

The New Birth

John 3:1-21

Call: Ps 98:1-3 (NIV)

Scripture: Titus 3:4-7 (NIV)

I. Introduction

Today, we come to chapter 3 of John. This is one of the most famous chapters in the entire Bible because it contains one of the most famous verses in the Bible. Thank you to our families for reciting this most famous verse for us. Even if you didn't grow up in the church, you probably know the verse from seeing it plastered on billboards or on bumper stickers or on signs at sporting events. If you know the football player Tim Tebow, he would famously reference it on his eye-black.

But, do you know the story that surrounds this famous verse?

As a review, in the first two chapters of John, we have seen Jesus making all things new. We've seen him gathering a new people of God. We've seen him make new wine at a wedding. Last week, we saw him promise a new temple. And, this week, we hear of the necessity for a new birth.

And, after cleansing the temple in last week's text, Jesus continues to be in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. He gets a visitor. I invite you into our text, John 3:1-3.

II. The New Birth (3:1-3)

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (ESV)

A. The Visitor

Who is this man Nicodemus? This is an important question because as we move through John, Jesus will encounter people from all walks of life. I think John does this in hopes that each one of us will relate to someone in his Gospel.

John describes Nicodemus as a "Pharisee" and as "a ruler of the Jews." This means he is not just a regular Pharisee. He's probably a member of the Jewish Ruling Council called the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a group of 71 experts in the law who governed *everything* about the people of God in the 1st century. In verse 10, Jesus will call him "the teacher of Israel" using the definite article. Nicodemus is of the elite class, highly educated, as a leading theologian of his day.

He would have also been a really good man. He probably loved his wife, loved his children,

gave money to the poor, paid his taxes and helped his neighbors during a pandemic. He was a really good man I'm sure.

And, he would obviously have been a very religious man. He was probably born into a religious home and grew up in church. He probably went to Sunday School and youth group regularly, and then, as an adult, attended big church every Sunday. He probably knew all the hymns by heart and probably sang in the choir. And, no doubt he would have even been on the elder board. As one writer said, "Here is Jesus meeting a good Christian."

So, the man that comes to Jesus at night is very educated, a really good person and very religious. His signature on emails would have had lots of post-nominal titles after his name like mdiv, thm, phd and thd. Don Carson calls him the "reverent, professor, doctor" (Carson, 115). This is Nicodemus.

B. By Night?

So, why does he come at night? We're not told. Most people assume that he doesn't want anyone to see him, especially other members of the Sanhedrin. Or, perhaps he sees a possibility that Jesus' theology matches his, and he wants to verify it in secret. In that case, he won't have to change. Or, perhaps he is simply being drawn to the light, like bugs are drawn to a light. Perhaps Nicodemus can't help himself.

We're not sure, but John also uses descriptions like this in his Gospel to describe spiritual realities. Perhaps John is saying it is "dark" to point out the darkness that is within Nicodemus. Here is an intelligent, good and very religious man, and yet he is still in darkness. Perhaps John is trying to tell us that even the leaders of God's people must be open to Jesus' new way.

Perhaps John also wants us to see that Jesus, out of his great love, is willing to enter the darkness. He is willing to meet people where they are, in their darkness.

C. The First Words

Regardless, Nicodemus opens the conversation acknowledging Jesus as a Rabbi. It's a bit startling because Jesus is an ordinary Galilean. He didn't go to their elite schools, yet Nicodemus apparently treats him as an equal by calling him Rabbi. Unless that is, he says it condescendingly.

He then recognizes there is something special about Jesus. Speaking for the entire Sanhedrin, he proudly asserts that they "know" all about you Jesus. What is ironic is from this point forward, Nicodemus will only ask questions. It seems he doesn't know as much as he thinks. He has no answers from this point forward. Maybe this is why he is in the "dark." His pride has blinded him. As Paul will say later, "*Knowledge puffs up while love builds up*" (1 Cor 8:1).

D. "Truly Truly"

Jesus responds and shatters Nicodemus' pride. Jesus immediately jumps to the heart of the matter and essentially says, "Nicodemus, it doesn't matter what you know. It doesn't matter

whether you are good. It doesn't matter that you are religious. What matters is being born again."

Jesus will repeat the phrase "born again" in our text. I think that means it's important. But, we also know this phrase is important, because here he begins with "*truly, truly.*" In the Greek, it is "*Amen, Amen.*" And, when Jesus begins with "Amen, Amen," it means we must sit up and take notice. You cannot read over these statements in John. These statements are trustworthy and true. They are statements on which to build your life. In other words, you want to internalize them and build your life around them.

E. "Born Again"

Nicodemus, you must be born again. Notice he says "must." It's a strong word used rarely by Jesus when referring to things we must do. You must be born again.

"Born again" is a sometimes over-used phrase in our time. Christianly, it has maybe become a cliché. But, even non-Christianly, it is sometimes used of athletes or politicians when they make a new start in their careers.

The word for "again" can also be translated as "from above." The point is not as much the repetition of birth, as it is the source of the birth. You must be born from above to see the kingdom of God. Later in John, Jesus uses this same term when he speaks with Pilate. Jesus says to Pilate, "*You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above*" (19:11). You must be born from above. You must be re-made from above, re-generated from above, if you want to "see" or later he will say, "enter" the Kingdom of God.

F. "Kingdom of God"

And, what about the phrase "kingdom of God?" The phrase "Kingdom of God" is only used by John here in his Gospel, verses 3 and 5. It is used repeatedly throughout the other three Gospels. For John, "Kingdom of God" is synonymous with "eternal life." In other words, when John uses eternal life, like he will in John 3:16 coming up, he is saying the same thing as Kingdom of God. It is the place where God reigns, where his will is done on earth as it is in heaven. That's the kingdom of God which is the same as eternal life.

And, of course, as we watch this conversation unfold, we recognize that Jesus is separating himself from not only the Pharisees, but from every other ideology, philosophy and religion that the world can offer. We don't need more education, more self-discipline, more meditation, a different economic order, social reorganization or any other kind of reformation. Humanity needs a new birth, a birth from above, a regeneration of our entire nature because our entire nature is entirely flawed. The new birth is our only hope.

Nicodemus now begins his questions, verse 4.

III. The Nature of the New Birth (4-8)

4 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?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 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." (ESV)

A. How?

Nicodemus asks, "How can someone be born again?" Now, this question, if read over it quickly, can sound a bit unintelligent, maybe brainless? But, we've already observed that Nicodemus is no fool. He is very bright, so what is he really asking here? I think Leon Morris captures it best. We can imagine Nicodemus asking his question like this, "I am a sum of all my yesterdays. I am who I am today because of all the things that have happened to me through the years. I am a bundle of doubts, uncertainties, wishes, hopes, fears and habits – good and bad built up through the years. And, it would be wonderful to break the inevitable consequences of the past and make a completely fresh beginning. But, how can this possibly be done? ... Regeneration is a sheer impossibility Jesus!" (Morris, 215).

The root of Nicodemus's question is whether human nature can really be changed. Can we really start over, or at least get rid of our bad habits? There may even be a hint of exasperation in his voice. It's too late to start all over again Jesus! It's hopeless.

B. Water and Spirit

At this point, Jesus repeats what he said earlier, but replaces "born again" with "born of water and the Spirit." Nicodemus, change *is* possible, but not by human effort, only through being born of water and the spirit. In other words, being born "again" or "from above" is synonymous with being "born of water and the spirit." But, what does this mean?

Now, remember Jesus is speaking to an expert in the Old Testament, so he can draw from Old Testament images where water and spirit are connected. And, I believe he is primarily drawing on the prophet Ezekiel here. God reveals his promises to Ezekiel that he plans to act in a mighty way to recreate his people. God says this, "*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you*" (Ezek 36:25-26). Water and spirit.

The next chapter in Ezekiel, then, is the famous chapter where God gives Ezekiel a vision of what those words meant. God takes Ezekiel out into a valley that is full of the bones of dead human beings. Everywhere Ezekiel looks he sees death. And, then, God tells Ezekiel to speak God's Word over the dry bones. "*Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!... 'I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.'*" (Ezek 37:4-5). And, when Ezekiel does this "*there was a*

noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone ... and breath entered them; they came to life” (Ezek 37:7-10).

The wind blew over the dead bones, the Spirit moved and they came to life. Jesus says that the *“wind blows where it wishes but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”* (3:8). In other words, there is mystery here. The Spirit is uncontrollable and mysterious like the wind.

Jesus is saying to Nicodemus here, “You want to be changed. You want to have a new life. You want to be in the Kingdom of God where God reigns, but you can’t get there by your smarts or your goodness or your religiosity. Being born again from above means being born by the Spirit of God, symbolized by the cleansing of water baptism. As the dry bones didn’t come to life by themselves – they came to life only through the Spirit – so it will be with you.”

C. Flesh-Flesh, Spirit-Spirit

And why is this the case? Jesus says, verse 6, *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* Flesh here means human nature. Jesus is not talking good or bad here. He is simply talking human nature vs. the spirit. The point is that like generates like. Flesh can only generate more flesh. Human nature can only give birth to human nature. Flesh cannot produce Spirit. It’s impossible. We cannot produce in our own flesh the life of the kingdom of God.

Here is where CS Lewis helps us here in Mere Christianity. It’s a long quote but I think it’s worth it. He works with the image of statues (which by the way was brilliant portrayed in the first Narnia movie), and says this:

“A statue has the shape of human beings but it is not alive. In the same way, human beings have the “shape” or likeness of God, but they do not have the kind of life God has.

What human beings, in their natural condition, do not have, is Spiritual life – the higher and different sort of life that exists in God. We use the same word *life* for both [but they are different]... the difference between biological life and spiritual life is so important I am going to give them two distinct names. The biological sort which comes to us through nature, and which is always tending to run down and decay so that it can only be kept up by incessant subsidies from nature in the form of air, water, food, etc is *Bios*. The Spiritual life which is in God from all eternity, and which made the whole natural universe, is *Zoe*. *Bios* has, to be sure, a certain shadowy or symbolic resemblance to *Zoe*; but only the sort of resemblance there is between a photo and a place, or a statue and a human being. A human being who changed from having *Bios* to having *Zoe* would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real human” (Lewis, 138).

Lewis here, in many ways, captures what being “born from above” really means, moving from carved stone to being a real human being, from *bios* to *zoe*, both Greek words. It is a new

genesis. When we were born, our human parents gave us the only kind of life they could give us, *bios* life. But, this life wears down and ultimately perishes. When we are born by the Spirit, we are initiated into a kind of life that only the Spirit can give us, *zoe* life, the life of God, which never perishes. Flesh gives birth to flesh which ends. The Spirit gives birth to Spirit, to *zoe* life, to life that does not end, to eternal life.

So, what is Nicodemus thinking now? Well, he asks another question, verse 9.

IV. The Reason the New Birth is Possible (9-15)

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 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. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (ESV)

A. The Son of Man

Jesus explains how being born from above is even possible. It is obvious he expects Nicodemus to know these things, after all Nicodemus "knows" the scriptures. This new genesis is only possible because the Son of Man has come to the rescue. Of course! He has descended from heaven with *zoe*, with the life of God! In the prologue, we heard "in him was *zoe*" (1:4). In chapter 5, we hear that the Son has *zoe* in himself (5:26). In chapter 10, Jesus claims to give *zoe*, and to give *zoe* abundantly (10:10). In chapter 14, Jesus claims to be the way, the truth and the *zoe* (14:6). Nicodemus, it is because the Son of Man has come that this *zoe* life is now possible.

B. The Bronze Snake

Jesus then brings in another Old Testament story, this time from Numbers 21. As the Israelites are moving around the wilderness, they begin grumbling against God and against Moses. And, in the middle of the wilderness, snakes begin to bite the people causing many to die. So, God tells Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole, and for anyone that is bitten, if they look on the bronze snake they will be healed and live (Numbers 21:5-9).

It is a strange scene, and Jesus refers to it as a prediction of his own death. He says that when he is lifted up, implying lifted up onto the cross, anyone who looks at him and believes on him will live, just like the Israelites in the wilderness. But, there is a big difference. The Israelites of old only received a renewal of the flesh, a renewal of the *bios*. They would die again. But Jesus says that when you look up on the Son of Man on the cross, a deeper renewal will take place. When you look up to him and believe, the regeneration takes place, the spiritual rebirth takes place and *zoe* comes, eternal life comes!

We are now ready to hear the famous verse, along with the rest of our text.

V. The Necessary Response (16-21)

16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." (ESV)

A. The Love of God

In these verses, it is generally agreed for various reasons that Jesus has stopped talking and John is narrating now. Regardless, we find out that everything Jesus has been sharing, all the good news we are hearing, happens *because* of the love of God. The living God has not given up on us. He has not left us. He has not forgotten us. He loves us! As Bonhoeffer said, "Love protects against forgetting" (Bonhoeffer, 15). This is the first occurrence of this word "love" in this Gospel, and it is breathtaking. The motivation for Jesus coming and for all that he says and does is the love of the father. It wasn't an emotional, theoretical, abstract love. It is not simply that God is love. It is an active, embodied love. He gave his son.

B. The World

Because God loved this world *so much*. It is shocking that the object of God's love is the world. Especially given how "world" is used in this Gospel. In this Gospel, the world is "human society organizing itself without him." Because God so loved that world – the world that lives in darkness of which Jesus is currently sitting in – that he would not leave it to the inherent consequence of *bios*. The inherent consequence of *bios* is that it perishes. But because he loved this dark world that organizes itself without him, he gave his one and only son. It's no wonder it's such a famous verse. It is the Gospel in miniature, as Luther said.

C. The Necessity

God pursued and God loved and God gave. So, what should Nicodemus do now? What should you or I do now? Only one thing. The necessary response is one thing – believe, believe in Jesus, the Son of Man. As I have said, believe is *the* key word in this Gospel, used 98 times, always as a verb. It is "... an activity which takes people right out of themselves and into Christ," entering into his *zoe*, and living within his *zoe*. (Morris, 336).

Jesus is saying, "Nicodemus, you must believe me as the Son of Man. You must trust me that I know what I'm talking about, and not your smarts or your goodness or your religiosity. And, when I'm lifted up on that pole like that bronze snake, if you look on me and believe in me, knowing you are in need of salvation and knowing you are in need of God's mercy, you will be rescued. And you will be given *zoe*, the abundant and eternal life of God!

D. The Consequence of Unbelief

To each of us, he says the same thing. Every one of us must decide. These final verses make clear that there are consequences to unbelief. Although Jesus has come on a great rescue mission to save everyone and not condemn anyone, a decision on our part “must” happen.

While our culture speaks naively of the goodness and the morality in each one of us, the Bible is clear that sinfulness and depravity are what define human existence. And, the only hope for us is to believe in Jesus, being born again from above by the Spirit. To remain in the darkness of our sinfulness and depravity – full of pride, unwilling to change, unwilling to expose our darkness, unwilling to entrust ourselves to Jesus – is to bring judgment upon ourselves.

For human destiny is ultimately determined by what a person does with Jesus. *He* is the deciding factor. Over and over again in this Gospel we will be confronted with this decision.

VI. Conclusion

So, what did Nicodemus decide? After this conversation, was he born from above? Was he willing to humble himself, to change and move out of the darkness and into the light? I think so, though we do not know for sure. He is mentioned twice more in this Gospel. In chapter 7, he courageously stands up for Jesus during a heated argument with the religious leaders (7:51). And, at the end of the Gospel, he joins Joseph of Arimathea in taking Jesus’ body off the cross and carrying it to the garden tomb. That was a huge risk. He probably lost his position as the reverent, professor, doctor with that move, for he had identified with the crucified one.

More importantly, what will you decide? Will you humbly come to the light, and believe in Jesus, the Son of Man? Or will you remain in the darkness?

If you have already been born again from above, what would it look like to go deeper with Jesus? What would it look like to turn over more of that darkness in your life to him?

When I read CS Lewis’ comments on bios and zoe, I did not finish the quote. Let me finish the quote as our conclusion:

Speaking of the image of statues, “This is precisely what Christianity is all about. This world is a great sculptor’s shop. We are the statues and there is a rumor going round the shop that some of us are some day going to come to life” (Lewis, 140).

Amen.

Benediction

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate you from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39)

Who, because of his great love, sent his son that you may believe in him and have eternal life (John 3:16).

Go and live within that love this week.

Resources

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *I Want to Live These Days With You* (Devotional)

Bruner, Frederick Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* Johnson,

Johnson, Darrell, *BIBL 553: Believing Into Life* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)

Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*

Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT)