

This morning we are in the third week of a new series called Meeting Jesus, looking at interactions that Jesus had with various people in John's gospel. This morning we are looking at John 3 and the interaction between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus:

***John 3:1-21** - Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."*

Before we continue, let me take a minute to talk about Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, which means he was a religious leader in Israel, part of a group that stressed careful observance of God's law and the traditions of the elders. He was also a part of the Jewish ruling council, known as the Sanhedrin, which was made of up current and former high priests and elders and scribes educated in Jewish law. The Sanhedrin was primarily responsible for trying false prophets and rooting out idolatry in Israel. So, Nicodemus was probably old, rich, educated, and powerful. So why is he coming to Jesus? Based on the context, I would guess that Nicodemus, this elder religious leader, is coming to Jesus, the young, up-and-coming rabbi, to see if they can work together, if Jesus might join the ranks of the Pharisees or at least partner with them in some way. But the fact that Nicodemus is coming to Jesus at night could be because he holds a minority opinion among the Pharisees and is afraid of retribution from the other Pharisees.

Let's continue:

*³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." ⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind **blows wherever it pleases**. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." ⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I **speak of heavenly things**? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-- the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just*

*as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to **save the world through him**.¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds **will be exposed**.²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."*

So Nicodemus, this older, educated, rich, powerful religious leader, comes to Jesus, probably to try to get him to join the ranks of the Pharisees, but as Jesus replies to him, something happens that takes the conversation in a completely different direction. Nicodemus stops talking and begins to listen and attempt to understand what it is Jesus is talking about. **What does Jesus say that absolutely stops this good, religious man in his tracks?**

It is summed up in verse 3, where Jesus says **"no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."** Why does Jesus say this, and what does he mean by that phrase? Before I answer that, two things I want to point out about the phrase "born again":

First of all, born again has specific meanings in our culture today, and I'm sure for many of you, they conjure up ideas and images. I distinctly remember the first time I heard the phrase, when I was reading an article in the Hartford Courant about the ex-Mets baseball player Darryl Strawberry, who reportedly have left a life of using cocaine in order to follow Jesus. I understood the phrase "born again" to mean when a formerly decadent person finds Jesus and now no longer does bad things. Other people might hear born again and think it refers to a certain type of Christian, maybe a narrow-minded or fundamentalist type, obnoxious and insensitive enough to believe that everyone needs to become a "born again" or they are not a real Christian. But you'll notice in the context of John 3, that not only is the phrase "born again" not a modern invention but a phrase coined by Jesus, but that **Nicodemus fits none of those modern-day stereotypes**. He is a moral, educated, religious man, but nevertheless, Jesus tells him that he must be born again.

Secondly, I think it is important to note that Jesus only uses the phrase “born again” here, with one person, Nicodemus. He does not go around telling everyone “you must be born again,” nor should we. After all, such a command would not be good news if we were to tell that to a Hindu trying to escape the cycle of reincarnation. In other places, Jesus uses other illustrations and phrases. With the rich young ruler, he tells him to sell all he has and give his money to the poor and then to come and follow him. With the woman at the well, he tells her that she needs living water. With the crowd that follows him after he miraculously multiplies the bread and fish, he tells them that unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood, they will not be saved. And with the woman caught in adultery that we looked at last week, he tells her that he does not condemn her, but to go leave her life of sin. My point is that Jesus did not go around telling everyone they must be born again. Jesus approached each individual and each circumstance in very unique ways, telling them something that tended to press on a specific idol or obstacle in their lives that was keeping them from God.

So why does Jesus tell Nicodemus that he must be born again? Of all possible phrases, why does he use that one?

Nicodemus had reached the top of the religious ladder. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, a respected and educated religious leader. And Jesus tells him with one simple phrase that his physical birth as an Israelite, his bloodlines as a child of Abraham, his religiosity and morality will never make him right with God, will never make him a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. He needs to begin again, to be born again, born from above, born of water and Spirit, symbolizing the cleansing of sin and the new life that comes from God. Remember – Jesus had a way of challenging people specifically where their idol or obstacle was that kept them from knowing God. For Nicodemus, and for anyone who believes they are right with God because of their heritage or morality or religiosity, it is hearing that you must be born again.

So while this phrase is not useful for everyone today, it is useful for those who, like Nicodemus, may think they are right with God because of their heritage or morality or religiosity. For the Catholic listening who thinks that because they were raised Catholic and went through the sacraments that they are saved, hear the words of Jesus – you must be born again. For the children listening who think that because their parents are Christians and they were raised in the church that they are right with God, listen closely – you must be born again. No one is born a Christian. You must be born again.

So what do we learn from the phrase “born again” in this passage?

1) Salvation is a supernatural work of God

³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." ⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows **wherever it pleases**. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." ⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

Jesus tells Nicodemus that salvation is a supernatural work of God's Spirit. He is not telling Nicodemus that he must be born physically a second time, but rather that he must be given spiritual life by the Spirit of God. And Jesus even chides Nicodemus for not understanding this: ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? He expects that Nicodemus would remember that God promised through the prophet Ezekiel to give His people a new heart and a new spirit:

Ezekiel 36:26-27 - I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Salvation is a supernatural work of God. God will put His Holy Spirit in you, giving you eternal life, spiritual life, new desires, new vision, and new consciousness. Salvation is not moral improvement or enlightenment, but a completely new nature, what the theologians call **regeneration**. Notice the force of the metaphor – salvation is not a bad person becoming good, or an ignorant person receiving knowledge. Salvation is a spiritually dead person becoming spiritually alive; is being born again. The reality is that the damage is far worse than you think. The infection has spread to your entire being. You are spiritually dead. And nobody can give birth to themselves. Nobody chooses to be born. God must bring us to life. As Paul put it:

Ephesians 2:1-5, 8-10 - As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.⁴ But because of his great love for us, **God, who is rich in mercy,**⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved...For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

You can not save yourself. It is only by grace, a gift of God, not by works. When you are regenerated, born again, you are given spiritual life. There is a heartfelt trust in Jesus for salvation, an assurance of sins forgiven, a desire to read the Bible and pray, a delight in worship, a desire for Christian fellowship, a trust in God's word and a desire to obey Him and no longer sin, and a desire to love others and to tell people about Him.

Anyone who believes that they are right with God because of something they have done is in the same boat as Nicodemus, trusting in the natural birth instead of the spiritual birth.

So how do you become born again?

2) Trusting in Jesus' death for us gives us eternal life

In v. 14, Jesus alludes to an odd story from Numbers 21:4-9:

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to **save the world through him.**¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Here is the original story to which Jesus is referring:

Numbers 21:4-9 - They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" ⁶ Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and **many Israelites died.** ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

So Jesus, in order to help Nicodemus understand what God is doing, recounts the story of venomous snakes biting the Israelites in the wilderness, and how God provided salvation to all who would look at a bronze snake on a pole. Weird means of healing, for sure, but in Jesus, we see that the story of the bronze snake points to the greater salvation that is found in Jesus. Like the Israelites, we have all rebelled against God and been smitten with a deadly disease, sin, that will kill us all. And the only cure, Jesus tells us, is that the Son of Man will be lifted up on the cross, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. There is no other cure, just as there was no other cure for those bitten by the snakes.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Look to Jesus and put your faith in Him, or you will fall prey to the deadly venom of sin. On the cross, Jesus took the venom of sin, dying in our place and giving us eternal life.

Colossians 2:13-14 - When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

2 Corinthians 5:17,21 - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Salvation is a supernatural work of God, bringing us from spiritual death to spiritual life. And this salvation comes to us as we look to the crucified Jesus, dying in our place, for our sins, as we trust in His offer of forgiveness and receive His righteousness.

3) The evidence of being “born again” is a life growing in Christlikeness

The evidence is not that you prayed a prayer, but that your life more and more looks like Jesus. Nicodemus shows up twice more in the gospel of John, and each time, we see evidence that perhaps he truly was born again: In John 7:50-51, Nicodemus encourages the Pharisees to listen to what Jesus has to say before condemning him, even though it prompts a backlash from the other religious leaders. And in John 19, after Jesus dies, Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus’ body for burial.

When you are regenerated, born again, you are given spiritual life, and over time, there should be evidence of that spiritual life as you begin to live and love more and more like Jesus.

1 John 3:9 - *No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.*

This does not mean that you will be perfect. It means that the pattern of your life will not be one of continual indulgence in sin. Instead, the one who is born again will increasingly display the fruit of the Spirit that is within us:

Galatians 5:22-23 - *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

The one who is born again will increasingly love as Christ loves:

1 John 4:7 - *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.*

There will be genuine love for the brothers and sisters. There is so much more! There should begin to be evidence of a heartfelt trust in Jesus for salvation, an assurance of sins forgiven, a desire to read the Bible and pray, a delight in worship, a desire for Christian fellowship, a trust in God's word and a desire to obey Him, and a desire to love others and tell others about Him. If you want a picture of what this looks like, see **Philippians 3:4-11** - *If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. ⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

2 Corinthians 5:17 - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

If you do not see these things in your life, it is not evidence that Christianity is false but that you do not know God, that you have not been born again. If you do not know Jesus but would like to, you can pray something like this from your heart to His:

Jesus, I believe that you are the Messiah, the eternal Son of God, and that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I believe in you as my Savior and Lord. Father, fill me with your Holy Spirit and bring me to spiritual life today I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.