

What Is Being Satisfied

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[0 : 00] helpful perhaps if you're able to follow that from the Bibles itself, and that's on page 89 of the New Testament section of our Bibles. It's a very famous account, of course, of the I never can work these things, actually. They're very simple, probably.

Thank you. I noticed Archie was struggling this morning, so I'm in quite good company. But it's from the third chapter of John's Gospel, and this is the very famous account of the approach of Nicodemus to Jesus, Jesus by night.

And it follows, if you'll note, and it's very often helpful as you're reading your Bibles to read a little before and after the section itself. Actually, the section itself in John chapter 3 is a long argument going right through to the end of the chapter, right through to verse 21, actually. In John 3, the argument starts at verse 1 and really goes right through to verse 21. And it's preceded by the fact that Jesus had been in Jerusalem in the end of chapter 2, that many had believed on him, but it was rather a superficial faith that they had, because Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man, for he himself knew what was in man.

So the account in John 3 is preceded by the rather superficial faith of the Jews, of some of the Jews, to whom Jesus had committed himself by his word, as he had been teaching in Jerusalem.

And chapter 3 then continues, Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

[1 : 47] 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 that you do unless God is with him.

Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew or again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? And then the account goes on. The question that Nicodemus asks here, in verse 4, must be surely one of the most important questions ever asked by anybody, and it must be one that we in some sense have echoed at some stage or other, or indeed will, as our life goes on.

How can a man be born again? Because Jesus says, You must be born again. And Nicodemus asks, How can a man be born again? Clearly we must, and the question is how.

And this is really a question that this account in John chapter 3 is bent upon resolving. How can a man be born again? One of the problems about reading the Bible, and it's relatively a small problem, I suppose, is we don't quite know how the question was asked.

[3 : 13] We don't have the intonation. We don't have the inflection behind the question. We don't really know whether it was asked aggressively, or whether it was asked polemically by Nicodemus, or whether it was asked appealingly.

We'll perhaps have to think about that as the account goes on. But we do know that it was asked by night, as Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, who came to Jesus by night.

We know that he's coming by night. It's not simply an incidental feature of the narrative. It's not just simply there to decorate the narrative. It's not simply there to, as it were, to fill it out, to add something to it, which is of little value.

But it seems to be something which is significant, because we notice that after the death of Jesus, when disciples and others came to embalm the body of Jesus, we read in chapter 19, verse 39, that Nicodemus, the same Nicodemus, Nicodemus also, who had first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes about a hundred pounds weight.

We'll have to think about that again at the later stage too. But notice again that he's identified as who had first come to Jesus by night. So the coming by night is not simply an incidental feature.

[4 : 36] It's of importance to the development of the narrative. We don't know what it was. He came by night, and therefore we have to suppose, we have to hypothesize, we have to think about the fact that he comes secretly, silently, but he comes by night, perhaps because he can't pass another night.

He comes by night because, in the course of his day, he's busy, he's a ruler of the Jews, he's resorted to, he is flayed by people and by questions in the course of a busy day.

There's no time in the course of a day. But by night when he's alone, and by himself at night, when the world is aware of his own construction, his own world, flashes upon his consciousness by night, when he's alone by himself by night, and the character of his life can be thought upon by night, he becomes terribly unsettled, perhaps as he comes to Jesus at night.

And the dust comes to each one of us at times, whether it be by night as we're moving from wakefulness into sleep, by night as we're thinking about the character of our day, whether in the sort of uncanny silence that surrounds us as we are by ourselves at night, at the last moments of the night as we fall into sleep, as we reflect upon the shape of our lives, the shape of the day as we've experienced it.

There do come great moments to us when we think seriously about the whole question of what life is about. And certainly this is one of the moments that had come to Nicodemus here.

[6 : 15] It would seem. Not a journey that he wanted to make publicly known, to come to Jesus as a ruler of the Jews, but it was a pressing journey for him personally.

We tend, I think, as we read John 3, to consume our attention in the great details of the chapter, the theological details of the chapter, and forget it's a very personal narrative about somebody who had a very pronounced need, a very great personal need.

And that's what brought him. And therefore, in some sense, I suppose, he brings us with him because he is talking about the real issues of life. He's talking about life and death. He's talking about a life after the grave.

He's talking about the real need of sins forgiven in life. And as he comes by night, he brings us with him because really these are great burdens for you and for me in life.

The great burdens are not how we're going to struggle through the course of the next day because we know that we'll make it, nor in the next few months, whatever, but the great burdens are how do we get our sins forgiven? How do we find out how we can see the kingdom of God?

[7 : 24] And so Nicodemus comes by night. And he starts very promisingly. He's a ruler of the Jews. He's a Pharisee, one of the Bible-believing Jewish people, believers of his own day.

The Pharisees, the great lay movement, the anti-clerical movement of the day of Jesus, firm believers in the Word of God, upholders of the sanctity of the faith once delivered to the saints, as Nicodemus comes.

And he comes and he says to him, he starts very promisingly, very deferentially. He says, Rabbi, using the title of honor to Jesus, unheard of on the lips of another Pharisee in the Gospels, we know that you are a teacher come from God.

So here is a very great concession, which is being made by Nicodemus here, characterizing the nature of Jesus' ministry as one who has come from God as a teacher.

That means no more in the context other than that he bears the marks of divine authorization. There's something about the quality of the teaching of Jesus that stamps it as distinct. And Nicodemus comes as one who has been attracted by the person of Jesus in his presentation.

[8 : 40] He comes as a representative, perhaps, of the unbelieving Jews of the end of chapter 2 to whom Jesus was not prepared to commit himself. But he comes further to explore the possibility of the exchange, of the theological exchange, that he may have, whereby the pressing questions that affect him personally now may perhaps be solved.

And he comes with a great question, which troubled the Jews of his own day, troubles people of every day, what must I do to be saved?

Because that's what he's really saying. We know that you are a teacher come from God, and Jesus shortcuts him. Jesus anticipates what he will say. In fact, Jesus, as it were, moves straight into the argument in verse 3 and interrupts him as he's about to begin with his speech of commendation.

Jesus answered him and said, Truly, truly, I say to you, coming right to the bottom line, as Jesus always does with every life, whatever the problem may be, as we, as it were, come to him and, as it were, surround our prayers with a good deal of specious pleading or whatever, Jesus has that way about him of exposing what is really real about the situation, of making us feel as we come before him, indeed, as we come before him through the words of the gospel, that he always comes to the bottom line, right to the very point of the issue.

And so here with Nicodemus, Jesus interposes and says, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew or from above or from again, or again, difficult to say what that means precisely, but certainly it does mean a new beginning, that's whatever the nuances might be, whatever the changes in meaning might be which surround it there, it certainly does mean a new beginning.

[10 : 32] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see, in the sense of experience, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Well, there it is.

So here, the question of what does it mean to be born anew? The necessity is laid upon Nicodemus and upon us, but what does it mean? And Nicodemus, uncomprehendingly in verse 4, goes on to talk about the fact that here is a clear physical impossibility, here is a human impossibility.

And verse 4 is simply there to underscore for us in the fact that it comes out in the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus that what Jesus appears to demand appears to be an impossibility.

And that is true, because God is always making the impossible demands on us. God is always asking from us what we can't possibly supply. No one of us here tonight can possibly meet the demands that God lays upon us.

And the only way that we're going to meet those demands, whatever they might be, of course, is that God gives us the grace to meet the demands. God who makes the demands makes with the demands the possibility that the demands can be met by the grace that God will give us.

[11 : 56] And so that's how it is in every life. There's no way that you and I can rise to the expectations that God entertains for our lives. And no way at all that we can do that.

The way, of course, it is done that God gives us grace. And so Jesus goes on here to speak about what it means to be born anew. And in the famous, verse 5, he says, Truly, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Jesus goes on in verses 5 and 6 here to speak about the nature of the new birth.

We've met the demand for the new birth in verse 4. Now in verses 5 and 6, the nature of the new birth. And he speaks in verse 5 of the necessity of being born of spiritual water, because I think that's what the text means by what it says there.

Not so much by water as one action, and by Spirit as another action, and not quite so much as one set of circumstances which must be superseded by another set of circumstances.

[13 : 14] What is meant by verse 5, by water and the Spirit, is the necessity as Jesus sees it, to be born again with spiritual water. Truly, truly, I say to you, and this one is born of water and the Spirit, of spiritual water, water, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

What Jesus is calling for here, I think, is the cleansing that the prophet Ezekiel had in mind in Ezekiel chapter 36, when Ezekiel is considering the possibility in Ezekiel chapter 36 of how Israel might be cleansed, of how they might be made clean as they come back from exile, with the filth of exile upon them in terms of their national heritage and how that's going to be wiped clean and removed from God.

And Ezekiel says, a new heart I will give you as God speaks through Ezekiel to Israel. As Israel is, as the prophet Ezekiel contemplates how God will renew Israel.

A new heart I will give you, says Ezekiel, and a new spirit I'll put within you. And then, oh, verse 25 is the one I want.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you.

[14 : 43] I think our Lord here in John 3 is referring really to the cleansing that Ezekiel had in mind and Ezekiel chapter 36 where the cleansing that Ezekiel had in mind was the outward sprinkling which, or rather, was not so much the outward sprinkling, not so much the ritual cleansing that Israel would have been familiar with, but rather, the inward cleansing, not simply the outward washing of water, but rather, the inward cleansing from sin is what Ezekiel had in mind.

And as Jesus speaks here in verse 5 of John 3, he speaks of the inward renewal that is necessary, not simply the outward washing of religious rites as the Jewish practice in his own day with which he would have been very familiar, but rather, the great theme of inward renewal that needs to take place if one is going to see the kingdom of God.

Then he speaks about the mystery of it in verse 8, the wind blows where it wills. We know what the wind is like. We can see the action of the wind, but it's mysterious.

We don't know what generates the wind, or we don't know precisely what generates the wind, but we can see the signs of the wind. We can see the rustling of the leaves in the trees as the wind goes by.

We can see the swell of dust on the streets as the wind goes by. It's like that with our lives. We can't, as it were, really define the way in which God works.

[16 : 22] But if this inward cleansing that Jesus speaks of takes place, we can see the results, the tangible results, in the shape of changed lives. Well, Jesus goes on that way with the rest of the chapter here, and really it turns out that the one who is born anew, or the one who is born from above, because that's the way I think the words must be taken in verse 4, verse 3, truly, truly, I say to you, unless a man is born from above.

As the account goes on here in John chapter 3, and particularly in verses 9 to 21, all this is true because Jesus himself is the one from above.

All this is true, Jesus tells us as the verses go on, is that he who has seen heavenly things has himself come down from earth.

And it will be true because he who has come down from earth as the heavenly son of man, he tells us, will be the one who will give his life for the sin of the world in verses 14 and 15 and then 16.

The one who is born from above is in fact Jesus, as the account goes on. And he makes it clear for us that it's only by identification with him and his death and resurrection that the possibility of birth from above, of inner renewal, occurs.

[17 : 48] And we're thinking in this Christian season of our year about the fact of the resurrection, about Jesus' rising on the third day, about Jesus' standing in the midst of his disciples, in the midst of their fears and presenting the signs of his victory in the midst of the disciples in the upper room on the first day of the week.

Then, one week later, standing in the midst of their doubts in the upper room on the second Sabbath of the week and reminding them as he reminds us that by the fact of that resurrection, by the fact that he is the one who has actually been born from above as it were, that we by identification with his person can experience through the work of the Spirit, the spiritual cleansing, the renewal, the forgiveness from sin, and the identification of Jesus in his life and his death.

We don't hear much more about Nicodemus who came by night. He occurs again at the end of John chapter 7 in the Gospel as he comes or as he speaks as a member of the Jewish council where there was a division among the Pharisees about the teaching of Jesus and Nicodemus in verse 50 of John chapter 7 who had gone before him and who was one of them said to them again, not openly identifying himself does not our Lord judge a man does our Lord judge a man without giving him first a hearing?

And they replied are you from Galilee too to Nicodemus so that in some sense he's a fringe member in some sense as it were there's not the open commitment there but then again at the end of John chapter 19 with Nicodemus he is there it would seem to endorse the finality of Jesus' death in John chapter 19 verse 39 there were these hundred pounds weight of embalming materials there as it were to make a thorough job of embalming the corpse of Jesus perhaps underscoring his own view that there was the finality of the death of Jesus with which he had to contend and so there's an element of sadness that surrounds the figure of Nicodemus and maybe as he came to Jesus by night the question to Jesus was wistful agonizing how can a man be born again perhaps as the question was put but somehow or other we feel as we look at this personality through the pages of John's gospel that he was one who knew the questions to ask but really was not able to endorse the answers and that's the problem

I suppose we may know the questions to put we may know our way through the prayer book we may as it were be very familiar with the faith that we profess we may be able to raise the range of issues that should be discussed but we never really have made contact or we've been close we've been in dialogue we've been in bible studies we've been in church groups but we've never really been able to make the content the content which believes the content of the message and there's a sadness that surrounds that ruler of the Jews who came by night a great personality in his own age it seemed but not able to see that by a spiritual fancy by a heart renewal by a clean heart and a right spirit there could be that entry into the way of life with Jesus of Nazareth who would not that would not see the cross as final who would not see the tomb as an interment but who would see the tomb as a tunnel and therefore who with the disciples could have on the first day of the week experienced all the grandeur which was the resurrection of the Son of God

[22 : 03] Nicodemus who came by night said how can a man be born again and Jesus said except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God God give us the inner sight to see the truth that Jesus conveys through his word God give us the simplicity to be able to believe the word we hear and God give us the personal experience of cleansing and renewal and invigoration through the spirit of God that makes our lives new full of prospect bright and shiny with radiant faith that leads us to the time when we don't see through a glass darkly but we see with Jesus all the blessings that God holds out for those who love him and persevere in well doing shall we close with prayer our heavenly father we long to know you better we long to know your son Jesus Christ and all his fullness better day by day and we know it's a simple matter of believing the word that you send us and give us help us we pray thee to let go of the difficulties that so often cloud us and hide us from you and take your word very simply believe it and bring forth the fruits of the spirit that the wind of the spirit may be seen in activating us in a newness of love make us so in our own lives we pray thee for Jesus sake and bless you and friends and bless you and bless you and kiss you and hertz we pray and bless you and bless you and bless you of course and bless you and bless you and bless you and publish you and write me and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you for the fun and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you and your Word and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you and bless you