

New Life

John 3:1–15

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Who Is Nicodemus?

“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.’” (John 3:1–2)

We are continuing our study of John’s Gospel, and today we arrive at one of the most important passages in all of Scripture — John chapter 3, verses 1 through 15. Next week we will take up verse 16, but this morning I want us to sit with what comes before it, because what Jesus says here is radical and it deserves our full attention.

The passage opens by introducing us to Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews — meaning he almost certainly holds a seat on the Sanhedrin, the governing council of Jewish religious life. He is a man of moral seriousness, of wealth, of influence. He comes to Jesus at night, and there has been much speculation about why. Some read the nighttime visit as cowardice — he doesn’t want to be seen. Others see him as a genuine seeker, drawn to Jesus but not yet sure what to do with him. There is also the possibility that he comes as something of an envoy, sent by a group of religious leaders to take the measure of this new teacher — to feel out who Jesus is and what he is after.

Whatever his reason for coming, notice what he says when he gets there: *“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.”* He is respectful. He is even affirming. He acknowledges the signs. But watch what Jesus does — he doesn’t respond to the compliment. He doesn’t engage the question that Nicodemus seems to be circling. Instead, Jesus cuts straight to what Nicodemus actually needs to hear.

Why Be Born Again? The Kingdom of God

“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” (John 3:3)

Before we can understand what it means to be born again, we need to understand what Jesus means by the Kingdom of God — because that is the *why* behind the new birth. That is what is at stake.

In most religious conversations, the Kingdom of God gets described in fairly narrow terms: it's salvation, it's heaven, it's a relationship with God. And those things are true. But I want you to think bigger.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees — along with most Jewish people of their day — were consumed with the hope of the Kingdom of God. But they were not thinking primarily about individual salvation in the way we often use that word. They were looking for God's reign to manifest itself in their day and in their land in such a way that tyranny, injustice, idolatry, and unrighteousness would be done away with — and in their place, God's righteousness, God's glory, God's holiness, and God's truth would be fully established in the world. That is what they meant by the Kingdom of God. It was a comprehensive hope. A total transformation of reality.

And Nicodemus — a man of deep learning and genuine piety — lived with a hunger to see that kingdom come. He believed, as his tradition taught, that when God's full reign is manifested, people would finally know true peace, true happiness, true freedom, real love, deep fellowship, and lasting contentment. He longed for these things. And I don't think Nicodemus was unusual in longing for them. I think every human being carries this same ache in their chest. It is universal. It is part of what it means to be human.

We long to be genuinely happy — to have a joy that holds even in hard circumstances. We seek love, both the giving and the receiving of it. We want freedom. We yearn for purpose and meaning. We ache for real friendship. We want to know what it is to be truly at peace. We want to be whole. We want things to be *right*.

People may not put any of this in religious language. They may never associate these longings with the Kingdom of God. But when Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person must be born again to *see* the Kingdom of God, this is what he is talking about.

The problem is that we live in a broken world — broken by sin, personal and cultural and corporate — and we pursue these deep longings through means that cannot satisfy them. We reach for happiness through pleasure and entertainment. We try to fill the ache with materialism, or with relationships we have placed too much weight on, or with self-help philosophies, or with an inflated confidence in political solutions. The list goes on. And when we survey the whole sweep of human history — all of our political movements, our inventions, our discoveries, our sciences, our philosophies, our medicines, our education, the promises of our cultural leaders — nothing, nothing, nothing has been able to deliver the things our souls most deeply want: joy, peace, love, deep fellowship with God and with one another, purpose, meaning, righteousness, healing, and wholeness.

Now hear the radical truth of what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus — and to us: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* You cannot know, you cannot taste, you cannot enter into the very things your soul most deeply longs for unless you are born again. You may have moments of joy, flashes of peace, glimpses of love — but that deep ache, that deep hunger and thirst, will not be satisfied unless something changes at the root.

What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?

I need to pause before we go further, because I think religion has often gotten in the way of understanding what being born again actually means.

Being born again is not a religious experience — at least not primarily. It is not defined by an emotional moment, though such moments may come. It is not about jumping through a mechanical set of hoops, checking boxes, following rules more carefully, or becoming more religiously dutiful. All of that can happen without anything essential changing.

Being born again is a transformation of the heart and soul — where indifference or hostility toward God is turned to love for God and a genuine desire for his holiness and righteousness. Let me try to illustrate what that means by drawing on an essay by C. S. Lewis called “Three Kinds of Men.”

Lewis describes the first kind of person this way: *“Those who live simply for their own sake and pleasure, regarding Man and Nature as so much raw material to be cut up into whatever shape may serve them.”* These are people who see the entire world — including other people — as existing to serve their own ends. They use people, they manipulate people; in every situation the only real question is what they can get out of it. People who cannot deliver are worthless to them. These are the tyrants, the bullies, the ones whose anger flares when they are inconvenienced, who are willing to damage others to get what they want. We recognize these people. We call them evil.

The second kind of person Lewis describes this way: *“Those who acknowledge some other claim upon them — the will of God, the categorical imperative, or the good of society — and honestly try to pursue their own interests no further than this claim will allow. They try to surrender to the higher claim as much as it demands, like men paying a tax, but hope, like other taxpayers, that what is left over will be enough for them to live on. Their life is divided, like a soldier’s or a schoolboy’s life, into time ‘on parade’ and ‘off parade,’ ‘in school’ and ‘out of school.’”* These are people who recognize that they are not the only ones who matter. There is a higher law — whether they call it God, or society, or conscience — and they genuinely try to honor it. We call these people good. And they are good, in a real sense. But underneath the goodness there is still a fundamental selfishness. Life is divided into

compartments: here is God's time and God's money, here is my time and my money. I recognize what I owe; I pay it. But the rest is mine. There is an ongoing tension between what I want and what God wants, and that tension never fully resolves.

Then there is the third kind of person. Lewis writes: *"But the third class is of those who can say like St Paul that for them 'to live is Christ.' These people have got rid of the tiresome business of adjusting the rival claims of Self and God by the simple expedient of rejecting the claims of Self altogether. The old egoistic will has been turned round, reconditioned, and made into a new thing. The will of Christ no longer limits theirs; it is theirs. All their time, in belonging to Him, belongs also to them, for they are His."*

This is what being born again looks like. Jesus is no longer the rule-giver, the tax collector, the party-pooper. He is Lord and King — and that is not experienced as a loss, but as life.

There is an image that may help. Imagine your life as a house — a living room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a front yard, and somewhere in the basement, a man cave or a private room that is entirely yours. There are areas of the house that need work, and so you call on Jesus to help you with them. Lord, clean up my front yard — I'm embarrassed by how things look. Lord, fix my marriage. Lord, update my living room. But in the basement? That private room stays closed. *God, I don't want you down here. Just fix the things upstairs.* A lot of people treat Jesus exactly this way — as a contractor they've hired to solve the problems they've decided need solving, while guarding the rest for themselves. A good teacher, a comforter for life's pains — but not King.

Being born again is when Jesus is King. When the whole house — every room, every corner — is surrendered to him. And it is precisely then that a person becomes, in the deepest sense, alive. Jesus did not come to make selfish people marginally more dutiful. He came to make dead people live, by a power from above.

How Is This Possible?

This is exactly what Nicodemus asks.

"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?'" (John 3:4)

We often smile at Nicodemus here, as if he has simply misunderstood the metaphor. But I want to push back on that, because what Nicodemus is saying is actually correct. It *is* impossible — by human power, by sheer force of will — for a person to truly and fully surrender themselves to God, to hand over every key, to hold nothing back. We may want to do that. I want to do that. But there is a hold upon our lives that runs deeper than our wanting. Sin has corrupted not

just our actions but our wills, our thinking, our habits, our desires. We are stuck. We are in a bondage that no amount of effort, no determined turning over of a new leaf, no religious discipline can finally break. Nicodemus is right: it is as impossible as being born by your own effort.

So Jesus answers him, and he answers him with Scripture — because Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel, a man who knows the Word.

“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 its 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.” (John 3:5–8)

Jesus is pointing Nicodemus back to a passage he should know well — Ezekiel 36:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh 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 obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36:25–28)

To be born of water is to be bathed in the love and cleansing of God — washed clean. To be born of the Spirit is to have the heart itself changed: softened, opened, made responsive to God and to his ways.

And notice the language of *birth*. When a baby is born, who labors? The mother. Who suffers? The mother. Who sacrifices their body? The mother. What does the baby do? Nothing. The new birth works the same way. Who labors? Christ. Who suffers? Christ. Who sacrifices? Christ. What do we do? We receive. It is powerful language, and it is meant to be.

Nicodemus presses again — *“How can these things be?”* (John 3:9) — and Jesus responds, in essence: you don’t yet know, but I do. And then he says this:

“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.” (John 3:14–15)

The story Jesus is drawing on comes from Numbers 21. The people of Israel are in the wilderness, dying from the bites of venomous snakes. They are poisoned, toxic, perishing. And God instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole, with the promise that anyone who simply looks at it will be healed. It is a strange and striking story, and we will look at it more closely tonight. But what matters here is what Jesus does with it: he applies it to himself. You are born again, you enter the Kingdom of God, your heart is changed, you are washed clean, you begin to know the depth of joy and love and peace and fellowship that your

soul has always wanted — by believing in what he does upon the cross. “*So must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*”

There is a mystery in all of this. “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*” The new birth is something God does. It is wrought by him. He labors, he suffers, he sacrifices. It is his Spirit that moves, his Spirit that transforms. And even our response to him — our reception, our belief — is itself touched and tainted by our own weakness and sin. Perhaps this is why we require grace upon grace. We trust God in the mystery of this new life.

But here is where I want to land this morning. If God’s Spirit is at work in your life right now — if that breath of God is moving in your soul — you need to receive him. Respond to what the Spirit is doing. That may look like obedience in a specific area, or repentance, or simply opening your hands and saying, *Here, Lord — take this room too.* And if you do not feel that movement, if the Spirit’s breath does not seem to be blowing in your life right now, then do what Nicodemus does: listen. Give God space. Come to his Word. Let what he says be planted in you, and trust the One who raises the dead to do what only he can do.