

A Death to Life Story

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks for reading, Simon, and thank you, Luca, as well. My name is Archie. As has been said, I'm one of the ministry trainees here. Let me say Happy Easter and add my welcome to Luca's as well. If you want to keep your Bibles open at John chapter 3, it might also be worth having a bookmark in Numbers chapter 21 because we will go there too.

I don't know about you, but I absolutely love this time of year. Not just this weekend in particular, but springtime. There are lambs in the field, daffodils, little bunny rabbits. I think I love this time of year because it's all about the miracle of new life.

And today we celebrate the central life-giving miracle of the universe. It's what Easter Sunday is all about.

Jesus making that journey from death back to life. And even more amazing than that, in making that journey, Jesus paves the way for us to join him. He paves the way for us to make that same journey from death to life.

And I just say, if you're here this evening and you don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, I totally get that. Honestly, really, I do. I understand. I mean, that story, that death to life story is literally impossible, isn't it?

[1 : 3 8] But this is what it all hangs on. This is the heart of the Christian faith. And if you don't believe that, I would urge you to really look into and explore the historical resurrection.

Because I really do believe that it isn't just a fairy tale, that it is grounded in history. And what if it's true? It might just make all the difference.

So this evening, as we celebrate the resurrection together, we're going to listen in on that conversation from John chapter 3. It's a conversation between Jesus and this man called Nicodemus.

Now, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, so a super religious Jewish man. He loved to follow all the rules of scripture and to be seen to follow the traditions of his forefathers.

And not only that, but did you notice he's part of the Jewish ruling elite, probably wealthy, certainly a great teacher. His religious CV could not be any better.

[2 : 4 4] If anyone is in a position to understand what it's going to take to make this journey from death to life, it's got to be this guy, doesn't it?

And yet, in this conversation, Jesus shows Nicodemus that actually what he needs is an eternal identity shift.

Not more religion, but a heart transplant. What he needs, as Jesus puts it, is to be born again.

It's what this passage is all about, new birth. And there are three questions about the new birth that I think Jesus answers here. First of all, why do we need new birth?

Secondly, why we're incapable of new birth on our own? And thirdly, why the new birth is possible? But before we let Jesus answer those questions, I want you to notice something really strange in our passage with me.

[3 : 48] You might have noticed it already in verse 3. Before Nicodemus asks anything of him, Jesus comes out with this statement.

Have a look at verse 3. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. I mean, isn't that just such a strange thing to say, completely out of nowhere?

Nicodemus hasn't asked anything about the kingdom of God. He hasn't asked about being born again. In fact, Nicodemus hasn't asked anything of Jesus at all. So why does Jesus come out with this statement?

Well, I think the immediate context here is key. In John chapter 2, verse 23, maybe just turn back to that and have a look at it with me. Verse 23.

Now, while he, that is Jesus, was in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name.

[4 : 52] Then have a look at what Nicodemus says halfway through verse 2, back in our passage in chapter 3. Verse 2. Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you are doing if God were not with him.

So I think it appears as though Nicodemus is one of those who Jesus, who had seen Jesus's signs in chapter 2 and believed in Jesus, at least as a miracle worker.

But why does Jesus engage with this believer of miracles in such a strange way in verse 3? Well, have a look at verse 24 with me, chapter 2, verse 24.

But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

Jesus knew what was in Nicodemus. What did Jesus know was in him, in this man who says that he believed in him?

[6 : 01] Well, I think that Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus that we're about to explore, his encounter with one of these new believers, answers that question. What does Jesus know about them?

Well, he knew that they were not born again, that this eternal identity shift had not taken place. And so he didn't need to wait for a question out of Nicodemus to know what was in him.

He already knew that. He sees Nicodemus and he sees that he has not yet been born again. So let's get stuck into our three questions about new birth.

Firstly, why do we need new birth? Why did Nicodemus need to be born again? The following verses show us, I think, Jesus' view of what is in humanity.

And it's not flattering, but it is utterly essential for us to understand. Four things Jesus tells Nicodemus about those who have not been born again.

[7 : 05] Firstly, in verse 6. What does it say at the start of verse 6? Flesh gives birth to flesh. So notice, those who haven't been born again are flesh.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, natural man. In other words, they are without the Holy Spirit. Paul unpacks this for us in his letters. He unpacks the implications of this.

In Romans chapter 7, verse 18, he says, Nothing good dwells in me, that is, my flesh. And in Galatians chapter 5, verses 19 to 21, Paul lists the works of the flesh there as sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

It is a very low view of humanity not yet born again. And notice that Jesus isn't talking about a particular sort of person here.

When he says that flesh gives birth to flesh, he's not talking about those who are especially badly behaved. No, this is all people, everywhere, utterly depraved and naturally cut off from God.

[8 : 29] So firstly, people without the Spirit are flesh. And flesh is utterly depraved. Secondly, see in the second half of verse 6.

Have a look there with me. The Spirit gives birth to spirit. And I think the implication here is that without the Spirit, we are spiritually dead.

Because birth brings forth life, doesn't it? It's what we've been talking about seeing at this time of year. And so if a spiritual second birth has not yet taken place in someone's life, it follows, doesn't it, that they must be spiritually dead.

Now this wasn't always the case. Genesis chapter 2, when God created man, he breathed life into him. Spiritual life. But then came the warning.

That eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil meant that man would surely die. That's spiritual death. And well, that's exactly what happened in Genesis, isn't it? They ate from the tree.

[9 : 37] And ever since, humanity has been spiritually dead. So naturally, humanity is flesh, utterly depraved. They are spiritually dead.

And thirdly, the consequences of this depravity and spiritual deadness is eternity in hell. Have a look at verse 3.

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. And verse 5, same thing. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Jesus is crystal clear. One must be born again to see the kingdom of God, to enter eternal life. Without being born again, humans are on a one-way trip to the grave and eternal death.

In other words, without new birth, humanity is destined for hell. Naturally speaking, flesh and depravity, spiritually dead, destined for hell.

[10 : 41] And finally, his, that is, the man who has not yet been born again, his religious efforts even are works of the flesh. And therefore, they have no moral value to God.

We've already seen in verse 1 that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. A Pharisee, a highly religious man. But religion is not a guarantee of spiritual rebirth.

Without being born again, we are incapable of moral good. Now, of course, people who have not been born again, they can have the appearance of goodness. In fact, in God's grace, they really can do good.

But their actions remain of no moral eternal value to the God of this universe, performed such as they are out of flesh and spiritual deadness.

So what does that mean for us? Well, I think one of the things it means, certainly, is that we can be perfectly upright sort of people. Even in the church, you could be an elder, a ministry leader, a pastor even, an embassy leader, a ministry trainee or whatever else, and yet not be born again.

[11 : 56] Jesus looks at a fallen humanity and he knows what is in them. That they are flesh and depravity, dead in their sin and without spiritual life, excluded from God's kingdom, destined for hell.

And that they might even deceive themselves to all of this through religious activity. And so a dose or a shot of religion will not save us.

What we all need is a heart transplant, a total identity shift. What we need is to be born again, moved from the sphere of death to the sphere of life.

This is the position that we all find ourselves in. Now, I'm aware you might be sitting there thinking, I'm kind of standing here thinking, come on, this is Easter Sunday.

Where is the good news that we were promised? And I promise you it is coming. But before it gets better, I warn you, it does get worse. Because this is our second question.

[13 : 00] Why is it that we are incapable of this new birth on our own? Do you see the question that Nicodemus asks in verse 4? It is, I think, a very sensible question.

How can man be born again when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb and be born. There are questions like this all over the Bible.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard change his spots? Can a camel pass through the eye of a needle? We can't change the colour of our skin.

A leopard can't change its spots. A camel cannot pass through the eye of a needle. And old men cannot be born again. It is impossible for man to cause himself to be born again.

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that the position he is in is utter helplessness. It's as though Nicodemus is stuck in a room and all the door handles are too high.

[14 : 04] They're out of his reach. And Jesus is calling him out of that room. He says, if you want to see the kingdom of God, come out. Come out. You've got to come out of there. And Nicodemus simply can't reach the door handle.

With man, these things are impossible. But with God, all things are possible. That's the crux of it.

Man is incapable of new birth because new birth is a work of God by his spirit. Have a look at verse 8 with me.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear it sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.

I think that's a wonderfully mysterious sounding verse, isn't it? And there's a wordplay at work here because the word in Greek for wind is exactly the same as the word used for spirit.

[15 : 02] It's been unbelievably windy here today, hasn't it, in Edinburgh? And with wind, we cannot see or tell where the gust of wind that strikes us started or where it came from, can we?

So it is with the spirit. It's as though we're at the total mercy of the direction of the wind, like a sailor lost at sea. Because new birth happens only by a power that is not our own and blows like the wind, according to its own doing.

No one will enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again for a second time. But no man can cause himself to be born again. Christian, it is so important that we remind ourselves of this.

That we didn't bring about our new birth through our own good works or our own religion or even our own desire for God. We cannot bring on our new birth by ourselves.

Remember who Jesus is speaking to here. It's Nicodemus. He's as morally upright as they come. He has the strongest religious CV you've ever seen. Not even he could cause himself to be born again.

[16 : 20] And so let that burden of trying to earn God's approval fall from your shoulders. If you're a Christian here today, if you've been born again, you can rest in him and his work having done that.

So we've asked why we need new birth. And we've asked why we're incapable of it on our own. But how then is the new birth possible?

Well, verse 13 is a key verse in this passage, I think. Up until verse 13, Jesus speaks sort of as any born again person might. He's witnessing to the state of man and his need for rebirth.

But in verse 13, he begins to talk about himself as the one who makes the new birth possible. Do you see what he says in verse 13?

Have a look at that with me. No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the son of man. In other words, the reason that I can give you heavenly explanations is because I have come down from heaven.

[17 : 32] See, before verse 13, Jesus has been talking about the process of new birth. He says it happens by a work of the spirit. It comes like the wind. You cannot do it yourself.

But after verse 13, he's talking about the basis of the new birth, how it is possible. He's talking about what he, the son of man, has come to do.

He begins to show Nicodemus what must happen for man to receive the spirit's work of the new birth. So what did the son of man come to do?

Well, the God of this universe is a perfectly just God. And so when he sees the fleshy and depraved state of man, his right response is wrath.

And something needs to be done. Something needs to happen to remove the wrath of God so that he will release the power of the spirit and cause his people to be born again.

[18 : 32] In our passage, you might have noticed Jesus uses quite a strange story, an analogy to explain to Nicodemus what he's come to do, how it is that he's going to do that.

And it's a story that might be strange to us, but one that Nicodemus would have been extremely familiar with. Have a look in verse 14 for Jesus's retelling of that story.

It says, Now you'd be forgiven for thinking, why on earth is Jesus comparing himself to a snake?

I just don't get that. So let's go back and we'll have a look at that story that Jesus is referring to as we try and make sense of this. Keep a finger in John 3 and turn back to Numbers chapter 21 that Simon read for us.

If you turn there now, it's very near the start of your Bible if you're lost. Numbers chapter 21. Just four observations from this passage that help us see how Jesus uses it to make sense of what he's come to do.

[19 : 45] First of all, the serpent in this story is not preventative. The serpent in this story is for people who have already been bitten. Do you see that in verse 8?

Look at the second half of verse 8. Anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. The serpent is not preventative. Second in verse 6.

At the start of verse 6, it is the Lord who sent the snakes. Do you see that? They are the curse of his wrath incurred for the Israelites.

Sin of impatience and grumbling in verses 4 and 5. An example of that impatience and grumbling. Have a look at verse 5. What do they say? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt?

It's the Lord who sent the snakes. Third, the means of rescue is a picture of the curse itself. They are rescued by a snake just as they were cursed by snakes.

[20 : 51] And finally, in order to be rescued, the Israelites simply need to look at God's provision hanging on a pole.

Do you see that? At the end of verse 9, what does it say? They lived. Jesus reads a passage like this in the Old Testament and he knows that it points to himself.

I wonder, just as a brief aside, when we read passages like this in the Old Testament, maybe in our own time, do we do that? Do we see how they point to Jesus?

What is it that Jesus sees about himself in this passage in Numbers? Well, turn back to John with me. I hope you kept a finger in it.

Verses 14 and 15 of John chapter 3. I'll read that again. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

[21 : 56] I just want you to notice three things about Jesus here. First of all, Jesus is the Son of Man. So when Jesus says that the Son of Man must be lifted up, he is talking about himself.

He's talking about what he's come to do. He's looking ahead to his crucifixion. Secondly, Jesus is the source of rescue. Jesus is in the place of the bronze snake.

He's the source of rescue. He's the source of healing from the poison of sin. And he is the means by which God's wrath is removed. And thirdly, Jesus himself is portrayed as a curse.

Just as the rescue in Numbers was a picture of the curse, snake for snake. So Jesus's rescue is a picture of the curse because God made him sin in our place.

In Galatians chapter 3 verse 13, Paul writes that Christ redeemed us from the curse of law by becoming a curse for us. In other words, Jesus took our sin, the curse of our sin on himself, and in doing so incurred the wrath of God.

[23 : 08] So Nicodemus came as a man who believed in Jesus as a great miracle worker. And he was that. But Jesus looks at him.

He sees what is in him. He sees what is in those like him. He sees that despite their religion, they are fleshly, depraved, spiritually dead, and destined for hell.

Maybe you're here tonight and you sort of know that about yourself. Maybe you can't see how you could possibly be good enough for a perfect God.

See the standards set by Jesus. And can't see how you or anyone else could possibly measure up to that. Perhaps you feel as though there's no coming back from where you've been, from what you've done.

That your guilt and your shame are simply too much. Jesus saw Nicodemus. And Jesus sees you.

[24 : 14] He sees us. And he sees that what we all desperately need is spiritual rebirth. A complete heart transplant.

To be moved from death to life. The wonderful news is that just as the Israelites looked at the bronze snake, we can look to Jesus hanging on the cross as the way that God has made it possible for us to be born again.

And that's just the start of the Easter story, isn't it? On the cross, Jesus won an incredible victory over sin. But of course, the story didn't end there.

Because the Easter story isn't just about Jesus's death. No, today, on Easter Sunday, incredibly, Jesus paved the way for us to be born again.

When he was the first to walk the path of death to life transformation. Three days later, he smashed the grave to pieces.

[25 : 22] In doing so, he made a way for us to be born again. From spiritual death to life and life eternal. He doesn't just offer us medicine by which we might escape our depravity and our destiny.

He offers us a heart transplant. He offers us a new identity. He offers us new birth. He offers us himself.

That's why I love this time of year so much. Every time I see a lamb bumbling in a field or a daffodil just starting to come into flower. Or a young bunny rabbit hopping around its warren.

I remember the new life that Jesus offers us in him. Will we look to him? Him who has walked through death to the other side.

And will we accept his offer to join him? Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for Easter Sunday.

[26 : 31] We thank you that your son died and that he rose again. That he, in doing so, made the way for us to follow him.

Today, to be born again. To have a heart transplant. To be made new creations in his name. And Lord, we thank you for your Holy Spirit.

Who does that work, that miracle in us, just as he did in Jesus. Lord, I pray that each of us would look to your cross and see our sins nailed there.

That we would feel the burden of our guilt and our shame released from our shoulders. And we would step into that new identity. Lord, would your spirit be at work in each of us.

Causing us to be born again. In your son's precious name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.