

Christ and Nicodemus

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[0 : 00] We are continuing a series I think that you've been doing the past little while on encounters with Jesus. And tonight we come to Nicodemus, a very famous encounter in John chapter 3.

So if you have a Bible we're going to read together from John chapter 3 verses 1 to 15. And as you're turning there, let me pray for us. Our God we come and give thanks, we know that there is no new birth apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, and there is no power in the Word of God apart from the work of God.

And so we pray for the work of God, we pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to be known among us, Lord, that we would be affected by your scriptures. And so we ask for that in Jesus' name. Amen.

John 3 verses 1 to 15, this is God's word. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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 again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, how can a man be born when he is old?

[1 : 21] Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and 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.

Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear it sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be?

Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?

Truly, 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 except 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.

[2 : 24] So Jesus gives a famous metaphor in this passage in John 3. The metaphor of the new birth or as he puts it, of being born again.

And we know it is a metaphor, we know he is very obvious in the text that he is not talking about actually being born again. That is one of the things that Nicodemus gets confused by, but that he is talking about something spiritual, something that has to do with the heart.

And one commentator on this passage talks about the history of the idea of the new birth in terms of its cultural impact.

And how in the 20th and 21st century actually John 3 and the new birth and the idea of being born again is not just known amongst Christians, but actually is widely known.

From the secular humanist outsider non-Christian perspective, they know the concept of the born again Christian. It is a well known idea and the idea is in their mind typically somebody who is over radicalized, who is often the most zealous religious person that has ever been around them, who is very traditional, who sticks to pre-modern concepts of what a person should be and all sorts of things like that, who is always perhaps pushing religion on their neighbors and things of that sort.

[3 : 52] But also even in the Christian world and the evangelical movement across the West, there has been an idea as well that a born again Christian is something slightly different from just Christianity and that a born again Christian is a person who has had the most radical testimony, who has moved from really big public sin into quick radical type conversion experiences.

And so there are actually misconceptions about John 3 both in the pop culture of the 20th and 21st century and also within the Christian community as well.

And so what we will do tonight for just a few minutes is disentangle a little bit and ask, what is Jesus really trying to say I think here and do with Nicodemus and why does he choose this particular metaphor in the presence of Nicodemus, the new birth.

So let's ask three questions. Who needs the new birth? What is it? And how do you get it? So first, who needs it? Now if you look down at verse 7, Jesus gives the thesis statement.

He says in verse 7, you must be born again. And there are two words that are really important and it's you and must, but let's think about the first one, the second one first and that's must.

[5 : 20] And when he says this, we immediately can say very simply that the new birth being born again is a necessity. That to have eternal life as he puts it in the passage, to see the kingdom of God, you've got to be born.

You must. It's a necessity. But then the word before that, the subject is critical and there he says you. You must. And so the question in this passage and the question, the reason that actually the Nicodemus encounter is even here, is to in some sense answer the question, who is the you in the you must.

And there's a couple significant things to say about that. And the first is that, and you can't see this in English, but when he says you must be born again, we have a word for that in Mississippi, it's y'all must be born again is plural.

Right. It is not a singular term there. He's not. He's using a colloquial we he's saying. He's saying when he says you must be born again, it's actually everybody.

He's saying y'all all of you must be born again. And the other significant thing there is if you look back at the beginning of the passage in 3 1. There's the word now now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus and that word now that's just a standard conjunction.

[6 : 44] It can it can be and or now or so. And but what it's doing there is it's saying there's you know, remember there's no chapters in the original Bible and it's it can be translated and there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, meaning the two verses just before it are actually telling you why the Nicodemus story is where it is according to John. And if you look back at those 23 to 25, it's really important.

He says now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs, the miracles that he was doing. But Jesus did not entrust himself to them because and here it is he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man or humanity.

So it says Jesus knew all people and didn't need anybody to tell him what humanity was like. And then what you have after that in John is a series of encounters.

Nicodemus, we're going to see the woman at the well not long after this, the Samaritan woman. And what's happening is is that is a kind of a thesis statement. Jesus knew all people.

He knew what was going on in the hearts and souls of all of humanity. And now we're going to get encounters with all sorts of different types of people. Nicodemus is very different from the woman at the well. But the y'all in verse seven means actually the new birth metaphor is for the woman at the well as much as it's for Nicodemus.

[8 : 18] And it's just like when he tells the woman at the well, you need living water. That's a metaphor that Nicodemus needs as well. In other words, every single one of the encounters is because he knows all people.

And so we're going to get a glimpse of all different types of people through all the encounters that need all need the same things that Jesus tells every single one of the people in the individual encounters.

And so the first thing we can easily say is who's it for? And Jesus makes it really clear here. It's for everybody. Everybody needs the new birth. Everybody must be born again to see the kingdom of God. But and we can then ask why choose this metaphor for Nicodemus?

Because he chooses a different metaphor to describe what people need with each of his encounters. And so why Nicodemus? Now, if you think about Nicodemus for just a second, I think that becomes clear.

What do we know about him? Nicodemus is very likely an old man. He is, we know, a ruler of the Sanhedrin, meaning he's a principal amongst the Sanhedrin, which is a political position.

[9 : 28] So he's a public politician. He's a Pharisee, which means he's wealthy. Nicodemus is without a doubt on top of the culture in every way. And if he was alive today, he would be a religious public intellectual.

You would read his columns, his religious columns in the times. He would have graduated from a prestigious university. He's on top of his game. He's on top of his culture.

And Jesus, in fact, says, you'll see, says, Nicodemus, you are the teacher of Israel. So Jesus even uses the definite article to describe Nicodemus and says, the teacher of Israel, meaning it's likely that Nicodemus was some type of principal among the Pharisees.

And Nicodemus also verse two represents some type of faction because he says, we know Jesus that you're a great teacher, that you're a great rabbi, meaning I'm coming to you representing a party within the Pharisees that are willing to meet with you and willing to negotiate and willing to make an encounter with you.

In other words, he is coming to Jesus. Jesus has been discredited by the Pharisees at every turn. Jesus is 30 to 32 years old, approximately. And that means Jesus would just now be old enough to even be considered for the baby steps of starting to work towards being a religious leader of the time.

[11 : 01] And so you've got an old, wealthy public intellectual coming to a, essentially in the way we see the world, a teenager almost, and saying rabbi, which was a phrase reserved for only the pinnacle of the teachers at the time.

And so Nicodemus is not a bad guy here. He's coming and saying, I respect you. And there's a faction of Pharisees that respect you. And we want to make a deal with you.

And it's a windy dark night and he's trying to barter and say, can we work together in some way, shape or form? This is not an immoral person. This is a successful religious, upstanding citizen, a good guy.

He's the best of the Pharisees. And Jesus just interrupts him and says, essentially, you need to stop talking.

And Jesus is saying, not so fast because you've come here tonight because you want to make a deal with me. You want somebody who's going to further you along in your moral endeavors.

[12 : 11] And what you need is not a teacher. You don't need a rabbi. You need a savior. And you're completely confused. In fact, you need the new birth.

And commentators will talk about how, if you jump back just really quickly to chapter one, that everything that happens in the prologue of the book of John, everything that John talks about in the prologue is then what gets repeated over and over again throughout the rest of the book.

So just listen, just listen to what John says in the prologue here and then think about the passage we're in verse, verses 10 to 13. He was, Jesus was in the world. The world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own, his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him who believed in his name, Jesus gave the right to become children of God who were born, who were birthed, born.

There's the metaphor, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but born of God. And so that's the thesis statement in some sense of the book of John.

[13 : 19] And then we've got the Nicodemus story and Jesus coming and saying, I know why you've come at night. Well, John 1110, four times in the book of John, John is going to come back to this theme of people coming in the night.

And remember John 1110, it says, if anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble because he sees the light of the world. But if anyone comes in the night, he stumbles because his light is not in him.

And JB Lightfoot, one of the great New Testament commentators of the last century, he says this, doubtless Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, but what he would find is that his own night was blacker than he could have ever imagined.

And when he gets there, he's saying, I am the great moral teacher of Israel, and I've come to a man who clearly is a great moral teacher, and I want to work together.

I want to grow up together. I want us to be partners. And Jesus says, you cannot see the kingdom of God. And there's a play on words there because he comes and says, we know you are a great teacher.

[14 : 33] And Jesus says, you are the teacher of Israel, and you don't know what the new birth is. And in other words, Jesus is saying, in all your accomplishments and even your friendliness, you need to stop and understand that you don't need a moral teacher as a partner.

You need a savior. You need complete transformation from top to bottom. So people of a religious subculture need the new birth.

People who grow up in the church need the new birth. People from secular subcultures of all sorts need to be born again. People from poor subcultures and rich subcultures need to be born again. That's who needs it. Now secondly, and that was the long point, and this is much briefer, what is it? And we've already started to get there, but verse three is one of Jesus's really strange interruptions. If you see it, because Jesus says, you're a great teacher, we know that there's no way you could be doing these miracles without God being with you. And then Jesus says, I say to you, unless you're born again, you can't see the kingdom of God.

[15 : 43] And so it almost comes across as a non sequitur. Nicodemus says, I know you're a great teacher, I've seen the miracles you can do. And Jesus says, but if you're not born again, you can't see the kingdom of God.

And what Jesus is almost saying in somewhat of a harsh way on the surface is he's saying, how could you determine I'm a great teacher if you don't understand what it means to be born?

And actually the word there, we say born again, is technically born from above. So Jesus is saying, how could you even assess me as a teacher unless you've been born from above, born from the kingdom?

And commentators will say that it's a better way to translate when we'll come back to that at the very end. But the reason born from above, it's part of a whole family of metaphors in John and in Paul, like Jesus saying that to be born again is to move from light to darkness, to move from old creation to new creation, to move from the old self to the new self, the renewing of the mind, the renewing, the washing of regeneration.

All of these are the same things alongside new birth. And there's just quickly three things here to highlight about this new birth.

[17 : 04] The first thing is this, the new birth being born again is to get new roots. And as one pastor puts it, the new birth is radical transformation, not moral renovation.

And it's when it's radical because of the Latin sense of the term radical, radix, which means root, have your roots ripped out and replanted all over again.

Tim Keller throws out this metaphor or this illustration. He says that if you have an apple farm and you decide that this year you want oranges, you want to produce oranges, and you go out and you water your trees and you keep the bugs away better than you've ever kept the bugs away in all of your time as a farmer, and you take care and you irrigate and you water like you've never watered before, at the end of the season you've got bigger, shinier, more beautiful apples than you've ever had and you don't have oranges.

And it's simple and it's silly, but the point is that's actually exactly what Jesus is saying, is that you need radix, root, transformation. That's what the new birth is. It's not moral renovation.

The difference between reformation and transformation, moral reformation, spiritual transformation, is right there when every time we baptize little babies in this congregation.

[18 : 39] You can see it because one of the joys of baptizing a baby is in the image that an infant provides when they're baptizing the message itself because they come and they lay back and they can't hold themselves up.

They don't make a decision to be baptized. They receive it because it's given to them. And they're entirely passive and in no way active.

And Jesus is saying the new birth is passive, not active. It is transformation, not renovation. It's passivity, not active.

The second thing is this, he's teaching us here, is that the new birth is not only new roots, but it's also getting a new self. Is the second thing here. A whole new consciousness, a new heart.

You remember Paul says this, he says, put on the new self. And the reason that he says it as a command, an active command, is because he's saying act like the new self that you've been given in the new birth.

[19 : 54] In the new birth, you're given a new self, a gift of being a whole new self in Christ. And then Paul says now go and put on the new self, meaning act like what you've become.

Take that which was entirely passive in the gift of God to you and make it active in moral innovation. Put it on, be what you've become. That's why Paul turns it into that command. It means a new identity and new desires.

And there's a famous story that is thought to be perhaps not true about Augustine, the great theologian of Africa in the fourth and fifth century.

And Augustine in his early life was a wild man. He lived a very free life. And there's an old story that gets told about how he was walking through North Africa in Hippo where he was a bishop and a woman that he had had a previous long standing relationship with, shouted out, Augustine, Augustine.

And he turned around and she said, it is I. And he said to her, oh, but it is not I. He said, no longer I'm not the man that you once knew. He said, he was talking about the new, you got the new birth.

[21 : 16] It gives you a new self, a new identity, new desires, a new direction, a new path from top to bottom. The third thing and the final thing is this, the new birth being born again brings a new vision as well.

One preacher makes the point very hopefully I think the point of the new birth is not the new birth. The new but being born again is not an into itself. He tells us here to be born again is for the sake of getting to see the kingdom of God.

And that's why it's actually better to say to be born from above because it's the language of the kingdom. And it's saying the new birth doesn't happen to you to simply stay there and to be all about being born again.

The new birth is that you're born from above so that you can be for the kingdom that is above. The new birth is not in itself about new birth. It's about the kingdom of God.

One theologian talks about it like this, how actually the grand point of all of human history is that the entire cosmos would experience being born again.

[22 : 33] That everything would undergo a new birth, that Jesus Christ would unite heaven and earth and there would be spiritual transformation of the entire cosmos. And someday every single thing will be born again in this cosmos, in the world that we live in.

But in Tel Aviv, Jesus has chosen to start with people, with you, with me, with anybody who is born again.

You in other words are like a micro picture of what God is doing with the whole world eventually.

And that's renewing everything and bringing it back to life. And that's why at the very middle of the passage, when he talks about the wind, and he talks about how to get the new birth, he says that you have to be born of water and the spirit in verse 5.

And some people have come to this and said, well, this is actually about baptism. How do you get the new birth? You get baptized and you're born again. But that's not the case because this is actually a quotation of Ezekiel 36, 25 to 27.

Let me just read it to you. It says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from all your idols. And I will cleanse you and I will give you, and here it is, a new heart and a new spirit I will put in you.

[24 : 01] It says you need water and you need spirit. And in the Ezekiel passage, water cleansing is a metaphor. You need the forgiveness of sins. The new birth means your sins are forgiven.

And you need the spirit, meaning you need a brand. I'm going to give you a new spirit, a new self. That's what Ezekiel is saying in the metaphor there. That's Ezekiel 36. Ezekiel 37, the very next chapter is the dry bones coming to life. It's the great Old Testament image of the new birth of being born again in the valley of dry bones.

And then Jesus says here, you need the spirit, you need the water. And by the way, the wind blows where it wishes. And what is he saying? He's saying that, well, for one, it was probably a stormy night.

And Jesus is actually telling Nicodemus, look at the wind, look at the trees blowing. Don't you see that the wind blows wherever it wants to? You can't control it. You don't know where it started.

You don't know where it's going to go. And in other words, he's saying to get a new spirit in you and to get forgiveness of sins. Actually, you need the spirit of God to connect Jesus's work to your life.

[25 : 23] That's what the spirit does in the new birth. The spirit takes what a man in the first century did and makes it mean something for you in the 21st century.

It's the spirit's work to connect the man, Jesus, to the person that you are today. And that's what he's saying. Why the metaphor as we close, why the metaphor to be born again, why...

One way to ask it is how much do babies contribute to their birth? And I've been there for four of these happenstances and only four.

And I can attest that the baby doesn't do very much at all. The baby doesn't do anything. It's mom. She does all the work. And that's why Jesus is choosing the new birth metaphor, the born again metaphor for Nicodemus because he's coming as the great moral teacher of the day.

And saying if we could work together, we could truly change this place. We could renovate this place. And Jesus is saying, actually, you need to become like a baby. You need to know that you can't do any of that.

[26 : 39] You need complete, radix, root transformation from top to bottom. Now, the last thing we'll say is this. How do you get it? Just a couple of minutes. Jesus is clearly saying here to every single human being, you do not need a moral teacher first. You need a savior.

And every religious person that's ever lived has got to shift their mind from being moral to being transformed by the spirit of Jesus Christ.

And the last thing Jesus tells us in the passage is exactly how to get it. And it's very simple and very quick. He says, just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

And that is a quote from Numbers 21, when the Israelites had been bitten by the poisonous snakes and they were dying and they needed to look up at something else, dying.

A representative. Why is the snake strung on the pole? Because it's been st- it's- the snake on the pole is dead. The thing that bit them, the thing that they were cursed and crushed by, then was imaged in death upon a pole as a representative offering to cure their illness.

[28 : 01] And Jesus is saying there, Nicodemus, if you want to know how to get this, look soon for the Son of Man lifted up in the same way.

And he's telling him, keep your eyes open, Nicodemus. And Jesus and John chose the Son of Man language as his favorite language for himself. And now look, John 19. After these things, in John 19, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly out of fear for the Jews, asked Pilate if he could take the body of Christ away.

And so he came and he took Christ's body away. And Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes.

And he wrapped Jesus's body with Joseph of Arimathea and he embalmed Jesus and he buried Jesus Christ. Now, people talk about, you know, whatever happens to Nicodemus and we don't know.

But in John 19, this is remember the day Jesus was crucified just before the Sabbath. And you remember the Torah, the Old Testament. There was a critical rule that could get you expelled from the presence of God.

[29 : 19] Do not touch a dead body. And this is the teacher of the Pharisees and he knows better than anybody that the last thing he can do before the Passover Sabbath is touch a dead body.

And on the day that Jesus is crucified, he's there at the very end, pulling Jesus's dead body down from the cross and bearing that body and defiling himself by phariseal law before all the public people, they all see it.

And they know what he is doing. They know that he, this man cannot enter the temple. This man cannot be on the Passover Sabbath with the Jewish people. He's defiled himself.

And why? And it can be for no other reason than that he remembered. He remembered. He remembered the rest of his days. I've got to look for the Son of Man lifted up on a pole. I've got to be looking because to touch the dead body means that he has put away every hope of moral renovation.

And he is embraced that he cannot do anything without radical spiritual transformation. And so he's willing to do everything that's against his sensibility for all of his life ever since he was a boy and touch a dead body just before the Sabbath day.

[30 : 41] He was changed. He saw Jesus crucified and he was changed. And Jesus says here, believe and look at the Son of Man lifted up. And if you believe that, that that is your God, then you are born again.

And so in all this chat about how only the Spirit can do this, only you, it's tempting for us to say, do I just sit around and twiddle my thumbs and tell the Spirit of God comes upon me?

Like I want to be born again. But you're saying that only the Spirit can do it. How do I get it? And Jesus says look at the cross and believe that that is true and that that's your God. And then you know you're born again.

And so there's real assurance here only God can do this. And so tonight, tonight, if you say, if you say tonight in the middle of this week, as you prepare to go back out into the world, I believe that Jesus Christ is God and that he died and that he did not stay dead.

And that that is my Lord and my King. Then you were born again. You've been raised up. That's not moral transformation. That's that's that's spiritual transformation.

[31 : 55] And there's real assurance in that Jesus says the last word will give to him first John 5 for God speaks to this. Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world. Our faith.

You believe and you have been born again and overcome the world in Christ.