

John 3 v 1 - 21

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Date: 18 May 2014

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[0 : 00] We're going to read a very famous meeting between Nicodemus, high-ranking Pharisee and Jew of his day, as he comes to meet with Jesus.

So let's read together. This is John and chapter 3, beginning at verse 1, and we'll read to verse 21. Here is God's faithful and wonderful word.

Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 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.

In reply, Jesus declared, I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. How can a man be born when he's old?

Nicodemus asked. Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered, I tell you the truth. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

[1 : 16] Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. 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. How can this be?

Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus. And do you not understand these things? 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. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 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.

[2 : 30] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 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.

This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but men love darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

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.

We bless God for his faithful word. Let's stand and sing then, In Christ Alone. In Christ alone, I own his love.

He is my life, my strength, my soul, his cornerstone, his solid ground, heard through the fears, his proud and strong.

[4 : 07] One heights of love, one heads of peace, when fears are still, their striding seas, my comfort, my all in all, here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone, who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless pain, his gift of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones he came to save.

Till on that cross, that Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied, for every sin on him was laid, here in the death of Christ I live.

Where in the ground his body lay, light of the world thy darkness slain, and bursting forth in glorious name, up from the grave he rose again.

And as he stands in victory, since mercy has lost its grave on thee, for I am his, and he is mine, all through the precious blood of Christ.

[6 : 13] No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me.

From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny, no power of hell, no scheme of man, and heaven brought me from his hand, till he reserves, from those behold, here in the power of Christ I stand.

If you have a Bible with you, then open to John and chapter 3, where he read just a few moments ago.

That will be helpful to you as we consider a central truth that comes out in this account of the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus.

When John Wesley was 32 years old, he and his brother Charles set off for America. Surprisingly, the main reason that he gave for going across there was not that he might see the Native Americans converted, but rather as he wrote a letter on ship to a friend, he said this, my chief motive is the hope of saving my own soul.

[7 : 57] He stayed there only two years, having failed to have any effect upon the Indian community, and even worse, still unsaved, returned to England. But on May the 24th, his diary tells us, 1738, an amazing thing happened to him while he was sat, listening to somebody reading from a commentary of Martin Luther.

John describes it in this way. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.

I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me. He preached 18 days later, the first time since he'd become a Christian.

And he describes in his sermon what had happened to him and happens to every person who is saved by faith in Christ. He said this, he is born again of the Spirit unto a new life.

That phrase, to be born again, a born again Christian, seems to be something really that most people outside of church, and perhaps even in church, sort of was introduced by American evangelists.

[9 : 18] Seems to be something more of a sort of an over-the-top fanatical type of Christianity. A Christianity which is really far too raw for us Brits, a little bit too emotional for us who like to keep our emotions suppressed.

A lot of shouting and waving your arms around, and so on. But that's exactly how Christians in Britain described what it was to become a Christian over 250 years ago.

And far more importantly, it's exactly what Jesus uses as a description of those who are his followers, those who alone are able to enter heaven.

For he says it twice, doesn't he? Unless, sorry, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. And later on again, he says, let me tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

But that phrase, of course, born again, is spread out, hasn't it, from beyond the walls of churches and Christianity. It's associated with any sort of activity that's practiced by people as it were in their second childhood, if I can put it that way.

[10 : 27] So you have born again bikers, men who are in their mid-40s and a bit older who decide that they're going to buy a great 1300cc Kawasaki and Zoom around the lanes of Yorkshire.

Or you can have a born again surfer or a born again rambler, born again knitters and born again dancers. It can mean any new start.

But what is a born again Christian? That's the question. If Jesus says that to be able to enter heaven, to be able to know eternal life, to be able to be a Christian means that we must be born again, if it's also the experience of Christians throughout the ages like John and Charles Wesley, what does it mean?

It's that important and that important question must be, am I born again this morning? Is it true of me? Has this taken place in my life?

Can I say that I am a born again Christian? So it was while Jesus was talking to this man Nicodemus that he describes the necessity of being born again.

[11 : 34] And he helps us, of course, to understand what that really means, what difference it makes to be born again. First thing's quite obvious, isn't it?

When Jesus speaks and uses the phrase born again, it must mean there's a new beginning, a new start. When we are born or when we were born, that was the very beginning of our life in this world. We did not begin life before we were conceived, before we were born. It's a universal experience of every single person here, every single person who is alive, that they were born, that there was their birth.

We celebrate it each year with our birthday, or some of us don't celebrate it each year with our birthday as we get to a certain age. Or, can I dare say it, we celebrate it, but it's not quite the same number that it should be for our birthday.

But Jesus mentions birth and being born here several times, doesn't he? Born again, having birth, being born of the Spirit, being born of flesh, and so on.

[12:41] Again and again, there's this sense of birth, of born, a new beginning. Nicodemus didn't fully understand, did he, what Jesus was talking about? He didn't understand what it meant to be born again, but he knew there must be some new beginning to life because he asked the question, how can a man be born when he's old?

So he has this concept, he knows there's some sense of new beginning, new life. Elsewhere in the New Testament as well, the disciples of Jesus, as they go on to talk about and explain and expand the words of Jesus, tell us once more that being a Christian is someone who has been born again. Peter, in his first letter, says, you have received new birth into a living hope. And again, later in that first chapter, he says that you have been born again.

Paul, of course, speaks much about this new beginning that takes place in the life of a Christian. He uses the phrase in 2 Corinthians 5, 17, if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation.

The old has gone, everything has become new, new beginnings. I'm sure you remember the famous court case a few years ago about John Darwin, the canoeist who just several miles up the coast here pretended to be drowned.

[14:03] And for five years, he was in hiding so that his wife could claim his life insurance. He was doing something, wasn't he? He was trying to make a new beginning for himself, for himself and his wife.

He lied to his sons, he lied to his neighbors, he lied to everybody, but ultimately he failed to achieve what he desired, that new beginning, handing himself in to the police station and serving several years in prison as well as his wife.

But that's what we want, isn't it? We want a new beginning, we want a fresh start, we want to put the past behind us, we want to have a clean sheet, as it were, to begin life again.

And of course, that's what everybody is after. And we do all sorts of things to try to accomplish that and to achieve that. For some people, it might just be moving house or moving to another part of the country or moving to Whitby, a new start, a new beginning.

For others, it may be changing their job or their work situation. If I do that, I can have a new start.

They can be changing your lifestyle, your relationships, your marriage, whatever it may be.

[15:12] If I change this, you see, there was one thing that we cannot change and there's one thing that must be changed if we're to have a new beginning and that's ourselves. We can't change ourselves.

The mistakes and the hurts of the past that we want erased from our present life are due in the main to our old hearts, to our old habits, yes, to our sinful nature.

We are where we are because we are who we are and who can change themselves. We can change our job, change our home, change our marriage, even change our name.

Some people go so far even to change their sex, to have gender change, but all these things are outwardly. All these things are on the external.

What about the personality? What about the soul? What about the heart? What about that? We can do nothing to change ourselves inwardly. And that's why Jesus' promise of a new beginning of being born again is such good news.

[16:22] For if we are born again, the old is gone and everything is made new. See, Nicodemus was a very religious man, a Pharisee.

He took the law of Moses seriously. He did all he had to keep it. He tried his hardest to please God. He was somebody that was an upright citizen in society. He was somebody who was a good churchgoer.

But of the Pharisees, including Nicodemus, Jesus had to say this, Matthew 23. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!

You are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside, you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside, you're full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

That's why Nicodemus had to come to Jesus. That's why he needed to come to Jesus. Even though it was night time, even though he was afraid of what his friends would say, he had to come to see Jesus because he knew that God was at work in Jesus' life.

[17 : 31] He knew that Jesus could do things no one else could do. Now I need to ask you this morning, is that true of you? On the outside, you're the presentable church-going Christian.

On the outside, you appear to be somebody who is an upright citizen in society. On the outside, you sing the hymns, you pray the prayers, you read the Bible, but what about the inside, dear friend?

You can't change that. Has that been renewed? Have you known a new beginning inwardly in your heart, in your soul, so that you know that your sins are forgiven, so that you know that sins have been dealt with?

Do you know that change in orientation in your life, so that there is that desire to please God and to live for him, which was not there before? It's a new beginning.

To be born again is a new start. But it also means something else, doesn't it? When Jesus speaks about being born again, it must also mean not just a new beginning, but new thinking, a new way of thinking.

[18 : 39] Jesus came, sorry, Nicodemus came to Jesus and he said to him, we know, we know you're a teacher who's come from God. But Jesus didn't reply to him, well, I'm glad you recognize that, does he?

He doesn't say, well done for seeing and knowing. It's good what you know. No, he tells, he turns it on his head. He says, I tell you the truth. You don't know. You don't know, you don't know anything. In fact, you can't even see the kingdom of God and understand the workings of God unless you're born again. You think you know Nicodemus, but you don't know. You come to me saying, I know that you're from God.

But the truth is, Nicodemus, you don't know the half of it. What you don't know is this, that I'm not just a man who's come from God, not just a man with whom God works, but I am God who's come down into this world.

Look at what Jesus says. He says, no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man himself. I am God himself in his world.

[19 : 41] I am God himself who is doing these things, not just God working through me, but I am him. And so the whole thinking of Nicodemus needed to be changed.

It's even more clear, of course, when he questions Jesus, how can a man be born when he's old? And he goes on to say, how can this be? He just can't comprehend. He can't get his head around these things.

He's only got an earthly mind. He only sees things with reason. He only sees things which can be felt and touched. He only sees things in this level field, not this vertical field.

He was a teacher of the Old Testament. Jesus says, you're Israel's teacher. You're somebody who's steeped in the Old Testament. You know all about God's workings. You know and understand these things, but you don't understand.

You don't understand. You don't understand the central message of the whole Bible. The central message that I've come to bring is what God has been saying over and over and over again, that you must have the Spirit.

[20 : 51] It's not just enough to have the law. It's not just enough to have religion. It's not just enough to have ritual. It's not just enough to have any of these things. If you have not got the Spirit of God, you cannot know God or relate to God or be in fellowship with God.

Again, this is something that's picked up at later parts of the Bible. Here's Paul as he speaks and reminds the believers of this truth. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

I'm sure you've all had the experience of going on holiday to a foreign country, going where they don't speak English, like Ireland. Or Wales.

No. But you go to a country where they don't just not speak English but they speak a language which is nothing like English. At least if you go to Ireland, you can understand most of what they say.

Or Wales, or Scotland, or wherever it may be. Or even France. You know, there's some words you can pick up, there's some similarities but if you went to the Middle East and people were speaking Arabic or some other language, you wouldn't understand a thing, would you?

[22 : 06] It would be so foreign to your ears, you just wouldn't be able to understand anything at all. So if we can't understand people who are very much like ourselves only slightly differently, how can we understand God?

How can we understand God's word and his language? He's so totally different to us. He's not a human being. He's God. He's holy and we're sinful.

He knows everything and we know nothing. He is eternal and we're just here and now. So being born again, born of the spirit as Jesus puts it so clearly here, is God's Holy Spirit giving us that new way of thinking and understanding so we can read God's word, we can hear what God says to us there, we can understand and appreciate and more than that we can do and live out his word and apply it to our lives.

Jesus. My father-in-law who is with the Lord now was a great joker and he would say things to people like this, I'm so glad I wasn't born in France.

I said, why? I can't speak a word of French. When we are born again of God, we are born so that we can speak that heavenly language.

[23 : 34] We can speak and relate to God. He is no longer a mystery to us. He is someone who is close to us and near to us in whom we have fellowship because our way of thinking and understanding God and our whole worldview is changed.

So we see ourselves differently. We see God differently. We see our neighbors differently. We understand things that we couldn't understand before and it begins with this work of the Spirit by which we are born again.

Let me ask you that question again. Is God something of a mystery to you? You sing the hymns. You read the Bible. You pray the prayers but there's something still within you that says, I still don't know this God.

I know about this God and I think I can understand but I just don't. He seems a mystery to me. People speak about being, having a friendship with God, a relationship with God.

They speak about knowing their forgiveness of sins. They speak about knowing peace which nothing else can bring but I just don't seem to know it and I don't want to pretend anymore. I want to be open and honest.

[24 : 44] God loves open and honest. One of the things that Jesus hated about the Pharisees, about the religious, what he hates about them still is this, that they're pretenders.

They pretend to know God. They pretend to do the things that God wants them to do but they don't know him. It's time for honesty. It's time to start being open and honest with God and saying to him, Lord, I am so confused.

I think I know it but I don't. I need you to give me that new way of thinking with that new start. But of course, it's obvious that really what Jesus is getting at which involves these two things we've been thinking about is this, it's new life.

New start but new life, newness of life. Jesus calls it eternal life, doesn't he? In verse 15, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness so the Son of Man, Jesus, will be lifted up, that's the cross, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

We've come to that conclusion, we've thought about being born again as a new beginning but this new life is more than just a new beginning, it's more than just a new start. It's more than just a slate white clean.

[26 : 04] It's more than just being able to put your past behind you and have fresh hope for the future. It's something more than that. Jesus puts it as being something as equivalent to being raised from death to life.

He says that just a bit later in chapter 5. He says this in verse 24, I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

And what is eternal life? He says, and will not be condemned. He's crossed over from death to life. It's being raised from the dead. It's being raised from spiritual death to spiritual life.

Again, that's the way the Bible describes what it is to be a Christian. Paul, as he writes one of his letters, Ephesians, he says this, because of God's great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions and sins.

It is by grace you have been saved. When we were born into this world physically, we didn't recognize it, but we soon learned to accept the fact, particularly as we got older, that we would have to die.

[27 : 15] It's inevitable. No matter how many years we live, no matter how long we are able to push back the boundaries of death and keep it at arm's length, the reality is that we must physically die.

The reality is the Bible teaches us that when we were born into this world, we were not only born with physical death already at work in our lives, but we were born with spiritual death.

Our souls were dead because we were born sinners. We didn't become sinners by the things that we do. doing sin is only the fruit of the reality that we are sinners.

Born as sinners, born with sin in our nature, in our fiber, in our minds, in our hearts, that nature that we've inherited from our fathers and our grandparents all the way back to Adam and Eve, to those who first sinned.

By their sin, death came into this world. And every generation has contracted that fatal, flawed gene of sin. King David, that great and wonderful king who had a heart after God, even he himself was able to say in Psalm 51 and verse 5, Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

[28 : 42] That's why God seems so distant to most people. That's why God seems to be so far away. Because like a telephone line, we've been cut off.

The line is dead between us and God. There is nothing that we can do to reconnect ourselves with God. There is nothing we can do to bring a spark of life to our souls that we might be able to come to God.

Being a Christian is not about us coming to God, but God coming to us. That's why we need a new beginning. That's why we need to be born again. That's why we feel regret and remorse for our past.

Because it's our sin that is there that needs forgiving, that needs to be dealt with so that we can have peace with the God who made us and the God to whom we are accountable and before whom we will stand as judge.

That's why we need eternal life. The result of sin is both spiritual and physical and ultimately eternal death. But the answer to all of these things comes when we receive new life by being born again of God's Holy Spirit.

[29 : 58] Because when we are born again we are brought into a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who died in our place and took our sins and our punishment and our death upon himself.

And because he rose again from the grave and conquered death so we have the guarantee that he is able and will raise us to spiritual life now and eternal life now but everlasting and resurrection life in the day to come.

So a new beginning a new way of thinking new life this is all that Jesus was talking about when he spoke to Nicodemus here about being born again.

Are these things that you know? Are these things that you can say with John Wesley of old I've got the assurance of that I have though my sins are forgiven and that I am right with God?

Are these things that you can say and testify to? Not just that you're a Christian and go to church not that you're a good person and seek to do the right thing not that you're a pillar in society or that you're religious but that you are born again of the Spirit of God.

[31 : 13] You can't do it yourself. All of your singing all of your praying all of your Bible reading all of your church attendance all of your good deeds all of your charity will never ever accomplish this work in your life.

As it could not do in mine. It doesn't matter how clever you are. It doesn't matter if you're as religious as Nicodemus. If you're a good Jew. It doesn't matter.

It is only God who can do this work in you. Something you cannot control. Jesus says himself the wind blows wherever it pleases you hear it sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going.

So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. And yet here is the wonderful truth I need to say to you this morning. Though you have not experienced this it is God's desire that you should.

It's God's desire that you should be born again. Maybe even for this very reason he's brought you here today. Maybe for this very reason he's brought you to this convention this weekend. Because he wants to do in you what has never been done before.

[32 : 17] Do you want that? Is that your desire? Can you say to God God I do want that you should deal with me and make me to be born again.

I do want these things which I've heard about because I know that I have nothing of that real and true experience of you in my life. Then the Bible makes it clear whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

call upon him he's near. Ask him to do this work. Turn from your sin. Lord Jesus save me and make me to be a new creation.

Let's spend just a moment quietly in reflection on God's word. If that's what you need to do then do that. And then I'm going to pray before we sing our final hymn. We thank you again O Lord our God that your son the Lord Jesus came into this world came from heaven that he might be lifted up that he might bear our sins and die on the cross that he might rise again that he might do all these things and so much more besides so that we might become those who are born of God born of the spirit born again.

We ask again O Lord our God that that work which Jesus has accomplished through his life and death and resurrection that you would cause that power and life to be applied to each one of us here.

[33 : 53] Those of us who've never known this Lord who've trusted perhaps like Nicodemus in what we know and what we are in our religion then Lord I pray that you would deal with us so graciously and gently and bring us to that place of repentance that we may confess O Lord that we need you O Lord come and work we ask and bring about that new life that new beginning that new thinking from this day forward and for all eternity for we ask it in Jesus name Amen Let us sing then our final hymn this morning hymn which speaks of our knowledge and understanding I know whom I believed yet confessing that we're so much more for us to learn and to know hymn three I know not why God's wondrous grace to me as they may know

O I unworthy as I am He paid before His own I know I am a believer and I persuaded that He is able to keep that who's like the prisoner unto Him against that day I know not how His saving grace to give Him God for I believe in His word God He is within my heart God I know I am a believer and that was straight to give that which I permitted unto

Him against the day I know not how the spirit was on which can all see day 3 voice healing for the chapter But I know I am believer and am persuaded that he is able to keep up his heart forbidden unto him and it's not day.

I know the dawn of fear of him may be reset for me.

The weary ways of golden days before his face I see.

[37 : 39] But I know I am believer and am persuaded that he is able to keep up his heart forbidden unto him and it's not day.

I know that when my Lord may come, I know I'll drown no way.

If I shall pass the day of death, for he did it the end. But I know I am believer and am persuaded that he is able to keep up his heart forbidden unto him and it's not day.

And now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.

To the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen.

[39 : 14] Please be seated.