

Cornerstone
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What is “Born Again?” John 3:1-18

For just over a month we’ve been studying the Gospel written by John, a disciple of Jesus and his closest friend. John came from a well-to-do family with connections to Jerusalem’s ruling class.

In addition to the gospel bearing his name John wrote three short letters, which we call 1, 2, and 3rd John and he wrote the last book of the Bible – the Revelation of John, which is filled with apocalyptic and futuristic language. Although Jewish and a leader of the church in Jerusalem early on, by the time he reached old age, John’s ministry was mostly among Gentiles.

Part of the reason was political. When Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their accounts of Jesus’ life midway through the first century, Jerusalem and Israel were the center of action. But in 70 AD Roman armies burst through Jerusalem’s walls, destroyed the temple, and enslaved and deported tens of thousands of Jews. From AD 70 to 1948 there was no state of Israel.

By 90 AD, John knew if the church of Jesus Christ was to continue to spread, it would have to be among Gentiles. So John wrote his own account of Jesus’ life focusing not on what Jesus did in the Jewish nation, but who he was as *the Son of God, the Messiah* who offered salvation to all people.

As John surveyed the Roman World in which he lived he saw a lot of effort and money going into promoting Roman religion. The government could build huge temples but Roman religion did nothing to improve Roman society. At the highest levels murder, corruption, and political intrigue were commonplace because the religion was powerless.

John wanted to show that true religion – true faith is not powerless. Religion is not just ritual. John said faith in Jesus completely transforms a person’s life and it starts with something Jesus called being “born again.” Jesus said no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Although new to most of John’s readers, we’ve *all* heard the term. In fact when the words Born Again came on the screen you unconsciously applied a definition. For some of you *born again* means receiving Christ as Lord and Savior, perhaps at confirmation, perhaps in a prayer. But to many others in our society “born again” means something very different

- judgmental, intolerant, spiteful
- Republican, NRA, anti-women, anti-environment, anti-immigrant
- hypocritical church attenders who want to impose their rules on others.

The phrase has been coopted to the point it has no consistent meaning at all. John is the only New Testament writer to use the term “born again.” It first appears in the gospel of John chapter 3 and I’d like us to read the passage together. Stand with me if you are able and let’s read aloud together the first ten verses of John chapter 3.

John 3:1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are 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?"

And we’ll leave that question hanging for now. You may be seated. May God bless the reading of the gospel.

Verse 1 introduces us to Nicodemus.

John 3:1 "Now, there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus by name, a ruler of the Jews."

Pharisees were zealous about obeying the law of Moses and all 613 rules they had added to the law. One of the ten commandments said, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” To make sure they didn’t work on the Sabbath, Pharisees like

Nicodemus would carry no more food than a dried fig from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. They would drink only one gulp of milk at a time because to drink more might constitute work.

Another rule prohibited men from tying knots on the Sabbath. Tying a knot would constitute work. Women, however, were allowed to tie knots in their sashes. So if your goat fell into a dry cistern on the Sabbath you'd get a woman to knot together several sashes making a rope, with which you could rescue the goat without doing any "work."

Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee but he was a member of the Sanhedrin; the 70 member Jewish supreme court. Nicodemus was a highly regarded teacher. In verse 10, Jesus calls him "the greatest teacher of Israel." In terms of piety and success Nicodemus was at the top of his class. But Jesus intrigued him so, verse 2 says

John 3:2 He came to Jesus at night

He didn't want to be seen. Maybe he didn't want to be seen by temple leaders as a friend of the guy who upset the temple market by driving out the money-changers. Nicodemus may have even secretly thought that what Jesus did in exposing corrupt practices was long overdue. He was no doubt aware of some of the scandals in the temple bureaucracy.

In any case, Nicodemus crept through the dark streets of Jerusalem to talk to Jesus. Verse 2 again.

John 3:2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God."

Wait a minute! Rabbi? Why would a high ranking Pharisee call Jesus Rabbi? There are two reasons and maybe three.

1. The term "Rabbi" was not a formal title in Jesus day . It was not like Jewish rabbis today, who have been through rigorous formal training. The word "rabbi" (more accurately pronounced ra-bee) was used of any learned teacher, or sage. Most teachers had a separate occupation and they periodically traveled around teaching and living off of donations, often taking with them young men they were

training.

In Jesus' day there may have been hundreds of teachers who traveled around Judea and Galilee like Jesus did. They went to the smallest villages and the most remote parts conducting classes in homes or public places. The teacher might stay for a few days or even a few months. So Nicodemus was recognizing that Jesus is one of those teachers – but there was another reason.

2. By this time Jesus had proven himself not only as a righteous teacher but a miracle worker. Notice the last part of verse 2.

John 3:2 ...For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

And flip back to the end of chapter 2, verse 23

John 2:23 Now while Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name.

Clearly, he had done more miracles than just changing water to wine. And it wasn't just Nicodemus who noticed.

Look again at John 3:2. Notice that Nicodemus does not say 'I know.' He said "...we know..." **"We know that you are a teacher who has come from God."** And that leads to what I think may be a third reason Nicodemus respected Jesus.

3. Nicodemus and other Pharisees may have observed and interacted with Jesus for more than 15 years.

Flip back in your Bibles to the gospel right before John – the gospel of Luke, and go to chapter 2.

The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about Jesus growing up years but Luke 2 mentions Joseph and Mary traveling to Jerusalem with their son, Jesus, to celebrate Passover. In fact it says,

Luke 2:41 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival

of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom.

Twelve was significant because at his next birthday Jesus would officially become a "son of the commandment," a full member of the synagogue, similar to a modern bar mitzvah. The Hebrew scriptures required all Jewish males 13 and older to attend the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

That was quite a commitment since Jesus and his parents lived 65 miles away. Joseph and Mary no doubt coordinated with friends and relatives to make these trips. You can imagine how much the kids enjoyed playing with and hanging out with cousins and friends they only got to see on these trips. So Jesus' parents took him to the Passover feast when he was 12 and verse 43 says

Luke 2:43 After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it.

Kind of like Glovers last Sunday. Leaving a kid behind at church. Joseph and Mary assumed their son was with relatives. No problem but when they tried to find him they couldn't so they went back to Jerusalem. Verse 46.

Luke 2:46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.

At 12 years old Jesus was debating theology and – look at this – he was fully aware of his identity. In Verse 49 he asks,

Luke 2:49 "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my *Father's house*?"

There's Joseph standing right there and Jesus calls the temple, "My Father's house." That must have turned some heads.

So at twelve years old Jesus was impressing teachers several times his age. You

know how it goes with child prodigies that appear on *The Voice* or *America's Got Talent*.

The kid from Nazareth became someone to watch. Nicodemus and other Pharisees had likely watched and talked to Jesus all through his teen years and into his 20's. When Jesus hit age 30 he was considered of age and ready to pursue the teaching profession. No wonder Nicodemus called him rabbi.

When Nicodemus says "*we know that You are a teacher who has come from God, because no one is able to do the miracles that You are doing unless God is with him*" – he's leading up to something but Jesus cut him off. John3:3.

John 3:3 Jesus replied, "Very truly (he uses this phrase three times in this brief conversation. King James "verily verily." Other translations say, "I tell you the truth" or something like that) **Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."**

The kingdom of God was not a new idea to Nicodemus. He knew the Hebrew scriptures like Psalm 103.

Ps 103:19 The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

Nicodemus knew God was sovereign. He also knew the prophets spoke of a yet future grand kingdom of God under a new and powerful descendant of David. Nicodemus and his Pharisee cohorts believed they would get prime spots in God's future kingdom.

But by adding the words "born again" Jesus implied that Nicodemus didn't qualify.

John 3:3 "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are *born again*. "

Nicodemus would have some understanding of the words, "born again." He had to know it meant starting over spiritually. The Pharisees themselves had a saying,

“A proselyte (a Gentile) who embraces Judaism is like a newborn child.” Same idea. They have to start over. Have to learn everything. Nothing in the past counts – and that’s what was so disorienting to Nicodemus. Why would he need to start over? He always assumed he was a shoe-in and he reacts in verse 4

John 3:4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

What, me return to my mother’s womb? Seriously? This made no sense – just like it doesn’t make sense to many people today.

Here are two things Nicodemus – and many people around us – are missing.

1. Living by rules – even religious ones– cannot save anyone. It’s not easy to change yourself.

Studies in neuroscience suggest that we set goals using five to ten percent of our consciousness, while the subconscious mind, which makes up ninety to ninety five percent of our consciousness, houses accumulated beliefs and habits that resist change.

Our conscious mind processes information at about 15 bits per second; our subconscious mind at 60,000 bits per second. When you decide to change a habit or change the way you respond to some situation you make a decision in your conscious mind but your preprogrammed subconscious mind resists and usually wins.

Nicodemus thought the key to gaining favor with God was by being more disciplined, meditate, memorizing sacred texts, keep rules, say prayers, give to the poor, fast regularly. Those can all be good. But no amount of discipline can improve anyone’s standing before almighty God.

Because our fundamental problem is not our minds but our nature. We all are born with what the Bible calls a sin nature. That sin nature is a giant chasm between us and God. We are quite literally powerless to do anything about it. We would be doomed if it wasn’t for the second thing – which Nicodemus also missed.

2. Changing our “sin nature” is a supernatural work of God. It’s not simply a matter of thinking different or overcoming the urges of our subconscious minds. We need a new (spiritual) nature. And that’s what Jesus was talking about. He begins verse 5 with the same words, “Very truly I tell you”

John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

There are conflicting interpretations of what Jesus meant by “born of water.” The most common view is that Jesus was talking about physical birth and spiritual birth. The problem with that view is there is no supporting data in the Bible or ancient literature. Physical birth is never called “born of water.”

I think Jesus is referring to the baptisms John the Baptist had been doing. John the Baptist urged people to repent and to turn away from sin. Their baptism in water was a testimony to everyone of their repentance. Jesus says even John’s baptism (being born of water) was not enough.

You have to also be born of the Spirit. It’s not a remodel but a complete transformation.”

John called it “Receiving Christ” back in chapter 1.

John 1:12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

All we can do is receive. We receive forgiveness. We receive a new nature. We receive the gift of eternal life with Christ. All grace – all God reaching down to us.

The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus may have gone on for hours. John gives us only a couple minutes worth of dialog and in verse 16 John takes the microphone himself to summarize. Probably the best known verse in the whole Bible. Read it aloud with me starting with the reference.

John 3:16 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.

I want to quickly point out three things:

First, God loved. The Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. A lot of times people picture God the Father as a scowling sovereign whose anger had to be placated by Christ's sacrifice.

God the Father was mad but Jesus is a caring and loving Good Shepherd. That's not true. God the father is not our adversary while Jesus is our ally. That is a false picture and it's one John wanted to correct. Several early church councils dealt with it as well. God loved, God offered salvation.

Second, notice that God did not love only Israel. God did not love only the elect. He loved all people. He loved the world so much he gave his Son.

In the 1990's I traveled to south Sudan many times. The last time I was there was Dec 2000, when I had to be medivaced out with severe back pain. I found out years later that when that happened – when the UN airplane came into pick me up on a stretcher— local Dinka Christians felt responsible for what happened. In their cause and effect culture they thought I would blame them for the pain and the fact that I had to stop traveling overseas.

Several years later our son Brian went to Sudan and when Rosemary Khamati, the head of PEACE International, introduced Brian as my son, the Dinka leader of the church said, “We heard you say before (Rosemary had told them) that Barry did not hold us responsible but in our hearts we wondered because we did not see him again. Now he has sent his son. If he held something against us, he would not have sent his son.

God loved people so much that he sent his Son knowing that those people would be reject and murder his Son.

Third, the miracle of “born again” begins when you believe. I intentionally skipped verse 14 and 15 because I want to finish there.

John 3:14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son

of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Nicodemus knew this story well. It was from Numbers 21, when the Israelites were in the wilderness.

Num. 21:4-9 They (the Israelites) 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 wilderness? 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, they lived.

What a strange story. People bit by this hoard of venomous snakes were getting sick and dying. Lots of them. You can imagine the terror. God prescribes a cure that was just as strange. Moses was to make a bronze snake, put it on a pole and lift it up.

From the garden of Eden on, snake always symbolized sin. So why would God require people to look up at a symbol of sin on a stick to be cured. Here's why. It was a picture of what would happen on the cross. Jesus is predicting his own death but Nicodemus doesn't know it.

When Jesus died, God put all the guilt and ugliness of all sins of all people from all time on Jesus. What an ugly image.

Romans 8:3 God ... sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.

With all that sin on him, Jesus looked like a writhing, loathsome snake. No wonder the Father turned away.

2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Galatians 3:13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole."

In the desert of Edom when anyone looked up at the bronze snake they lived. No matter how sick, no matter how undeserving, no matter how plagued they were with doubts. *I mean it's so silly – just look up a bronze snake? That can't work...can it?*

In exactly the same way, being “Born again” sounds too simple. It doesn't mean you have it all figured out. It's saying, “Lord, I want to believe. I want you in my life. I see it in others but I can't get it by myself.”