

The Man in Transition

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Date: 14 January 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, we all came to church in a fog this morning, and I hope we go home differently. I wonder if you would turn to John 3, page 888, and the page before in your New Testament Bible.

One of the things about having this fog in Vancouver is that fog horns go all night. I don't know if you heard them. I heard them. And there's a different sort of sleepless fog that we struggle with in the morning.

And I mention that because today we begin this new series, Meet Jesus. We want everyone to meet Jesus, of course. Christianity is all about the person of Jesus Christ, and there's nothing better than that we could meet him.

And every time we notice in the Gospels, when Jesus meets an individual, he sweeps away the fog, and you can see what's really there. And sometimes it's a great relief, and sometimes it's a great pain for people as they struggle with exposure.

And sometimes people just want to close their eyes again and go back to the fog. There's more space given in the Gospels to individual conversations and encounters between Jesus and others than there is to all the miracles and all the public speeches to the crowds.

[1 : 23] Interesting. People from the top of society, from the bottom of society, and always in between. People who are curious or completely in the dark.

And the reason for this, and the reason we're looking at it, is that you can't deal with Jesus at a distance. It's not possible to really know him secondhand.

We have to meet him for ourselves. So as we look at these accounts, the prayer is and the promise is that Jesus makes himself real to us. We see him and know him better, and we want others to come and meet him as well.

We're going to start on this very famous encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in John chapter 3. Perhaps the most famous personal encounter. And I want to try and deal with three questions as we look at this familiar passage this morning.

First is, who's Nicodemus? Secondly, what happens? And third, what's the effect of this meeting on Jesus? So firstly then, who is Nicodemus?

[2 : 28] And we know quite a lot about him. We begin in verse 1. He is a thoroughly good and decent man. Highly intelligent, morally upright, a pillar of the community.

He's the kind of person you want on your board. He's trusted, scholarly, winsome, charitable, deeply religious, highly regarded, and to boot, he was rich.

He had to be if he was on the ruling council of the country. He's got oodles of experience and authority. And he was a Bible guy. He held some sort of official position, we learn a little bit later in chapter 3.

He's the most outstanding teacher in all the country. And he tried to live it out. He was faithful to his wife. He paid his taxes. So we meet him right there at the beginning of chapter 3.

Now 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, for no one can do these signs, these miracles, that you do unless God is with him.

[3 : 43] Now it seems good, doesn't it? A gracious and winsome start. Nicodemus is intrigued by Jesus. He even calls him Rabbi, even though Jesus has had no formal training.

He says, you know, I see God working through you. You might think that Jesus is going to turn around and be glad to have him on his side. But John tells us two little details here, which are very important.

The first is, he calls Nicodemus a man of the Pharisees. Now that's a very odd way to speak about someone in English, isn't it?

A man of the Pharisees. It's even odder in the original. A man of accountants. A man of hockey. Whatever.

And it's not just because Nicodemus has built his identity around this whole rule-keeping Pharisee thing, but this is here and it's put this odd way because of the sentence before it.

[4 : 46] The last sentence in chapter 2. Jesus needed no one to bear witness about man, and that means man and woman, for he himself knew what was in man.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees. Jesus knows exactly what's in the human heart. And the first example is a deeply religious and good man, highly regarded by others.

Jesus sees completely past all those external things, and he says exactly what Nicodemus needs to hear. So that's the first little clue. And the second clue is that he comes to Jesus by night.

And whenever John speaks about the dark in his gospel, he means the spiritual dark. So that despite his goodness and his religiousness, Nicodemus is completely in the dark about spiritual things.

And the fact that he comes, that he waits until dark to see Jesus, means that he's still caught in that horizontal view of life, where what other people think about him is overwhelmingly important.

[5 : 54] From the outside, he looks like he's completely secure in his reputation and his goodness, like many of us. But he doesn't want to take the risk. He doesn't want to put any of that at risk.

He's wealthy, he's widely known, and he feels like he's got to lose here, so he visits at night time. Now this is very helpful, because so many people think about Christianity, that it's about being good.

It's about being serious about life, being good enough to go off for God to accept us. The irony is that being good often has to do with the horizontal calculation, where we compare ourselves with one another.

But when we meet the person of Jesus Christ, this is completely shattered, because in Jesus we meet someone who's come down from heaven. Someone who's not just good, but holy. We meet the Son of God.

And all his goodness, and all his reputation is not going to make Nicodemus acceptable to God. In fact, what it's done, ironically, is that it's blinded him to spiritual reality, so that he's controlled by looking at his goodness, and by the horizontal comparison.

[7 : 06] So I think there's a little bit of condescension in his first words, where he comes up to Jesus. Look, he says, Jesus, you know who I am, everybody knows who I am, and there are some of us on the ruling council.

You see, he says the we, he uses these we phrases. There's some of us on the ruling council who've taken a bit of a liking to you. We could even say God's working through you. I am even willing, for the sake of argument, to lift you right up to my level and call you rabbi in this private place in the dark.

You hear this today when people say, I've got the highest regard, the highest respect for Jesus. We're too busy trying to make ourselves good enough for God.

We create this, a self-made fog around us. We can't see who it is we're talking about here. We have zero spiritual visibility. Nicodemus is positioning himself to tell Jesus what Nicodemus can do for Jesus, because he's an insider on the council.

So it's not a very promising start. That's the first point. Who's Nicodemus? Point two, what happens? Well, Jesus goes straight through the fog. Before Nicodemus can even ask a question, we get this very famous verse three.

[8 : 23] Verse three. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Unless a man or a woman is born again, they cannot see the kingdom of God. Now, this is one of the most abused and least understood of Jesus' sayings.

In the marketplace, currently, born again means a sort of a makeover of a company. You know, a rebranding with improvements.

So when the Canadian company Blackberry had a big investment and new management, the headline was Born Again Blackberry. There is an automaker in Florida called Born Again Autos, quality used cars.

It's used in real estate, you know, Born Again Old House. It's used in toy stores, Hamley's store in London and Regent Street introduced a new cuddly toy division.

[9 : 26] It called itself Born Again Hamley's. When it's used in religious circles, it means either you've completely lost your mind and become overzealous, like she's become a born again health freak, or you've moved to become intolerant, thoughtless, you're fodder for right wing politics and you love conspiracy theories.

And I've even heard people say, oh, that's those born again Christians over there as though this is sort of a deluxe or a crazy sort of Christianity.

Jesus says, unless a man or a woman is born again, they cannot see the kingdom of God. There's no division between born again Christians and others. What Jesus is talking about is a completely new life from heaven.

He's not talking about craziness. He's not talking about turning over a new leaf and being zealously reforming about your life and about everyone else's. He's talking about receiving a completely new life, a complete fresh start.

It's not adding behaviours or adding goodness on top of your life to cover your badness. It's calling into existence something that was not there before.

[10 : 50] It's not a moral clean-up. It's not a spiritual enlightenment. It is a new creation, a new life, a new heart, with new hopes and new fears.

It's an essential new life from God. Now, God loves goodness and he loves it when people do good. But all Nicodemus' knowledge and all his money and all his goodness could not open his eyes to this great spiritual reality of the kingdom of God.

It couldn't make him into a new being. And all your good deeds and all mine cannot make us spiritually alive because Christianity at its root is not so much about what we do but about what we are, whether we're reborn.

And this is a great challenge to all of those who honestly try to live a good life and to be spiritual. But again, listen to the words of Jesus. The kingdom of God is not about what you do.

It's whether you're born anew. And I think that helps explain Nicodemus' response in verse 4. He says, How can a man be born when he is old?

[12 : 03] Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? He's not poking fun at Jesus. He's an enormously clever man.

He is expressing deep longing to Jesus. He's uncomfortable where this conversation is going for sure. It had never occurred to him that he needed a completely new life from God.

But this comment from him is wistful. It's hopeful. He says to Jesus, If only if it was possible for me to have a completely fresh spiritual start.

I am an old man. I am the sum of all my yesterdays. I cannot change. I wish what you were saying were possible, Jesus. I just can't believe it can happen for someone like me.

And I think it is easy for us to begin to think that things can never really change. And we mistake this idea of being born anew for having a grand emotional experience or a grand spiritual experience or some great moral reset.

[13 : 11] So what Jesus does with Nicodemus is he takes him onto familiar ground. He takes Nicodemus to two Old Testament passages to clear the fog away.

And the first is in verse 5. He says, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

This is perfect for Nicodemus. He's an Old Testament expert. Jesus is almost quoting verses from the prophet Ezekiel, right before the valley of the dry bones where God resurrects a valley of skeletons to life.

Water and spirit come together. God promises with water to cleanse all our inner darkness and impurity and then to pour his spirit, the spirit of transformation and new life and new nature on his people.

The cleansing has to happen so that the spirit can come and live with us. It is the Old Testament equivalent of being born again. It's not something we can do for ourselves, verse 6.

[14 : 17] That which is born of flesh is flesh. That which is born of spirit is spirit. We enter this world by being born naturally. We enter into the kingdom of God by being born by the spirit of God.

And Jesus says, you know, it's like the wind we don't really understand where it comes from, where it goes, but you can tell it by its effects. And there are marks of being born anew and being a member of the kingdom of God.

Here are some of the marks. You personally know the reality that God is your heavenly father. I mean, before we're born again, we don't really think much about God, let alone pray to him, except in those special emergencies.

You know, where we do deals with him. Lord, help me with this and I will go as a missionary to Africa or whatever. But being born again, one of the marks is that your, his love and his grace become real and really important.

You have a desire to know him, to spend time with him, to enjoy him. You wish to pray with him, to praise him, to be him, be in his company, to see him acting in your life and in the lives of others.

[15 : 34] And the Bible goes from being something that's dry and boring to something where you hear him speak, food for the soul. These are all marks of the spiritual reality of new birth.

You find yourself being concerned with others. You want to meet with other Christians despite how much, how different they are from you and you want very much for people who do not yet have this new birth to see the kingdom of God.

And the second Old Testament story Jesus takes Nicodemus to is in verses 13 to 15. It is a very strange story.

It is the strange time when Israel were in the wilderness attacked by poisonous snakes. Actually, when you look at the original, they're fiery snakes. I don't know what that means.

They're traveling in the wilderness. They have no protection and many of them are dying and they call out to God and God says to Moses, you make a big bronze snake and lift it up on a pole and everyone who looks to the snake is going to live.

[16 : 40] Not because the snake's magic, because it's the kindness of God. Just look down to verse 13 with me. No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And 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.

He's talking about the cross. Nicodemus has no idea who it is who's standing in front of him. He has no idea this is God in the flesh and he has no idea of the massive cost it's going to take for Jesus to open the door of the kingdom of God to him.

We're so far away from God, we're so in darkness that it takes the death of Jesus for God to open the kingdom of heaven. And as Jesus is lifted up on the cross and we trust him, we receive new birth, eternal life, when he is nailed to the wood of the cross.

And it's interesting, Nicodemus disappears from the conversation around here. We don't know what he thought. There's no sign here that he places his faith in Jesus Christ or that he is born again by this encounter.

[17 : 59] So I want to move to the third question. What is the effect of Nicodemus meeting Jesus? Did you know Nicodemus comes back twice in John's Gospel two more times?

The middle appearance is not very impressive. The ruling council of Israel is trying to have Jesus arrested. They want to get rid of him. And Nicodemus stands and sort of timidly says, excuse me, point of procedure, shouldn't we at least give him a hearing?

And there's a moment of silence and they all turn on him and say no. And they go back to their plans. It's not a very effective or clear witness. Nicodemus does not stand clearly on Jesus' side.

He's still very committed to the horizontal view. He's still living in a fog. But it did take courage for him to raise the issue. He has made a feeble start. It's clear that the meeting with Jesus in chapter 3 has begun to make a change.

But I want to finish and turn with you to the final appearance of Nicodemus. So if you have your Bible open, turn to John chapter 19, please. The end of John chapter 19.

[19 : 07] This is just after Jesus has died on the cross and the fury of the Pharisees has got rid and crushed Jesus to death.

Nicodemus is one of the two men who take Jesus' body off the cross. So look down at verse 38. We're introduced to Joseph, another rich man who's very afraid of declaring his faith.

Let's see what happens. Verse 38. After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, he asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus.

Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also. They run together. Who earlier, who had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds in weight, so they together took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as was the burial custom of the Jews.

Now, this is a moment of great danger. Much more danger than chapter 3. Nicodemus with Joseph.

[20 : 27] He's unafraid to put himself at risk. The 12 disciples, they've all abandoned Jesus and run away and now Nicodemus steps forward to honour Jesus.

He steps up and helps Joseph take his body down from the cross and bury him. There has been a radical change for both of these wealthy men.

They put a higher value on honouring Jesus than they do on all the loudest and most important opinions of those in Israel and they put their resources and their reputations and their lives at Jesus' disposal.

The old Nicodemus would never have courage to do this. He's become a new man. He's got completely new priorities and new courage. He's no longer controlled, you see, by the horizontal calculations of what other thinks.

He hardly thinks about the cost. He's completely unashamed now to openly side with Jesus. There's a new thing going on in Nicodemus.

[21 : 31] It's a new life, you could say, a new birth. And certainly, he'd been encouraged by Joseph but this is a different Nicodemus. If you ask yourself, what's happened?

What's changed? And the answer is this. He's seen Jesus lifted up on the cross. God has used the death of Jesus to finally establish new birth in Nicodemus.

And as he saw Jesus lifted up on the cross, he realised, Jesus is dying for me. God loves me. This is a measure of the deadliness of my spiritual fog and of what God is willing to do for me.

And the riches and the reputation that had hindered him from openly confessing Jesus, he now places at Jesus' disposal he's born again.

And I think there are just two very obvious things to say after we look at Nicodemus this morning. And the first is this. Do you know what it is to be born again? Do you know this reality of a new birth?

[22 : 43] In your own heart, do you feel like you're alive to Jesus Christ? Do you know this love of God for yourself? Have you experienced the forgiveness and cleansing of God and the new life of the Holy Spirit?

If you have not, Jesus says, you must trust him as God's son. He's come to bring you eternal life. Look to him, lifted up on the cross, dying for you and ask him for forgiveness and new life and he will give you new birth just as he gave it to Nicodemus.

And the second obvious thing for us, I think, to take away has to do with patience and prayer. Part of enjoying the new life of God's Spirit is wanting others to have it as well.

And this encounter with Nicodemus is a reminder that we cannot give it to ourselves and we cannot give it to others. It's God's gift to give. And since it's God's gift to give, doesn't it make a lot of sense for us to pray for our friends and our family, to entrust them into God's hands and ask God to work in their lives?

And the great thing about the Nicodemus story is that for some people it can take a very long time. For some people they can hear Jesus speaking and continue in their spiritual fog for ages, still controlled by the horizontal horizons and not come through to new birth for a very long time.

[24 : 14] Whether it's because they are good and wealthy and that might be hindering them from looking at Jesus being lifted up or perhaps they lack the courage, we need to be patient and we need to pray.

Nicodemus did not start very well but he came through and he finished magnificently. So we should pray with patience that God would work through us and in others for this new birth because God so loved this world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Amen.