

The new birth

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 36. The subject tonight, as you can see in the notice sheet, is the new birth. And here in Ezekiel 36, some 570 years before Christ came, he prophesied that there would be such a thing as a new birth. So I'm looking into the chapter at verse 22.

2. Therefore, say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God, it is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you are profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. For I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols

I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers. You shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleanness, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant, and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good. And you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord God. Let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded of all your ways, O house of Israel. And then turning across to John's Gospel, and we're coming into it actually at chapter 2, verse 23.

Now, when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did. But 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. Now there was a man of the Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This 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, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of the flesh is flesh, and 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 whether it goes.

[4 : 1 9] So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus said to him, How can this be? Jesus answered him, Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? Truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven but 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. Amen. May the Lord bless you. That reading may it be to his praise. Bulletin asks you a question. It asks you if you are born again or born from above.

This is language which is not only in the Bible, but is now part of the secular world. So the novelist will say when they've discovered a new theme for that important novel, I've been born again.

Politicians, not in this country, but in the United States, when they're introducing a new change of direction, I've been born again. There are people who I've heard on the radio, when their particular partnership is broken up, they're looking for a new partner. I need to be born again. What's that got to do with the biblical text? Nothing. Not one thing. So we looked this evening at a well-worn passage of scripture, the person of Nicodemus. Nicodemus in the New Testament times was a fairly common name borrowed from the Greeks. It means victor of the peoples. That's what it means. And you'll find that in the annals that Josephus, the Jewish historian, writes in the intertestamental times in BC 64, the Jewish king had an ambassador to the Roman court and his name was Nicodemus. Not the same as one here.

When you see films of rabbis arguing over interpretation and questions of the Jewish religion, you'll see them arguing over big books. These are not the text of the Old Testament, but a thing called the Talmud. It's a whole lot of legal prescriptions made up by different rabbis and it's a whole lot of legal prescriptions. It's a whole lot of these is about a Nicodemus Ben-Gorion, that son of Gorion. He lived in Jerusalem until its destruction in AD 70 and he was known for his charitable deeds. Is he the same as the one here? Possibly.

[7 : 49] We've no evidence to prove it one way or the other, but it's possible. As far as the text of the gospel of John is concerned, he only appears three times. The first is in this interview with Jesus in the first 12 verses of John's gospel. The second appearance is in John 7, 51-52, where he is found to be defending Jesus to the Pharisees. And they say to him, are you also of Galilee? Search and see. No prophet will ever come from there. And the final occurrence is at the burial of Jesus where he joins Joseph and Arimathea in John chapter 19, preparing the body of Jesus for burial. Now, the episode in John chapter 3 occurs in the early Judean ministry that Jesus had, which Matthew, Mark, Luke don't record at all.

Matthew, Mark, Luke concentrate on the Galilean ministry of Jesus, which John only mentions briefly from the end of chapter 4 to the end of chapter 8. And I want to think about this tonight in three different ways. First of all, the status of Nicodemus. There was a man of the Pharisees whose name was Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This one came to Jesus by night.

Now, the idea that he was a ruler is found in the Greek text by a little noun called archon, which simply means ruler or principal person of some sort. In the time of Jesus, Jerusalem was governed under the Romans by a council called the Sanhedrin. And he was in that council.

By this term Pharisee, he was the member of a strict religious order. And you remember Paul in his defenses in the book of Acts tells us he also was a member of that order. Now, none of these Pharisees were ordained clergy. Their name comes from the Hebrew verb *parash*, which means to separate.

And the way they understood their calling was like this. They understood that the holiness of God, which was meant to be in the people Israel, was exclusively in them. And so they called themselves the separated ones, the separated ones, separated from evil with the purpose of serving God in this Sanhedrin. And their attitude to ordinary people in Jerusalem can be found in what they said to the man whom Jesus had healed from blindness in John 9. They say, you were born in utter sin, and would you teach us? We are far better than you. We know more than you.

[11 : 11] Now, when you study the Gospels, you'll find that there are other groupings who are also in this Sanhedrin. And one of these other groupings is the Sadducees. And these were the only ones that were the ordained clergy. They were the literal descendants of the priestly family of Zadok, which was set up by Solomon in 1 Kings chapter 1. So they and they alone were the only ordained clergy. Everyone else was a lay person of some sort or another. So this is Nicodemus. But he doesn't seem to have this high attitude attitude that some of the Pharisees had, as we saw in the quote from the blind man.

No, he comes to Jesus with the background of being a teacher of Israel and having high responsibility in this office. Now, we're not informed as to how he heard about Jesus.

Only he came to Jesus at night. Was that because of what he was afraid of, what his colleagues in the Sanhedrin might think of this?

In the Gospel of John, there are several things that take place at night. It is Nicodemus who comes to Jesus at night. In John 13, verse 30, it is Judas who is told by Jesus, what you do, do quickly.

And he went out. And it was night to perform his act of treachery. But coming back to Nicodemus, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these things which you do unless God is with him.

[13 : 06] So here is a confession made by this person representing this order who is saying as far as he's concerned, Jesus is a God-sent teacher and the proof of that is in the miracles that he performs.

A later statement, which came from another group of people called the Scribes, they came down from Jerusalem and said, he is possessed by Beelzebul, the master of flies, and by the prince of demons, he casts out demons.

So here is Nicodemus not saying that, but saying, you are a teacher who has come from God. We recognize this because of the miracles that you performed.

We've seen that. So that's who Nicodemus is. And that's where he steps into this story. But Jesus gives him a challenge.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one has been born from above, he is not able to see the kingdom of God. Now, the key understanding to getting to the grips with what this passage is about is to be found in the fact that the term which is rendered from above is also capable of being rendered again.

[14 : 37] And if you accept that the sayings of Jesus originally operated in or transmitted in Aramaic, then there is a similar word in Aramaic which means the two different things.

Either that or above, or in you. And if you follow the conversation through, you find these two meanings being used.

So in response to the challenge of Jesus, Nicodemus clearly understands Jesus to mean again. He says, how is a man able to be born when he is old?

Is he able to enter into the womb of his mother a second time and be born? That's the meaning again. But Jesus says, no, that's not the meaning. The meaning is something different.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a man is born by water and the Spirit, he is not able to enter the kingdom of God. So again, he's ruled out, and it's now from above.

[15 : 46] How does this come to pass, this birth from above? In verse 8, Jesus says, the wind blows what it wills, and you hear its voice, but you do not know from whence it comes and where it goes.

So is everyone who has been born of the Spirit. In this quotation, the word translated wind is the Greek word pneuma, from which you get pneumatic.

It has two meanings also. It either means wind or spirit, and that is true of the Hebrew ruach, which means the same thing. So this birth from above, and that's the point of Jesus saying, the wind blows where it wills.

He's saying something about the sovereignty of the operation of the Spirit of God. Now, in the natural sense, we have weather forecasters, and they can tell us which way they think the wind is going to blow, but even they can't tell it where to blow.

The wind comes through listening to and reading the word of God. Jesus said this, The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

[17 : 25] And how true that is when you read the Gospels. When you're in the act, as I am, of translating them from the original, you realize that this is not a dead word.

This is something that is impregnated with the life of God. And it's because of this medium that the word of God is preached Sunday, Sunday in, Sunday out.

First Peter, in his chapter 1, says, Being born anew, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

So the word of God is here to impart life, to impart understanding, to take away blindness, to illumine your heart as to the truth of the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

How wonderful is that? Yet we come to Nicodemus again, and we see his failure. Jesus answered, Are you a teacher of Israel?

[18 : 36] and you do not know this? How is it that you, a teacher of Israel, don't understand this? It has been foretold, as we read, by the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 36.

And the first note of failure that you can see is that when Jesus asked him this question, Are you a teacher of Israel and you don't understand this?

He made no reply whatsoever. Let me suggest two reasons. One is, he was not aware of the scripture.

Although he was a religious teacher in Israel, he would have been aware of the opinion of Rabbi Jacob on this version of the scripture, and Rabbi Meir and another portion of the scripture, but not necessarily of the scripture itself.

Now, Jeremiah said of the ministers of his day, those who handle the law do not know me.

[19 : 55] Oh yes, they could take it up and read it. they could even preach on it. But they didn't know the law. Those who handle the law do not know me.

On another occasion in Matthew 22, Jesus answered the Pharisees, You are wrong. This was a question about the resurrection.

Because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. And here is a statement by Jeremiah backed up by the teaching of Jesus himself, which is surely an indictment to those who hold office and yet have no knowledge of scripture.

In the 18th century, 19th century, in the 1840s, there was a minister of the Church of Scotland called Alexander McLaren.

He operated in Loch Caron in the Highlands and was regarded in his day as something of a minor prophet and for that matter still is.

[21 : 12] Now the problem of the church in the 1840s was the problem of patronage. That is, that the local landlord and he alone had the power to say who the new minister in a parish was going to be.

And McLaren, he said that the church will be delivered from this problem but afterwards it would be inflicted with a plague of graceless ministers.

How right he was. that is the real problem today. A plague of graceless ministers. So it becomes a challenge to us not only to read the scripture and become aware of its contents but allow us to speak to us.

The second thing is he had not given proper attention to the teaching of Jesus. It could have been that he was relying on reports of the ministry of Jesus which had been made to him.

Jesus himself said when he was teaching many times he who has ears to hear let him hear.

[22 : 38] So the problem that Nicodemus has is his knowledge of Jesus and his teaching is second hand. So when he says we know that you are a teacher who has come from God he's citing perhaps what some other Pharisee who was favorably disposed to Jesus may have said.

In terms of a confession it's good but it's not good enough. It doesn't lead to the new birth that Jesus spoke about.

And the question in our gospel preaching is what Jesus was trying to get through to Nicodemus is this who am I?

So when our Lord came to the height of his ministry in Caesarea Philippi which is right away in the north of Galilee the Galilean ministry was coming to an end he asked his disciples whom do men say that the son of man is?

They say some say John the Baptist now the person who held that opinion was Herod because he said John have I beheaded who is this that I hear about?

[24 : 12] Others say Elijah because of his miracle workings others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets now these are confessions which were being made by a whole lot of different people but not by the Pharisees or Sadducees are these confessions any good?

We often hear in our own day that what people value about the gospels is the ethical teaching of Jesus that's a similar kind of confession but Jesus isn't satisfied with knowing what people think about him he wants to know what they think who do you say that I am Peter at once gave the response you are the Christ the son of the living God and among all the opinions and all the confessions that have been made which you can find in the New Testament this is the only one that will bring you into a living relationship with God it's the only one that will lead to a wonderful experience whereby your life will be turned upside down the new birth so here is the question who is

Jesus do you know this new birth that the gospel of John is talking about and supposing you do what then well there's another question this time it's found on the lips of Pontius Pilate when he's trying to decide which of the two Jesus or Barabbas to release and the crowd are asking for Barabbas he then says the immortal words what then shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ and that question is one that he only can answer and as it's being said tonight again it's a question that I have to answer and you have to answer now it could be of course that many years ago you accepted the

Lord but the question comes again what then will I do with Jesus because there's a world outside that's looking to find him they're needing this saviour this healing of the soul this forgiveness of sins this peace of God only Christ can give it what then shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ amen may the Lord bless to us that reading these remarks may be to his praise and to his glory