't understand. Well, that's...

[31 : 53] That's what... That's what... That was the kind of person that Nicodemus was, and I have no trouble identifying with him at every point. You know, that I am somebody who looks for change and that I am somebody who wants to think about Jesus and whether he has some part.

And I am somebody who has got real reservations about whether or not you should be a disciple. And I am somebody who is steeped in religion. And I am somebody who is anticipating a kingdom in the distant future.

And that I am somebody who has the practical reality to know that... I'm wandering around too much, Joel.

Anyway, that's the man. And how does Jesus deal with him? Well, I want to tell you three ways in which Jesus deals with him.

the first thing he says to him is that you must be born again, which was what you would call in modern parlance very direct of counseling.

[33 : 20] And he wasn't trying to make it easier. He said, that's what's necessary. you have to be born again. That there is a radical discontinuity between what is and what needs to be.

And that radical discontinuity is something that has to break into your life so that, in effect, you start life all over again. You start again a new kind of life.

The life you are living now is subject to a process of law and sin death. That's the direction you're moving in.

That's where your path lies. You're moving towards it. And there is nothing that is going to break in and interrupt that from your point of view.

Something has to happen in which you are born from above. God has to do something. And you have to be born again to a new reality.

[34 : 29] You see, the heart of the new reality is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The pattern of human life towards law, sin, and death has to be broken by an entirely new pattern.

And the entirely new pattern begins with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And you have to, you have to, in a sense, get hold of that life which begins with the resurrection.

The other life has hold of you. You have to get hold of the life which begins with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so, and that's what Jesus is telling him, that there needs to be something break in to the whole direction and pattern of his life.

And the second thing that Jesus says is that this is something which, not which you can do, but which is done for you.

You see, and that's where the world is turned upside down. Because our most basic consciousness of ourselves is that the end result of our life will be the sum total of what we have managed to do with our life.

[36 : 05] And what happened, what Jesus says to him is, this new birth is not going to come from you, it's going to come from God. And that's what you require.

You need God's intervention in your life. You need God to break into your life. You know the direction of your life. God has to break in and change the direction of your life.

And that interruption is the new birth. he goes on to explain thirdly to Nicodemus how it worked.

And he says, you're a teacher of Israel and I should be teaching you this. And he says, you know there's a physical reality and a material reality but there's also a spiritual reality.

He said, if you want to know what the spiritual reality is like, look at the physical world. In the physical world you experience the blowing of the wind.

[37 : 17] You know, you're standing there and maybe if you're in a sailboat you experience it more dynamically than in other ways but you do experience the blowing of the wind.

You don't know where it comes from, you don't know where it's going to, but you know the wind is blowing. That's something you experience physically. Now you will probably know that wind and spirit are the same word.

It's like they're pneumatic tires. In Greek it's the word pneuma. P-N-E-U-A. So that Jesus says to him, this spiritual reality is comparable to the physical reality of the wind blowing.

That the Holy Spirit blows and you experience it. It becomes something that happens to you as God the Holy Spirit blows. So that the wind is the physical dimension of the physical sort of manifestation of how the Spirit works in your heart.

And so that's what Jesus has to say. And in the passage that we read, Nicodemus is still in a state of unbelief.

[38 : 46] And he says, how can these things be? well, that's the third chapter of John sort of wanders away then.

And Nicodemus gets lost in the shuffle and the passage goes on with some further teaching, which may have been given to Nicodemus or may have come later, we don't know.

But there is one beautiful statement in the Gospel of John about Nicodemus. And that was when Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate to get the body of Jesus and got permission from Pilate to take the body and put it in his own tomb.

He had somebody to help him. The person that helped him was Nicodemus. So that's the sort of conclusion in Scripture of the Nicodemus story, and it's a very powerful conclusion.

Now, let me just tell you, though, that this story is a kind of pivotal story in the whole of the New Testament because it has to do with individual salvation.

[40 : 18] How do I know that I have eternal life? Personally, how do I know it? How do I know that the kingdom of God has come for me, that it is the dominant reality of the breath that I draw at this moment, is that is the kingdom of God?

How possibly could I know it? you know, we might consider, you know, that we might stand in this place and say, well, I know about it and I understand it, but it's not part of me.

Well, the Bible is confusingly simple about this. When it says things like, you cannot say that Jesus is Lord, Lord, but by the Holy Spirit.

You can't do it. And so, you might take a moment quietly to yourself and ask yourself whether you can say, Jesus is Lord.

God. And if you can say that, know that it's not a conclusion that you've arrived at by a process of logic.

[41 : 48] It's a conviction you've come to by the inbreeding of the Holy Spirit. Tattooed on you, but it isn't.

it's the gracious work of God's Holy Spirit which says, Jesus is Lord, which says, I believe.

That's, it's very, very simple. And it's very, very important. That's why we're told to be very careful not to offend the Holy Spirit, not to fight against what the Holy Spirit may have to say in our lives.

And so the new birth begins with the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing us to personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, you may want to demonstrate that by going as a missionary to the cannibals of New Guinea and being eaten alive, or at least boiled to a tender state and then eaten.

[43 : 12] That may be a help to you to prove that you are a Christian. But long before you get there, you could know simply by the witness of God the Holy Spirit in your heart in which you say I believe.

I love to go on, but I just want to say one more thing, which is important.

All of us, I shouldn't say all of us, but I suspect it is all of us. We are angry with God because my ears are too big, my life is too soon over, I have been subject to disease, I have been subject to pain, I have been subject to suffering, I have been subject to this, I have been subject to that.

And we have these things about which cause us to be resentful to God because he has seen fit to deal us such a circumstance in the course of our lives.

And of course, the thing that you have to do is to know the grace of God in coming to terms with that reality, you know, so that my life is three quarters over, you know, I am afflicted with this particular condition, I have suffered this particular loss.

[44 : 53] And God in his grace and by his Holy Spirit will, and through the company of other believers and through prayer, will bring you to come to terms with this condition in your life.

And it may be long and it may be tortuous, but I don't think there's any question but that God will bring you to that place. in the same way, God will bring you to the place where you accept the fact that you belong to him, that his Holy Spirit is at work and witnessing in your heart to the new birth, to the reality of the kingdom, to the gift of eternal life, that God is giving you that.

And I think you have to come to terms with that. And coming to terms with that is coming to terms with the fact that your life is not your own. That God in a sense says to you, give your life away if you want it.

God says to you, take up your cross if you want to follow. because that's who you are. You are one whom God has in his sovereign purpose brought to new life by putting it into your heart to confess that Jesus is Lord.

And you and I have to come to terms with that. because that of course is the central, that becomes the central reality of our life.

[46 : 44] Let me pray. God, we thank you for the wonderful story of Nicodemus.

And we thank you for the amazingly brief life-changing encounter that you had with him. Thank you about doing