

John 3:1-15

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Date: 28 September 2025

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[0 : 00] Amen. Friends, while you're standing, let's pray. Heavenly Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening.! In Christ's name, amen.! So let's talk about the human problem first.

What does Jesus tell us about us? Well, he says we have a heart problem. That something in our hearts is off.

And he doesn't mess around when he describes it. In verse 19, he says the problem with people is that you love darkness. And he uses the word love there, the Greek word agape.

It's a really strong word. He says you really love the darkness. And he says you resist the light. And why do we resist the light? Because light exposes.

That's why people sort of regularly clear their Google search history, isn't it? We love the dark.

Because the dark covers things up. I think I've told this story before.

[1 : 34] But there's a famous story about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He's an author of the Sherlock Holmes novels. And apparently he's a bit of a practical joker. In the late 1800s, he wrote a telegram to the 12 most respected men that he knew.

And the telegram simply read, flee, all is discovered. Flee, all is discovered. Like it was a joke. It was a joke.

Apparently eight of them left the country within 24 hours. We love the darkness, Jesus says.

We hate being exposed. That's the heart problem. I think it's shocking for us to hear. But if you don't like what I'm saying here, don't blame me. These are the words of Jesus.

This is what Jesus said. So, it's a human problem. But God has a solution to this problem. And what is it? The solution is this. Jesus says we need to be born again.

[2 : 35] And how does Jesus get that across? And it's a bit surprising how he gets it across, actually. So, this is what I mean. If you were to sort of espouse the idea that people are a bit broken, you know.

I mean, you know, we do nice things. People do nice things. But there's brokenness in there, isn't there? There's darkness in there. If we were to espouse that idea that people are a bit broken, how would you do that? You'd probably pull out some stats.

Or you'd point to the worst people in society. You'd point the figure you think about. You'd go Hitler and Pol Pot. And you'd talk about some serial abuser in your community.

Or you'd talk about internet trolls. And that's how you'd make your case. You'd go, look at these people. Look, people. There's a bit of rot in all of us. Look at them. Humanity has a problem. It's terrible. So, who did Jesus pick to make the point that there's a bit of a problem?

And this is kind of one of the shocks of the passage. He doesn't point to the worst in the world. He actually picks one of the best guys around. Nicodemus. A man. Jacob. He was at the top of his game, wasn't he?

[3 : 38] Nicodemus? The top of his game. See that? The top of it. It says there was a ruler. So, probably a member of the Sanhedrin, which is like the ruling. It's like, Sanhedrin is like a committee of people that kind of run the place.

You know? He would have lived a strict moral code. Comes to Jesus. Not to fight. Just to talk.

Seems like kind of an open sort of guy, right?

You'd like Nicodemus. I'd like Nicodemus. You'd like Nicodemus. It's like when you meet, like, it's lovely. You know when you meet, like, really famous or powerful people and they turn out to be quite lovely?

I met MC Hammer once. Yeah. I didn't know it was MC Hammer until afterwards. Really nice guy. Right? Nicodemus doesn't seem super stuck up.

He's coming to Jesus just to talk. Pretty open sort of guy. He sounds lovely. Amazing. The shock of the passage is that to demonstrate that people are broken, Jesus uses this guy.

[4 : 44] The best society has to offer. But he's moral. He's humble. He's powerful. Jesus says to him, you live in darkness. You live in darkness and your heart needs to be transformed.

Even you, he says. Even you, Nicodemus, mean to be born again. That's quite astonishing.

Nicodemus meets him and says, look, I want to just talk. Just throw around some ideas. I know you're a bit special.

Like he's actually one of the most open-minded people in the New Testament. And Jesus says, like in verse 10 he says, Nicodemus, you have no idea what's going on. And you should have an idea what's going on.

Because you know the Bible. You know the Old Testament. You should get this. But you don't. And you don't because your heart is corrupted. And the only solution is to be born again. And we get a clue that this is kind of coming quite early in the passage in verse 2.

Do you notice that Nicodemus came to see Jesus by night, it says. And that by night part, that is not a time stamp. It's not a throwaway thing. John, who wrote this gospel, John loves using symbol-laden language.

[5 : 57] Right. So if you read the whole gospel at once, you'll notice lots of black-white, night-day, dark-light kind of language around it. And it's trying to communicate something.

A good example is Judas, at the Passover, so the Last Supper, John 13, Last Supper, after passing Judas the piece of bread, and Jesus says to him, do it quickly.

Like, I know what you're going to do. I know you're going to betray me. So just get on with it. The passage finishes with this line. Like he's saying he's just given over to darkness.

He's pointing to a spiritual state. So Nicodemus, this really stand-up guy, coming at night, is John sort of cluing us, is letting us know that actually this guy who's super stand-up, that everyone loves, is actually in spiritual darkness.

He's lost. Okay, so quick summary. Here we go. So Nicodemus comes to Jesus and basically says, me and the guys have been talking, and we think you're special. Let's talk about it. And Jesus says in verse 3, you have no idea what's going on because you need to be born again.

[7 : 09] So that's the human problem. And the divine solution is be born again. But what does that mean? What does being born again mean? And I think our cultural reflex is like, born again.

That's just this fundy, kind of nutty, weird Christian slang thing. But let's just for a moment get past that, all the baggage that's attached to it, and remind ourselves that this is a phrase that Jesus said. So let's ask ourselves the question, what does it actually mean? What does being born again mean? And let me just throw out whole ideas here for you to consider.

Well, being born again, it doesn't mean a do-over. It doesn't mean like, well, you get to start again, and I hope you do okay this time. Right? It doesn't mean, I don't know if you've ever had that fantasy of like kind of living your life again.

And you think, if I could live, I don't know, if you've, Jacob, you've thought this, if you could live your life again, geez, it would be good, wouldn't it? No! No, it wouldn't be.

[8 : 19] Like, if I did it, if I had to start, if I could do it all again, I'd just do stupid things again. We'd still make mistakes. Because of our hearts.

You get a million do-overs. You kind of still end up in basically the same place, probably. So born again doesn't mean a do-over. And it doesn't mean like, you know, this is not talking about spiritual, like a spiritual vitamin supplement or something.

Like it's not, Jesus is not saying, Nicodemus, you need a Jesus addition to your life. You need a bit of extra Jesus. You're doing great. Just a bit of extra Jesus and you'll be fine.

It's not saying that. I used to meet with this guy years ago who is a businessman, doing quite well, loved this girl. I've told you this story.

Loved this girl. And she said to him basically, I think you're spiritually immature. You're not very spiritual. Whatever that meant to her. I don't know. And so he was like, okay, I'm going to prove to her I'm super spiritual.

[9 : 20] I'm going to start meeting with a priest. That was me. Priest, you know. And so we'd meet, we'd have coffee and we'd have lunch and we'd chat. And it was clear to me after meeting on many occasions that he just wanted to sort of have a spiritual dialogue partner and have, think some spiritual thoughts.

And he wanted to get back with this girl and show that he was spiritual. And at one point I just got sick of it. I said, mate, Jesus can't be an add-on to your life.

He wants to actually transform your entire life. Brother, you need to be born again. Anyway, he didn't want to see me after that. So it doesn't mean getting more religion.

It doesn't mean being more moral. Nicodemus had lots of that. It doesn't matter how good you are, how bad you are. Being born again means regeneration. Just if you think about the phrase, born again, it's like born again.

Jesus is saying you need a whole new nature. But how does that work? And what changes? It means being made alive to God. So you see things differently and you have different priorities.

[10:38] And the affections of your heart are changed. And you kind of like, read the Bible and it's like, this is fantastic. This feels true. I believe this. And it moves you.

To be born again is not turning over a new leaf. It's not making, you know, better New Year's resolutions. It's not something you can do.

You can't do this yourself. You can't try harder. Because it's something that God does through his spirit. This is what verse 5 says, which is a bit confusing. It says, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he, she cannot enter the kingdom of God.

So this is a reference back to our first Old Testament reading from Ezekiel. So thousands and thousands of years ago, right? Ezekiel, this Old Testament guy, speaking on behalf of God, says, at some point when God restores his people, this is what it's going to look like.

And so I'll remind you of the verses that Richard read to us. Verse 25, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you should be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

[11:47] I'll give you a new heart and a spirit I'll put 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 into my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

God is saying, I will transform my people, I'll put my life into their hearts. So being born again is not self-illumination, it's not self-transformation, it's not trying harder, it's God's work.

Which is why I think the phrase born again is so genius, because it's so helpful to get across what's going on there. So I was at the birth of my three kids, and as a dad in that room, you're pretty useless, you're just kind of passing glasses of water and saying you should drink, and you're counting and stuff.

Which is fine, that's all you can do. And so I'm a bit useless. Baby's a bit useless, to be honest, baby's not doing anything. There's someone else in the room who is suffering and bleeding to make that happen, and at the end there's life and it's beautiful.

So being born again is not the result of you trying harder, it's God's spirit doing something in you, changing your heart. That's what being born again means.

[12:54] And what's so remarkable about this is God gives that gift to people, regenerates them, to people who actually want darkness. John 3.16, very famous.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. It doesn't say God loves really good people. God loves just the good people. It says God loves everyone, which is astonishing because the world's such a mess. And he loved this mess so much, he gave the most precious thing in the world to him. He gave his only son so we could be born again and regenerated.

Now let me just speak for one more minute here and bring this to a pointy end. That's basically the passage. It's basically the passage. There's a lot of stuff I couldn't talk about.

We didn't have time. But I want to point out one last thing here. The word believe is mentioned a lot there. If you slide your eyes over it, you see the word believe, believe, believe, believe, believe.

Now, you understand tenses, right?

[13:53] Tenses, grammar in language, yes. Greek tenses are different. Some of them are different to English tenses like past, present, future kind of tenses.

There's a Greek tense in here for the word believe there which is called present continuous.

Present continuous. Which means it's present but a continuing action.

So when it talks about believing, that's what it's saying. It's saying being born again is not just, because we can't just be born again and go, done. I'm just going to do my thing now. It's like, keep believing that.

Keep believing you were born again. Keep reminding yourself that this thing, this amazing miraculous thing has actually happened to you. Because when you forget that, you just, what happens is you can just fall into this kind of like, you become a religious observer. You observe religious practices. You know? You become a functional Christian. You kind of just do the stuff. I'm just going to do the stuff.

[15:01] You know? See, a born again Christian believes that they were transformed and that is an ongoing work of the Spirit in their lives.

Believes the Spirit of God gave a new life. Believes that can happen for everyone. And it's very easy in a place like Vancouver to get a bit cynical about this stuff.

Especially such this clunky kind of phrase, born again. But friends, don't get cynical. Cynicism sounds sophisticated, I think.

But it's just fear, I think. I think my encouragement is just keep remembering you've been born again. You've been born again. Spirit of God is in you.

Continually working in your heart, wanting to change you. All those dark places wants to get into. Folks, if you're here and you're not a Christian, I remind it to you.

[16:01] Jesus cannot be just a helpful spiritual addition to your life. Jesus said this to the best guy he met.

To the best, most spiritual guy he ever met. Jesus said, You must be born again. Your heart must be renewed, friends.

And you need to ask God for that to happen for you. And it's not difficult. Like really, it's saying, God, forgive me.

I want to follow Jesus. And you could say that prayer now. You could say that prayer at home. You could say that prayer anytime during the service. And God will do something in your heart.

He will change you. And if you are a Christian, and you've forgotten this miracle, that God has put a spirit in you, and you are born again, come back to it, friends, because that's where there's life.

[17:02] That's where the life is. That's where the good stuff is. Amen. Amen. Amen.