

Greater Life

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. So we are in the end of John 2, beginning of John 3. Our passage this morning is about a human problem and a divine solution.
- Now, in it we'll see in John this a lot, that Jesus loves to use word pictures to describe the human problem. Towards the end of the passage there, you can see he says, The problem with people is this, we love the darkness.
- You can see that in verse 19. We love the darkness. Love, it's the agape word, it's a strong word. We love the darkness. And he says we resist the light. Why? Because the light exposes us.
- We don't want people to see what's going on in here or in here. We don't want people, anyone, to tell us to stop it. But there's a famous story of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was the author of Sherlock Holmes, the Sherlock Holmes novels.
- And he was quite a practical joker, apparently. And one day he wrote a telegram to some of his famous friends, to 12, actually, 12 of the most respected people in England that he knew.
- [1 : 1 1] And the telegram just had four words. It simply said, Flee! All is revealed. Eight of them left the country within 24 hours.
- Folks, we all have secrets. And we don't want them revealed or pleasures we don't want to relinquish. And that's why in our hearts we resist the light.
- That's the human problem. And Jesus wants that problem to be known and he wants that problem to be exposed because he wants to deal with it. Now, how he gets that idea across, that there is darkness in our hearts, is very surprising.
- Let me explain. If you were to sort of expose the idea that all people are broken and sinful, how would you do it? Well, you'd probably point the finger at the worst people in society.
- Maybe the worst people in history. You know, you could line them up. You could go, Eddie Amen and Pol Pot and Hitler. Or you could talk about, you know, the serial abuser in your neighborhood. Or you could talk about internet trolls.
- [2 : 2 2] And you'd make your case by saying, see, look at these people. Look how terrible the world is. Now, who does Jesus pick to make his big point that people love darkness? And here's the shock.
- He doesn't point the finger at the worst in the world. He picks the best guy. He picks the best guy to make this point to. To make this point with. Nicodemus was a man at the top of his game.
- He was a Pharisee, which nowadays we immediately think negative. But in those days, this is a very respected man. Passage says there in verse 10 that he was the teacher of Israel.
- It's a definite article. The teacher of Israel. So he's a big name. He was a ruler. Likely very wealthy. A man who lived to a strict moral code. And it would seem he was quite a humble guy as well.

You can see that. This very powerful man comes to Jesus. And it's right at the beginning of chapter 30 there. He's willing to call Jesus this untrained carpenter.

[3 : 28] He's willing to call him rabbi. So Nicodemus has seen, witnessed Jesus or heard of Jesus. And he comes to see him for some religious dialogue. He's sort of an open sort of guy as well.

He believes in Jesus in his own sort of way. The guy sounds amazing. So here's the shock of the passage. The human problem is symbolized not by the worst in society, but by the best of humans.

Even the best guy. The best guy the world can roll out to Jesus. There is darkness in his heart. He says to him, you live in darkness.

You need your heart to be transformed. I mean, it's quite astounding. Nicodemus just goes there to have a bit of religious dialogue. And Jesus doesn't even entertain the conversation.

He just hits him smack in the face. You need to be born again, he says to him. Now we get a clue that Nicodemus is in darkness right early on in verse 2.

[4 : 29] Do you notice that it says, this man came to Jesus by night. Folks, it's not just a time stamp. You know, it could be saying something about Nicodemus' fear of seeing Jesus.

Perhaps. Didn't want other people to see it. There's more going on here. John, the author of this gospel, he loves symbolic language. And you'll see over and over again in John a lot of contrast.

Day, night. Dark, light. A good example of this that ties into what I'm saying here is in John 13. You don't need to turn to it. I'll explain it to you.

Jesus is confronting Judas. So it's Passover feast. And they're having a meal. And, you know, Jesus says, someone's going to betray me. It's who I give this piece of bread to. And then he gives the piece of bread to Judas.

And then the passage says this. So, after receiving the morsel of bread, Judas immediately went out. And it was night. Not a time stamp. Saying that Judas had given himself over completely to darkness.

[5 : 31] So, summary. Where are we at so far? Summary in the sermon. So, Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Basically says, me and the boys have been talking. We think you're great. You're obviously special.

We've thought it through. And to this man says, Jesus says, you have no idea what's going on. You cannot see the kingdom of God.

You need to be born again. I mean, I remember at the start I said, there's a human problem. And there's a divine solution. The human problem embodied shockingly in this man.

Best guy. The best guy is even dark. There's darkness in his heart. Well, the divine solution, I think, has summed up really well in this idea of being born again. Now, let me tell you how to ruin a dinner party.

Okay, so let's say you're at a dinner party with some polite friends. And let's say you're the only Christian there. And people start speaking about spiritual things.

[6 : 32] And someone says, you know, I just read Eckhart Tolle's The Power of Now book. And, oh, I just thought it was fascinating. And other people would go, that's great. Tell us about it. And someone to your left says, you know, I've been practicing yoga for years.

But I've just started to get into the more spiritual stuff. And I've found it really helpful. People will probably be keen to hear more about that. Another person says, I've been exploring my Buddhist roots.

That is tremendous, they'll say. Someone says, you know, I'm not particularly religious. But every now and then I go to Evensong, a cathedral. And it's just so beautiful. Wow. You should invite us sometime.

And then you say, I'm a born-again Christian. Gee, that would just ruin the whole thing, wouldn't it? That party has been destroyed.

And that's because the title born again, it's become so maligned now. It's almost pejorative. You say, I'm a born-again Christian to somebody.

[7 : 32] They immediately put you in a category, right? Ah, right. But you're not the nice kind of Christian that we like. The one that never says anything and just, you know.

You're this type of Christian. Perhaps a bit emotional. A bit needy, maybe. Really needs a strict moral code to live by.

Kind of needs somebody else telling them how to live, perhaps. A bit too eager. A bit nutty, maybe. You know, there was a poll in the States a number of years ago. And the pollsters were asked, would you like to live near?

Would you like to live beside? Would you like, if your neighbor was a born-again Christian? 70% of the people said no. That was the States. Given that misunderstanding and that suspicion of the phrase born again, given the fact that Jesus uses it here, seems to love it.

It's very important we don't know what it means. What it's saying and what it's not saying. So what does the passage say about being born again? And I want to say two things about it.

[8 : 41] There's a lot more to say about it. But I want to focus on two things the passage says about being born again. So the first point. It just means being born again.

So we hear it so often, right? It's a phrase we know, but just think about the words. It's a radical metaphor. Born again. And that means that it's not that you will see the kingdom of God if you understand something better.

Nicodemus knows what's going on. He thinks he knows what's going on when he comes to Jesus. And in his mind, he just wants... His goal is information, right? It's information. Dialogue, information.

Being born again is not illumination. It's regeneration. It's a new start. It's God putting his spirit in you. And you are changed.

And 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.

[9 : 47] You read the Bible and you believe it. It's life to you. It's not foolishness. It's not nonsense. It's not ancient people's religious experiences recorded.

It's life to you. When I was a kid, I caught the bus to school. And it went past this Baptist church. And it was a large church. And they owned a building beside it, which was about four stories high.

And down the one side of that whole building, they'd put John 3.16 in massive letters. And this is like on one of the main streets of Auckland, New Zealand. For God so loved the word he gave his only begotten son, etc.

And I drove past that so often that I memorized it. Now, I wasn't a believer. I memorized it. And so when we'd come to it, I'd turn to one of my friends. And I'd just yell the scripture at them. For God so loved the word he gave his only begotten son.

Yay! I did it. I remembered it. John 3.16. I knew the whole thing. It was, it was, here's the thing though. It was, it was a game.

[10 : 49] I said that, I said that hundreds of times. Meant nothing to me. Meant nothing to me. It might as well have been a limerick. Meant nothing.

And that's because I wasn't seeing it through the eyes of new birth. My heart wasn't regenerated. It was just words. Being born again doesn't mean that Jesus becomes an addition to your life.

It's a brand new start. As if you were actually born again as a new person. That's what happens. You know, Augustine, 4th century theologian, bishop in North Africa.

One of the most important theologians we've ever had. Before his conversion, it was fair to say that he was probably a sex addict. In fact, there's a story of Augustine walking down the street after conversion.

And he sees, he sees one of his former lovers, one of his mistresses coming towards him. So he turns around and starts walking the other way. Now she's got no idea, no idea what's happened to him. And she yells out, Augustine, it is I.

[11 : 57] And he yells back, yes, but it is not I. Being born again is being created again with a new nature. You have the life of God in your life.

That's the first thing I want to say about it. The second thing I want to say about it. Being born again is God's work.

It's God's initiative. Verse 5, you'll see it there. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. This is a reference to Ezekiel 36.

Can we read this to you? I'm reading from 25 to 27. I'll read it out to you. You don't need to turn to it. Ezekiel 36. Ezekiel is describing what is going to happen.

It's a prophetic word. He's describing what's going to happen when God comes and restores his people. Now hear these words. I will sprinkle clean water on you. And you shall be clean from all your uncleanness.

[13 : 00] And from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. You see the water and the spirit there. I will put it within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart.

I will 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. Now do you hear this again? I will sprinkle clean water on you.

I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart. I will put within you. I will remove. I will put my spirit on you. This transformation.

This is God. God doing this work. Being born again is not self-illumination. It's not self-transformation. It's God's work.

I was at the birth of all three of my children. And these babies did not get themselves born. It was the work of someone else.

[14 : 04] Someone else suffered. Someone else bled to make it happen. And at the end there was life and it was beautiful. Being born again.

It's being made new. And it's God's initiative. And it's God's business. And it's his plan. And it bumps up against, I think, our society's great goal of self-improvement.

That's why it's such a humbling thing and why it's hard for us to accept it. Now we love self-enhancement. My wife and I did this diet. We just finished it actually. A 30-day diet called Whole30.

I don't know if you've heard of it. And it's like a... It's rebooting your system. Lose weight off my problem areas. And I hated every minute of it.

It's just awful. It's no dairy, no grains, no sugar, no legumes. Oh, I know. Perhaps you've done things like this. You know, diets or what's the new one that men do?

[15 : 21] Mansformations. Is that right? Any men here? Mansformation, right? We love the idea of self-improvement. But folks, you know, these things are fine. But they are such a thin shadow of the amazing work that God wants to do in your heart.

That God did in your heart at conversion. And that he wants to continue to do. I want to draw this sermon to sort of a pointy end by highlighting why it's so important that you understand the concept of being born again.

That it is a new thing that God does in your heart. Like being born again. And that it's God's work. Why is this so important? It's important because if we forget what it means to be born again, it's so easy to become just a religious observer.

So our identity can be born again Christian. At this end. And at this end is religious observer. And it is very easy to slide from here to here.

It is very easy to go from here and just drift gradually over to this side. And this over here. Some of you might know from experience.

[16 : 42] Can be very, very dark. Can be a very dark place. So, some differences. Let me give you some examples here.

So a Christian knows they are born again. When they do that, they obey God because they want to be more like Jesus. They want to please Him. And they think God's beautiful.

The religious obey God. But there's so much insecurity and fear here. Because they're scared if they don't, that God will get them. And so they obey to be accepted. Which is the opposite of the gospel.

The gospel is you're accepted so you obey. The born again Christian prays to God. To get God. God is the reward. The religious prays to get things.

Prayer is a resource for controlling your environment. Or you pray out of guilt. The born again Christian wants others to experience faith. And that comes out of the overflow of their experience.

[17 : 43] Their new life. The religious practitioner has no desire for others to experience faith. Because they haven't experienced it. And the faith becomes private. Very personal.

The born again Christian lives in the light of spiritual realities. Their ambitions are controlled by spiritual things. Not material things. They can love material things.

They can have lots of good material things. But they see them as resources for the kingdom. Was the religious observer? It's very easy for those material things to put big hooks in their heart.

The born again Christian is constantly renewed by hope. Believes in real change. Believes real change can happen in their life.

Let me give you an example in my life. I have three children. Four, two and zero. And four months. And it's just madness.

[18 : 44] Like it's constant madness. And our house is always untidy. And I get really angry with my kids sometimes. And I lose my temper very quickly.

And perhaps this has been your experience. I open my mouth and my father comes out. Or my mother's words come out. And honestly, I find it terrifying.

I find it terrifying. The born again Christian believes that the God who gave them new life that that spirit in their heart is the engine for ongoing change. This is what I'm praying for in my life.

My kids pray for me as well. You know, the religious person, the religious person is cynical about this. You know, they can hold on to the forms of faith.

And they can find comfort in that. But they don't see any hope for themselves and change. This was Nicodemus, wasn't it? In verse 4.

[19 : 48] So Jesus says to Nicodemus, you must be born again. And Nicodemus says, look, man can't go back into the mother's womb and come out again and be born again. Now he understands it's a metaphor.

He's not a stupid man. But what he's saying here is, people can't change. I can't start again. And Jesus says, yes, you can.

You can change. And I can do that. George Whitfield was an 18th century preacher. An amazing preacher.

Preached to hundreds of thousands of people. His favourite topic for his sermon was, you must be born again. And one day somebody asked him, estimated he preached 3,000 times on that topic.

Somebody came up to him one day, I guess a bit of a sceptic, and said, George, why do you preach so often on the topic of you must be born again? And he looks at him and says, because you must be born again.

[20 : 54] Folks, if you are here and you are not a Christian, you must be born again. This is the only way to God. Well, if you are here and you feel like you've drifted from here, to just being a religious observer, folks, I want to remind you of the treasure you have in Jesus.

that God has put his life into your life, and there is great hope in that.

There is great hope for change. And I would ask you that you would draw on that light, because this is a dark place, that you draw on that light, and you would stop that drift.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.