

Born Again

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- [0 : 0 0] So folks, here's what we need to do with our minds if we're to understand John chapter 3. We need to walk over to Marchmont. We need to get on the number 24 bus.
- And we need to take it all the way to the Royal Infirmary. And we need to take a walk around the maternity ward. Okay, you with me? Tell you what, the last time I was in the maternity ward, it felt pretty useless.
- Okay, our youngest Eve was born. Here's the scene, a number of doctors running around the room doing their thing. Up goes the curtain. And I'm told that the best thing that I can do is to be up top and keep chatting to mum.
- And I'd love to tell you in those moments, I offered a few inspirational words and I had sparkling conversation. But honestly, I looked deep inside and I had nothing. In fact, I even asked Alex, so panicked was I for conversation, I think I even asked her what she'd planned for the rest of that week.
- And I was so aware that I was in that room doing nothing. I was doing nothing other than take up space in an already overcrowded room. But I was also aware that there was someone in that room who was doing even less than I was doing.
- [1 : 1 8] And out she came. Crying and contributing nothing other than a lot of pain on behalf of my wife, the kind of which I cannot begin to imagine. There's the baby.
- The baby was doing absolutely nothing. Except being born. And so with that image in our minds, here's the puzzle of John chapter 3.
- As Jesus explains what it is to be a Christian. Of all the metaphors that he could have picked. Of all the sights and sounds that he could have told us to take in. Of all the places that he could have taken us to understand what it is to be a Christian.
- He takes us to the maternity ward. And he gets us to picture a baby being born. Verse 3 is the key verse here if you want to follow with me in the text.
- No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Now let me just say two things at this point by way of introduction.
- [2 : 2 8] The first is a clarification. You might hear that phrase born again and immediately alarm bells are going off in your minds, right? If you're immediately thinking of some kind of spiritual space cadet who looks very much like Ned Flanders from The Simpsons.
- Someone who has their heads in the clouds and has nothing to do with everyday life. Now you might have picked that up from the media. You might have picked that up from friends. But let me lovingly plead with you today to put those assumptions, presumptions to the side for one minute.
- And come and let Jesus, the one who coined that phrase, let him do the talking. Let him clarify for you what he means when he uses that phrase.
- Come and hear it as it were. Come and hear it straight from the horse's mouth. And the second thing to say is an invitation.

As strange as this might seem, I'm convinced that if we can grasp what Jesus is saying here, if we can see both the source and the shape of the Christian life as he lays it out here, friends, it is wonderfully liberating news for us.

[3 : 38] There is life to be found in embracing what Jesus says is true about following him. Now listen, if you're still confused.com, let me just say you're right at home in John chapter 3.

Because the man on the other end of the conversation doesn't have a clue what's going on either. Do you want to meet him? Come with me to the text. I'm a bit of enthusiasm here. Come and meet him.

Here he is in John chapter 3. His name is Nicodemus. Do you see him? His name is Nicodemus. And this is a one-on-one conversation that he has with Jesus.

And it centers around the two words that you will find at the end of verse 15. It centers around this thing that Jesus calls eternal life. That all the way through John's gospel, Jesus has been using this repeated phrase and making this repeated claim that he has come so that we may have eternal life as we hear about him and put our faith and trust in what he's done for us.

Now let's just break that phrase down for a second, will we? Eternal. Let's talk about quantity. Right? Life that never ends, starting from the moment that we receive Jesus as Lord, carries on right on through after death into forever, except then it will be perfected and amplified as we know it because we know it in God's new creation.

[5 : 04] And life. Talking about quality. The kind that deeply satisfies the hungry, thirsty, and restless human soul.

Stemming from the knowledge and enjoyment of our creator God who exists as a glorious community of love as Father, Son, and Spirit three in one.

Eternal life as we know and find our place in relationship with the God who made us. Oh, and friends, in our world of death and in our news screens where the war in Europe doesn't seem to be ceasing, and in our world of cost of living worries, in our world of political uncertainty and the pain that's coming from that, in our world of real heart-breaking questions, those two words, eternal life, they should come at us today, should feel like walking into a log fire heated room when you've just come in from a freezing wet walk.

This is Scotland in winter. Okay? They should come at us with huge refreshment and warmth and life. As C.S. Lewis once said, too often we're like children who are too happy making mud pies in the dirt to contemplate what Jesus means and holds out to us as he offers us a holiday at the beach.

We're all too easily pleased. And Jesus comes here and he says, I've come that you may have eternal life. Now here's the thing about eternal life.

[6 : 39] Nicodemus in this day is the favorite to get it. Because he has a spiritual CV to die for.

Right? Follow with me. Verse 1. This man is an Orthodox Jew. He is part of this devout group called the Pharisees. He is deeply committed to external purity, legal observance, and Bible knowledge.

And this man is part of the religious ruling council of the day called the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus holds those cards in his hands. We've got to understand in our terms, he would be holding all the aces.

You're not just, you are not beating this guy. I think that's the point. You're not beating him. If you've asked anyone who's around this day, who is the favorite to get this thing called eternal life?

The whole neighborhood is pointing straight at Nicodemus. And here's the thing. However good you think you are here today, however religious you think your life might be here today, Nicodemus beats you.

- [7 : 49] And it's the guy up front who's meant to be the religious guy. He beats me. He outprays me. He outreads me. He outthinks me. He outworks me.
- Nicodemus beats me. Hands down. He's just not beating them. And Nicodemus goes to see Jesus.
- Do you see at night in the text? Just the time of day he went. I take it if you're going to suss somebody out, you don't want others to see you doing it. You go at night. Maybe he's intrigued by Jesus because he's gathering quite a crowd.
- If you remember at the end of chapter two, as a result of the signs that he's doing. He goes at night. But John, in his classic style of double meaning, night is also a window into the true state of this man's heart before God.
- Because spiritually speaking, the lights might be on, but there ain't nobody home. Nicodemus, despite having all the aces, he's in the dark.
- [8 : 54] To see being spiritually in the dark, friends, it is not a matter of the intellect. It's a matter of the heart.
- Famous story told about William Wilberforce and his good friend and parliamentary colleague, William Pitt. Great week to pick a parliamentary illustration, I tell you. Pitt, one of the brightest minds of his day, eventually becomes prime minister and Wilberforce takes Pitt to hear George Whitefield.
- George Whitefield, one of the greatest preachers this country has ever known when he was speaking in London. And George Whitefield does his thing. People come to faith in Jesus.
- Wilberforce turns to Pitt and he says, what did you make of it? And Pitt simply replies, I didn't understand a word that that man said. I just didn't get it.
- You've had that experience before when you've spoken to a friend about Christ. I remember at university taking a friend along to a CU event when there was one of my favorite speakers speaking. So excited afterwards, my friend just, what was that all about?
- [10 : 07] Friends, what we all need to understand is that this is all of us, by nature, outwith Jesus Christ. All of us.
- We are creatures deserving his judgment. We are following the course of our own sinful hearts and desires. We want nothing to do with God. In the words of Christopher Rash, each of us are like musicians in an orchestra who want nothing to do with the conductor because we want to play our heart's own song.
- Outwith Christ, we are creatures who are spiritually dead. It's exactly what the Bible says to us.
- And what our hearts need is not CPR. What our hearts need is not resuscitation. What our hearts need is the thing that the Bible calls regeneration.
- We need to be made new. We need, in other words, we need God. We need him to do something in here. That's what we need him to do. So the problem is.
- [11 : 17] So there's the problem. It's in here. So Nicodemus makes his play. Do you see it? Verse two. And in turn, Jesus challenges and flips the entire way that Nicodemus understands himself and he understands the world in which he lives.
- He flips it on his head. Because Jesus says two things to Nicodemus about eternal life. He says, first of all, that there is nothing you can do to earn it.
- So the word born appears there six times. Do you see it? Born, born, born, born, born, born. Which is a bizarre metaphor, especially if you consider that Nicodemus at this point in time in the text is an older man.

Now what does that mean? It means that he's not some kind of teenage boy giggling in the classroom when he hears somebody explain the birds and the bees, right? He's an old man.

He's been already, he gets it. But it's a metaphor that if Nicodemus is to understand his true spiritual state before this holy God, it's a metaphor that precisely makes the point.

[12 : 25] Because Nicodemus has lived his whole life probably according to the mantra that to behave is to belong. Perform well, keep the rules, stay in line and demonstrate that you're on the right side of God and you're in the kingdom because you're behaving like you belong.

But I just won't wash with Jesus. According to Jesus, this isn't about Nicodemus trying to turn over a new leaf. We've got that phrase that we use in our culture, don't we?

We always use it on the 1st of January. It's not about turning over a new leaf. It's not going to cut it. It's not going to make a difference. You're not going to know your own heart well enough to know that when you try and change, it just doesn't happen.

Right? That's why gyms are rammed in January and they're nearly dead in February because we always make these resolutions to do things with our lives and we realise after a while, actually, it's just too much hard work.

I can't do it. No, this is not about Nicodemus turning over a new leaf. This is about Nicodemus, by God, by his grace, giving Nicodemus a new heart.

[13 : 36] This is about God, by his spirit, giving him a new heart, working in him to bring a complete inner cleansing from his sin.

That's what it is to be born with water, if you're wondering what that word is there for, and transforming his entire being. This is something that only God can do in the soul of a human being.

Only God can do this. Nicodemus needs a new heart. All of those out with Christ, we need new hearts. All of those that are in Christ, we're only there by the grace of God because he's given us a new heart.

Now, to stop you thinking that I've driven you into some kind of cul-de-sac with nowhere to go, let me just tell you why my soul was so refreshed by the truth of this passage this week. Friends, is it not incredibly good news that when Jesus wants us to understand what it is to be a Christian, he doesn't take us round the religious hall of fame, show us all the heroes of the faith, sends us away and says, try again.

No, he takes us to the maternity ward and he says, come to me and be born again. Do you see the difference between the two?

[15 : 01] Not try harder, not try again, trust that I've done it all, look to me and be born again. Oh friends, I'm a Christian not because I am the man.

I am a Christian because I am the baby. that's the liberating truth of this passage. This is what it is to know God's grace.

Oh friends, this is what it means to have God as our gracious heavenly father and this is what it means. This is an invitation to run to him knowing that we're saved by grace, to run to him and ask for more grace.

Oh and here's a wonderful book and I don't mean to cost you tons of money at this time, this is just books that I found really great. Dane Ortlund and his wonderful book Gentle and Lowly.

Friends, if you want to recapture Christ's love for you, his child, here is a wonderful book where he does this, okay?

[16 : 06] Here's the quote, when you come to Christ for mercy and love and help in your anguish and perplexity and sinfulness, you are going with the flow of his deepest wishes, not against them.

Do you see, this is what it is to be saved by grace alone. This is how the grace of God works, working in us because this is how the spirit of God works.

And that's what Jesus means there at verse 8. What does he describe the Holy Spirit? He's like the wind. Remember, the spirit is not an it, the spirit is the third person of the Godhead.

He is like the wind. You can't see the wind, but boy can you see the effects of the wind. Likewise, you don't see how the spirit is moving, you don't see how he is at work, but boy can you see the effects of him moving.

The words of that old hymn that some of us might have grown up singing, I know not how the spirit moves, convincing men of sin, revealing Jesus through the word, creating faith in him.

[17 : 20] And here's what I want to do, I guess, as your pastor this morning, I want to encourage you as a church, our church family, that I see the spirit at work in you. some of you seeking to investigate Jesus, whereas six months ago that wasn't even on your radar.

Friends, that is the spirit at work. Some of us installing things in our computers so we don't go near stuff we shouldn't be looking at. Some of us thinking twice about relationship for us that's just not helpful.

Friends, that is the spirit at work in our lives. Some of us giving sacrificially of ourselves to our children, taking the time that it needs, pouring in the hours to seek to try and raise them and nurture them in the ways of the Lord.

Friends, that is the spirit. And I went to see Audrey and Donald ten days ago just before I went on holiday just listening to what life is like for them. It's hard.

Listen to Audrey tell me about the fact that she's in a lot of pain. But let me tell you, I heard a lot about pain but I heard nothing about panic. Do you know what she said?

[18 : 31] She said, I'm just ready to go. And then she added one little word at the end, home. First Peter, the spirit of God, we've been born again to a living hope in Christ Jesus.

Friends, that is the spirit. Some of us putting our hands up and asking for help and opening up to brothers and sisters about the struggles in our life because we understand we're saved by grace alone. That's the spirit.

It's one thing I picked up in America, friends, to always be on the lookout, how God's spirit is at work in everyday unspectacular ways in our lives. Let me just encourage you, the urge to fight sin and pursue Christ is not a sign of failure, it's a sign of faith.

Do you know why? Because it's God who's put that desire there. It's the spirit working in our lives that's given us the desire in the first place. that we would want to pursue Christ and not pursue our own agenda.

That's the spirit. You know, Alex and I were walking around Bath this week. The two of us had a night off without the kids, walking around Bath City Centre, people pouring out of pubs, out of work, students doing their thing, things going on in the city centre that go on in any city centre.

[19 : 41] Do you know what the two of us said? If it wasn't for God at work in our lives, we'd be doing exactly the same. Oh, friends, do you see how he's put these desires here?

He has caused us to be born again by his spirit. He's washed us clean by his blood, cleansed us through his work on the cross.

Friends, I look at you, just to finish this little bit off, I look at you, do you know what I see? Term of endearment. I see babies. Nicodemus, this is how it works in God's kingdom.

When it comes to eternal life, there's nothing that you can do to earn it except secondly, trust that I've done everything that you might have it. Verse 9, how can this be true?

Well, according to Jesus, do you see, and I think this is a surprise in the text, if you come with me to verse 9, Nicodemus should have known this. This ain't coming from left field, as far as Jesus is concerned.

[20 : 47] You're the leader of Israel, you're the religious guy, you've read the stuff, you should know this. If you think back to what Fiona read in Ezekiel 36, this is what God promised he would do for his Old Testament people, for his people, his all nations, hear about Christ and are gathered in.

He was going to do this, he was going to work to bring about that heart transformation that his people need. He was going to make a way for them to be cleansed from their sin and uncleanness.

he was going to do the taking out of the heart of stone and he was going to do in its place put in a heart of flesh. And if you also remember, what else was God going to put in his people's hearts?

His law and a desire to obey it, that they would long to walk in his ways in obedience and worship of him. That's what God's going to do, a heart transformation in the lives of his people.

It's almost as if the God who first breathed life into the very first human being. And I love that bit in Genesis that you get, it's almost like God, I breathe the breath of life into Adam in the Garden of Eden.

[21 : 58] It's almost as if the God of the universe through Christ is going to do it again. He's going to breathe spiritual life into his people. But here's the question, what gives Jesus the right to speak so authoritatively on this one?

It's a good question to ask, isn't it? Verse 13, what does he say? He says he's been there. That's how he can speak in these things, because he's been there. Some of us might learn the hard way when you book a holiday, listening to what the hotel says about itself is not always the best policy, is it?

Because they always big themselves up, food, to die for, entertainment out of this world, staff are a charm, complete with wide-angle lens photos to make things look more beautiful than they actually are.

So what do we do? We go on the website and what do we look for? We look for reviews of people that have actually been there. And even though you get 800 positive reviews, you search for that one review, because of course that one person is the only person that's actually been there.

So what we do, we listen to the voices of people who have actually been there. And that's what Jesus is saying here. He can speak of heavenly things. Why? Because he's from there.

[23 : 16] He's been there. In fact, he's been there since time began, except now he's taken on flesh and he's come down to reveal the Father to us. Because of the pursuing, loving determination of God, the God that so loved the world that is perishing, he came to bring forgiveness and transformation to bear in the hearts of his people.

So Christ can come and say, I've come to reveal the Father. Why? That this is how it works in the kingdom of God. Do you need to be born of the Spirit and of water? Why? Because he's been there.

And he's come to tell us. And he's come to give us. Verse 14. He's come to give us. And he uses his Old Testament story from the book of Numbers.

from when the Israelites were wandering in the desert. A time in Israel's history where people are just complaining, they are bitter, they are angry about God and about his chosen leader Moses.

And God so angry with his people's sin, his righteous anger, he sends snakes among them who bite many of them. Because a holy God must deal with sin.

[24 : 27] But in his mercy, God says to Moses, would you make a statue of a snake and would you raise it up and put it on a pole?

Lift it up and tell everyone who's been beaten all they need to do to be healed, to be saved, is to look at the snake on the pole.

Look and live. And the thing about that episode is that people would be saved not by being in proximity to the snake.

People would be saved and healed not by acknowledging the mere existence of a snake. Well, friends, people would be saved solely by looking to and trusting what God has said was true about the snake.

And Jesus says, in the same way, my earthly life will end with me lifted up on a cross. and what we need to understand as human beings is that our sin is way more eternally deadly than a snake bite.

[25 : 35] What do you need to do to be healed and to live, says Jesus? You need to look at me. I need to trust in what I've done.

You need to look at my blood pouring out of my side, my blood shed for you. And I love this. Friends, I hadn't seen this until this week.

John writes as Jesus dies in chapter 19, that he gave up his spirit. The image there is of him breathing his last.

Psalmist John symbolically saying, through what has happened here, through the death and the subsequent resurrection of Jesus, as he inhales and as he exhales, this will be the means by which he will breathe the spirit, the breath of life, into his people.

All those who would look on him for trust and for forgiveness. And so the invitation for all of us here today, maybe particularly if you don't know this Jesus as your Lord and your King and your Saviour, is to look at him on the cross, embrace it, trust him, love him, and look and live.

[27 : 00] Here is, if you think back to what Archie said, shared a few weeks ago, is Jesus came on the scene in John's gospel as the substitute groom. Here then is Christ the divine bridegroom come to breathe life into his bride.

And she lives. And we live because of him. Friends, let me just take you to a cracking little Italian restaurant in Louisville, Kentucky called Martinis.

Alex and I had a night out with our dear friend Betsy and our friend Gary, a night that will live long in my memory for two reasons.

Number one, hands down the best lasagna I've ever tasted. So big with the portions I couldn't finish it all, I had to take it home, got a doggy bag to take it home the next day to have for lunch.

Friends, you can take the boy out of Scotland. But the second reason it will live long in my memory is hearing Betsy's story of how she became a Christian.

[28 : 15] Do you know what she said? She started telling us, she said, it was this difference I noticed in my older brother, CJ. You see, neither of them grew up in a Christian family, and CJ, the oldest brother, had grown long, hippie hair, loved to smoke pot, he was obsessed with sports, and he couldn't wait to move out of home.

As soon as the opportunity came, he was gone. And she said, years later, all of a sudden, my phone went, and it was CJ on the phone, and he wants to meet, he wants to talk, and I find out he's done the exact same thing with all my family members, so I meet him, and one by one, he goes around our family, and he tells us how he's gone away, he's met people at university, he's put his faith in Jesus Christ, and she said, I don't know what happened, but the guy I was looking at was not the same guy I was spoken to before, what have you done with my older brother?

But you know what she also said, she said, whatever had happened in him, whatever had gone on in here, I didn't understand it, but I wanted it. And you know what she said, here was her line, how was it manifesting itself in CJ's life?

Here's what she said, he couldn't stop saying sorry. And so here is John chapter three, telling us what has gone on in CJ's life, explaining to us, if we're a Christian here today, what has gone on in our lives, that there's been a baby born.

And why has he done it? What is this all about? How should we leave here today? Why has he done it? He's done it so that we would walk in the newness of life. He's done it so that we would pursue righteousness and Christ likeness.

[30 : 02] Oh friends, I am a new creation. No more in condemnation. Here in the grace of God I stand and I will praise you Lord. I will praise you Lord and I will sing of all that you have done, a joy that knows no limit, a lightness in my spirit.

Here in the grace of God I stand. Let's pray, will we? Father, I'm so aware of the parable of the sower that tells us when your word goes forth so often the evil one comes and tries to snatch it away.

And Father, I pray that just now by your living and abiding spirit in us, Father, that you would do your work in our midst. O Father, bring comfort, bring challenge, bring rebuke, bring a wonderful reminder of your fatherly care and love for us.

O Father, for those who don't know life in your son, the Lord Jesus, may today be the day where they put their faith in him. Father, we thank you that we are saved, not because we tried again, because that could never work.

Father, thank you that we are saved because you tell us by your grace, by your spirit, that we've been born again. O Father, receive our praise, we pray.

[31 : 33] In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Amen. Amen.