

BEGINNING AGAIN

John 3

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He was a Jew. He was a Pharisee. Maybe even a member of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. Like most of the Jews, Nicodemus was expecting a Rambo-Messiah who would lead the Jews in a military uprising that would free them from Roman oppression. “How can I possibly go and speak to Jesus?” he must have thought to himself. “I’m a leader of the opposition party against Him. Maybe I can go at night,” he thought.

Cautious. Cautious. Watch Nicodemus now as he comes to Jesus, sneaking in the shadows of the night. But Nicodemus was not only a cautious man. He was a curious man, as well. Despite the risk he was taking – the risk of shame, the risk of humiliation – Nicodemus goes to see Jesus.

“Who is this man named Jesus,” Nicodemus pondered. No one Nicodemus knew had graduated with Him from the University of Jerusalem. He certainly wasn’t properly trained in the law of Moses. “And, yet, Jesus debates our best with authority. He leaves us perplexed. He sees the scripture in a whole new way, as if it were written just for him. Yet some have said he was nothing more than a carpenter.”

A carpenter – yet the crowds follow Him and hang on every word that leaps from His lips. Thousands go into the wilderness to hear Him teach, to hear Him declare, “Behold, the kingdom of God is at hand.”

But more than teach, He does miracles. Some have said that with His very word He can turn water into wine.

And how brave He seemed when He went into the temple and threw out those who had turned the sacred space into nothing more than a flea market. Oh, if you could have seen the look on the faces of the Sadducees as Jesus took a whip and drove out those selling sheep and oxen and those changing money. He even claimed that if they tore the temple down that He could raise it up in three days.

The Sadducees were perplexed. They had seen 46 years pass during the building of the temple, and they were none too glad to see some man from Nazareth – Nazareth, who would ever have thought that a miracle worker would come from there – make such nonsense claims. Even if He could turn water into wine at a wedding, surely He could not build the temple in just three days.

Of course, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus didn’t mind too much to see the Sadducees taken down a notch or two. But he couldn’t get past wanting to know who Jesus really was. Did Jesus really

know how to find the Kingdom of God? Could He tell Nicodemus how to have a right relationship with God?

Nicodemus approaches Jesus, coming under the cover of the shadows of night. “Now teacher, I know that you’ve come from God because nobody could do the miracles you’re doing unless God was with him.” Immediately Jesus, refusing to enter into a scholarly debate about the law, blasted as a trumpet blasts, articulating a painful truth: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

Oh, how Nicodemus wanted to see the Kingdom of God, to celebrate the reign of God, the rule of God.

But what could Jesus mean – this strange teacher – when he declares, “You must be born again?” Surely He cannot mean that a man should enter the womb again to be born. That thought is foolish.

“Unless you are born again, you will not see the Kingdom of God.”

In 1976, Jimmy Carter’s candidacy for president sent political journalists into a research frenzy. They wanted to know, as presidential scholar James D. Barber wryly observed, about this curious religious creature, the orthodox Christian. What was this oddity?

Twenty years later, at a cocktail party in South Carolina, the discussion turned to religion. Someone asked what “born again” meant. Another said, “Oh, that’s something that Jimmy Carter started when he was in the White House.”

The lone Christian in the crowd tried to explain, “No, ‘born again’ was something Jesus started when he said, ‘You must be born again.’” But no one listened. (Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*, p. 44)

I want you to understand this morning that you cannot ignore the words of Jesus. If Jesus is the Son of God, and if He has made this proclamation, it applies to you and it applies to me. You will not participate in the Kingdom of God, the eternal reign and rule of the creator of this universe unless you are born again. There is no other way by which to be saved.

In verse 5, Jesus explains to Nicodemus He is not talking about a physical birth. Rather, He is talking about a spiritual birth. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (verse 6), “and that which his born of the Spirit is spirit.” He is talking about something altogether different. We must not only be born physically, but we must be born spiritually as well.

In 1752, Preacher George Whitefield wrote to Benjamin Franklin: “As I find you growing more and more famous in the world of letters I recommend to your unprejudiced study the mystery of the New Birth. It is a most important study and if mastered will abundantly repay you. I bid you, dear friend, remember that He before whose bar we must both soon appear has solemnly declared that without it we shall in no wise see His Kingdom.”

What was true in Jesus' day in A.D. 30 was true in George Whitefield's day in A.D. 1752. And it is also true today in A.D. 2024. To see God's Kingdom, you must be born again.

While I was pastoring at Meadowbrook, there was a man whose obituary was placed in the paper before he died. Well, he's not the only one that ever happened to. That man at Meadowbrook was Paul Ostroum. It's happened to others, too. **When it happened to one man, he was greatly disturbed. He went into the newspaper office and demanded to see the editor. He said, "This is terrible! Your error, your proclamation of my death, will cause me no end of embarrassment and a great loss of business. Who wants to do business with a dead man? How could you do such a thing?"** The editor tried to apologize. He tried to express his regrets, but the man who had been declared dead (but was fully alive) would not receive "I'm sorry" for an answer. Finally the editor said in disgust, "Cheer up, man. I tell you what, I'll put your name in the birth column tomorrow and we'll give you a fresh start. You can start all over again."

That's what Jesus is talking about – the ability to be born again, to be forgiven, to start life new.

Louisa Tarkington wrote a poem.
*Oh, how I wish there was some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our poor, selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat
At the door
And never put on again.*

You must be born again.

That meant Nicodemus must be born again. That means I must be born again. And it means you must be born again.

Jesus presents the gospel to Nicodemus. In verse 13 He explains how He had descended from heaven, that He is the Son of Man spoken of by the prophets. Even as Moses had lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up on the cross. Whoever believes may, in Him, have eternal life.

As the children of Israel sinned, God sent fiery serpents among them to strike them. "Moses, we've all sinned," they cried out. "Please ask the Lord that He will remove the serpents from among us." The Lord told Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it upon a standard. All who looked at the serpent of bronze were healed.

Even so Christ, as He is crucified, is lifted up. And all who look to the cross, all who look to Him in belief and in faith will be spared and be given forever life.

John 3:16 is the whole gospel – in all brevity but in all power.

**God the greatest Lover
so loved the greatest degree
the world the greatest number
that He gave the greatest act
His only begotten Son the greatest Gift
that whosoever the greatest invitation
believeth the greatest simplicity
in Him the greatest Person
should not perish the greatest deliverance
but the greatest difference
have the greatest certainty
everlasting life the greatest possession**

“Nicodemus, if you want everlasting life, you must be born again.”

You must go to the land of beginning again.

I don't care how smart you are. I don't care how much you know about Scripture. I don't care how long you've been a church member. I don't care how long you've been a deacon. I'm telling you that unless you've been born of the flesh and of the Spirit, you will not see the Kingdom of God.

There is a society I used to belong to – probably still should, just got tired of paying the dues. It is the Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. It's that meeting where scholars gather – those who have written papers on various New Testament and Old Testament topics – to study and criticize, to debate and to hear the latest thought, the latest word from the masters of scripture (that is, the masters in a scholarly sense, not a popular sense). There are book displays and book tables. And those who love the scholarly world of biblical study go and drool over all the expensive new technical texts that have been written in the area of biblical studies.

It's a different sort of crowd. It's not exactly like a church meeting. I realized that the first time I went and they opened up the bar. I was pretty naive my first trip and just wasn't used to men in clerical collars, professors of theology discussing Paul's view of the law as they shared a swig or two. You get the picture. It's not Baptist Sunday School. This is hard time, technically theological, jargon-laden conversation.

Fred Craddock remembers being at one of those meetings. The point is, Fred was both a top-notch scholar as well as a practicing believer. Some of those in the Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature are not even professing Christians. They are just studying the scripture as literature. But not so with Craddock.

As they were leaving one meeting and going to another meeting, he encountered a woman who was frantic with fear and high anxiety was written all over her face. She clutched a black zippered Bible and said, “Are you attending this meeting of Bible teachers?” “Yes,” Craddock said. “Is it open to anybody?” And he said, “Well, there are open sessions.” And

she said, “Well, can I come in?” “What’s your interest?” he asked. “I have wasted my life – I would like to be a Christian.”

“Oh,” Craddock thought to himself, “there is not anything on the program for her. There is liberation theology in meeting room A or a subjective genitive reading of the faith of Christ in meeting room B. But there is really not a class about how to be a Christian.” Well, he didn’t send her to the Wittgenstein seminar. Rather, he called her over to the side, to the refreshment stand. He talked to her for an hour. He talked to her about being a Christian, showed her how to walk the life of faith.

What if Craddock had not been there? What if she had run into one of the other scholars who was a scholar of the mind but not of the heart? What if nobody had spoken to her? Then there would be no reason or need for the American Academy of Religion or the Society of Biblical Literature. (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 81)

Giving one’s life to Christ, being born again, is truly what it’s all about.

I dare say when that young woman left, with an understanding about what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ Jesus, in one instant she knew more than all the scholars gathered together, for she knew the words of Jesus: “You must be born again.”

They studied the water – she drank it.

Do you understand that God loved you enough to send Jesus to die – to die in your place? For God so loved the world – for God so loved you – that He gave His only Son that if you will believe in Him, you will not die but live forever.

Perhaps you are here this morning and you need to go to the land of beginning again.

Perhaps you’re here this morning and you need to profess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. He died in your place, for your sin.

Perhaps you’re here this morning and, like Nicodemus, you’re curious about Christ. Or maybe you’re flipping channels. You don’t usually stop and listen to television preachers – and I don’t blame you for that. Maybe you’re asking, like Nicodemus, “Is it all real? Can a man really be born after he’s already old?”

It says in John 3:18 that those who believe in Jesus are not judged, but those who reject Jesus have been judged already, because they’ve not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Perhaps the Spirit has pleaded with you before. Perhaps several times. And every time you’ve said, “No.” You don’t want to go God’s way. You want to go your way. You don’t want to be obedient to anyone else’s plan but your own.

There were two men, I am told, who were watching an old western on television. As the hero rode on horseback toward the edge of the cliff, one man said, “I bet you \$50 he goes over the cliff.”

“You’re on,” said the other man. The hero rode on, straight over the cliff. Being a sport, the second handed over the money. The first man looked at it and said, “You know, I feel a bit guilty about winning your money. To tell you the truth, I’ve already seen this film before.” “So have I,” said the second man, “but I didn’t think he’d be stupid enough to make the same mistake a second time.”

Dare you make the mistake of rejecting the Christ a second, or third, or fourth time?

When the Son of God Himself, the creator of the cosmos, the One who turns water into wine, the One who causes the lame to leap, the One who commands death to leave and gives life back to broken bodies – when that One says, as plainly as He can, “You must be born again or you will not see the Kingdom of God,” you’d better be really sure before you reject that truth and that teaching.

There is a painting entitled, “Waiting for the Verdict,” (painted by Abraham Solomon in 1857). Have you ever been in a courtroom before with a friend who’s been accused of something? I’ve been there. It’s a sick feeling. You wait for the jury to come back. You hope against hope they are going to say “Not guilty,” yet, you don’t know. Why are they taking so long? Or, why have they returned so quickly? In this painting, “Waiting for the Verdict,” people are in a small room just outside a courtroom. They have a look of intense pain etched on their faces. A man and a woman sit with clasped hands, bearing the agony of not knowing the outcome of their son’s case – the dad bowed in painful prayer, the mom, ashen-faced with tears. The young man’s sister, frightened and tearful, stands peering through the half-opened door into the courtroom where her brother is on trial for a serious crime. Looking at the painting you can see the tension leaping from the colors on the canvas. They await the verdict.

So many people live life that way in their relationship with God. They live like they want to live. They do what they want to do. And they hope, somehow in the end as they anxiously await the final decision, that somehow with God they will be acquitted.

But Jesus has said, “You will not see the Kingdom of God unless you taste the second birth.” Jesus has said that those who do not believe have been judged already because they have not claimed the name of the only begotten Son of God.

If you want to see the Kingdom of God, you must be born again.

Life is short
and death is sure.
Sin is the cause
and Christ is the cure.

Marvel not that I say unto you, You must be born again.

I’ve got some good news – I think I do.

Nicodemus. What did he do? Whatever happened to him? Later in John's Gospel, as the Pharisees denounce Jesus as an imposter, Nicodemus retorted, "It is not lawful to judge a man without first giving him a trial." Nicodemus softly spoke up on Jesus' behalf. And finally, the one who had come by night to see Jesus, was the very one who, with courage, took the Lord's body and bound it in burial linen and anointed His body with myrrh and aloes.

It seems the story of Nicodemus has a happy ending, like all good stories.

But what about your story? You're writing that one yourself. Will you be born again? The end of your story depends on you.