

## **Nicodemus: Born Again**

1 of 5 in the series *Jesus Encounters*

August 7, 2022

John 3:1-17

Well I'm back from a few weeks of vacation, just in time to start a new sermon series.

We're calling it *Jesus Encounters*. Over the next 5 weeks, we'll be looking into the Gospel of John and exploring the stories of various individuals who had life-changing encounters with Jesus.

And here's the thing about these stories. In one way or another, each is an invitation for you to encounter Jesus. Indeed, it's our prayer that through this series, you will have personal encounters with Jesus that set off a process of restoration and transformation in your own life.

With that in mind, let's get right to it, and dive into the Jesus encounter we'll be looking at today. It's an encounter between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus.

Please give your full attention to God's word as I read now from John chapter 3 verses 1-17. I'll be reading from the NLT, the New Living Translation:

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you."

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?"

Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit."

"How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked.

Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things? I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won’t believe our testimony. But if you don’t believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>1</sup> [3:30]

The heart of Jesus’ invitation to Nicodemus, and by extension to all who read this passage, is to be born again. It can also be translated “born from above” and it’s often referred to as the “new birth.”

This is a rich text, and to help us get at its riches today, I’m going to piggyback on a helpful outline that I’ve adapted from Tim Keller. Today we’re going to explore 4 questions about the new birth: *Who is it for? Where is it from? What does it do?* And in connection with the Lord’s Supper, we will also consider the question, *How does it come?*

We start with:

### **1. Who is the new birth for?**

What thoughts and feelings come to you when you hear the term “born-again Christian”?

These days, the term can mean many things to many people. For some, it speaks of something very precious. But for others— both outside as well as inside the church— the term “born again” has picked up negative connotations which have led to stereotyping.

You know those “born-again types”? They’re the kind of people who get all emotional and lift their hands and cry and sway and jump around when they sing their songs at church. They’re the kind of people who get in-your-face about their beliefs. They’re the kind of hypocrites who are drawn to politically conservative, Bible-thumping churches.

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:1-17 (NLT)

Do you think *those* are the kinds of things Jesus had in mind when he told Nicodemus you must be born again? Is the new birth just referring to *those* types of people?

The fact that Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus actually tells us a lot about who the new birth is really for.

Verse 1 of our text tells us that Nicodemus is a Jewish religious leader—a Pharisee, to be specific. He would have been a rabbi of some fame and status— a respected scholar and teacher and spiritual guide looked up to by others for his clear-thinking wisdom and high standards of morality.

Nonetheless, he seeks Jesus out for spiritual conversation, even though Jesus has none of the formal religious credentials that Nicodemus does. And Jesus cuts right to the chase with him:

“I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is saying this to a man who has all the religion and morality in the world. But as far as Jesus is concerned, none of it counts. According to Jesus, in order to see the kingdom of God, even a guy as religious and moral as Nicodemus needs to be spiritually reborn.

And Jesus goes on to say in verse 5:

“I assure you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

We'll talk later about the meaning of that phrase “born of water and the Spirit.” For now, suffice it to say that it's another way of speaking about the new birth.

But can you see from this statement who the new birth is for?

In saying that no one can enter the kingdom of God without the new birth—not even Nicodemus— Jesus is also saying that the kingdom is open to *anyone and everyone* who receives the new birth. Indeed, later in the passage, Jesus says explicitly it's for “everyone who believes.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John 3:3 (NLT)

<sup>3</sup> John 3:5 (NLT)

<sup>4</sup> See John 3:16

So no matter your pedigree, no matter how much you've achieved, no matter how much you believe you have your act together, you still **MUST** be born again to enter the kingdom of God. But at the very same time, the exceedingly great news is that no matter how checkered your past, no matter how messed up and broken you are, you **CAN** be born again.

Because the new birth is for anyone and everyone, including you. Next: [8:10]

## 2. Where is the new birth from?

That's probably not a question you'd think to ask when you read this text, but it's an important one. Why?

It has to do with the phrase "the kingdom of God" which we find in verses 3 and 5. In the other biblical gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—the term "kingdom of God" is used all the time. But John hardly ever uses it, so the fact that it shows up twice in our text is significant.

The kingdom of God refers to God's rule and reign as divine king. And a Pharisee like Nicodemus would have understood the kingdom of God to be something that would come *in the future*. He would have thought about the resurrection at the end of time, when the Messiah would usher in the kingdom of God, making all things new, setting the whole world right, once and for all.

In our text, Jesus has this future regeneration of the world in mind—in verse 16— and it happens to be the Bible's most famous verse:

For this is how God loved **the world** [the *kosmos*, the whole created order]: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have *eternal life* [which also can be translated as *the life of the age to come*]. God sent his Son into **the world** not to judge **the world**, but to **save the world** through him.<sup>5</sup>

Over in Matthew chapter 19, Jesus uses a specific word in the original Greek to refer to the coming of the kingdom of God in fullness at the end of time. The word is *palingenesia*—which the NLT translates as "when the world is made new."<sup>6</sup>

But things get really interesting when you jump ahead in the New Testament to Titus chapter 3. There, the apostle Paul speaks of how:

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<sup>5</sup> John 3:16 (NLT), emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 19:28-29 (NLT)

[Jesus] washed away our sins, giving us **new birth** [*palingenesia*] and new life through the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Can you see the Greek word Paul uses to speak of our own new birth? He uses the word *palingenesia*.

So from a biblical perspective, where is the new birth from? It's from the future.

Because the new birth is the same restoring, regenerative power that God is one day going to use to make the whole world new, coming into your life today. It's God's future, entering your life in the present, working to renew and transform you day by day.

What does this mean? Well, if the new birth stems from the same power by which God will one day renew the whole wide world, then you mustn't underestimate its power to bring change in your life now.

Because there is no brokenness, no bondage, no hurt, no flaw that the new birth does not have the power to repair—at least partially on this side of God's kingdom—and of course fully and forever in the age to come.

Whatever your issues, whatever you struggling with, there's hope for change. This is good news, amen?

Now we come to the next question, and it's a big one:

### **3. What does the new birth do? [12:10]**

We'll spend some extra time on this question, and we'll start by talking about what Jesus means when he says in verse 5,

"I assure you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit."<sup>8</sup>

Bible scholars have differing views on what Jesus means by this—particularly the phrase "born of water." Does it refer to natural birth, and the water is, say, amniotic fluid?

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<sup>7</sup> Titus 3:5b (NLT)

<sup>8</sup> John 3:5 (NLT)

Or does “being born of water” have something to do with baptism? Some scholars think so.

To me, one of the more convincing arguments is that the phrase “being born of water and the Spirit” is a combined metaphor pointing to Old Testament passages where similar language is used to speak of God imparting new spiritual life to his people. There are various examples of this, but perhaps the most prominent is found in Ezekiel, where God says:

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.”<sup>9</sup>

So what does the new birth do? It washes your sins away, raises you from spiritual death to spiritual life, and in doing so it **gives you a new capacity for spiritual awareness and responsiveness.**

Not unlike when a baby is born and enters a world of amazing new sensations, to be born again—or to be born of water and the Spirit— makes possible an awareness of certain spiritual realities—of God’s movement and presence— that you hadn’t perceived before.

I remember the Pentecostal church I attended just around the time I became a Christian. I went to worship services there, and I could see the vibrant spiritual life that the people of that congregation had. They were pretty hard-core Pentecostals, so it was all a little wild and weird to me at the time, and yet I can remember wanting that the life that they had in me.

But it just wasn’t happening. I felt like I had this callous on my heart that was preventing me from experiencing God the way they were. I remember praying and asking God to remove the callous on my heart, and in due time, he did. And I had a whole new awareness of God’s reality and presence and love that I had never known before.

And this led to a new spiritual responsiveness in me. I began to serve others and speak to others about Jesus and take responsibility for my actions and ownership for my sins and shortcomings—none of it perfectly—but certainly authentically, in a way I never had before.

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<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel 36:25-27 (NLT)

As part of this new capacity for spiritual awareness and responsiveness, the new birth can also illuminate the scriptures for you. Of course you still need to read and study and meditate on your Bible, but the Holy Spirit who indwells your heart when you're born again can make scripture come alive for you like never before.

Have you ever heard someone who grew up in church say something like this? "You know, before, the Bible had always seemed so abstract, but now something's happened, and it's become so real to me." That could well be a sign that a spiritual rebirth has taken place. Remember, Nicodemus was a teacher of the scriptures, and yet he needed Jesus to enlighten him with revelation from heaven.<sup>10</sup> So the fact that you've been a churchgoer for a long time and are familiar with the scriptures isn't in and of itself a guarantee that you've received the new birth.

What else does the new birth do? It **gives you a new identity**. In John chapter 1, it says:

Yet to all who did receive [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.<sup>11</sup>

To be born again is to receive an identity as a beloved child of God. In Jesus, God becomes your Father, who loves and accepts you unconditionally, and makes you his very own. When you're born again, the pressure's off, because in Jesus, your identity is received, not achieved.

Tim Keller tells the story of a woman in his church who said she had five identities throughout her life. And it's not like she had a multiple personality disorder or anything.

She explained, "When I was a young girl, I grew up in a very conservative church, and felt good about myself because I was a very moral person. But this turned me into something of a smug, self-righteous Pharisee."

Eventually she dropped out of church and started dating. She thought, "As long as I've got a man on my arm, I'm somebody." But that didn't turn out well, because she often found herself lingering in unhealthy, abusive relationships.

Then, some well-meaning girlfriends told her, "What you really need is to become an independent career woman." So she upgraded her education and enhanced her career. But

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<sup>10</sup> See John 3:12-13

<sup>11</sup> John 1:12-13 (NIV)

then she said, "I felt just as destroyed when I had a bump in my career as when I broke up with a guy."

Then someone else came along and said, "You're too wrapped up in your career. What you really need to do is to help people." So she started to volunteer, working with women in prison and the poor. And this did give her a sense of purpose, but after a time, she realized that people's needs were so great she felt like her help was never enough, and she ended up exhausted.

The woman summed up her journey, saying, "First I thought I was somebody because I was moral. Then I thought I was somebody because I was beautiful. Then I thought I was somebody because I was successful. Then I thought I was somebody because I was helpful. But then I heard the gospel of Jesus, and realized that all along, I'd been trying to save myself. Those other identities don't work."

She gave her life to Christ, because she finally realized God loved her because of what Jesus has done for her, rather than what she had done. Every other identity she tried had been based on her own performance, and all the ups and downs and pressures that came with them. Now, she could rest, because when you get new birth in Jesus, your identity is received, not achieved. And you become your true self.

Here's another related thing that the new birth does: It **reorders your loves**.

A lot of people would say, "Sure, I'm a Christian. I go to church. I believe God loves me." But if in your day to day life, the love of popularity and success, or money and material possessions, or romance and sex, or even your spouse and kids, is more real and motivating to your heart than God's love is, then your loves need reordering.

For example, when I love my wife and kids more than I love God, I actually don't love my wife and kids very well. I need them to affirm me in everything because I'm looking to them rather than God to meet the needs of my heart. But try as they might, they can't meet all the needs of my heart. So when they don't what do I do? I'm critical of them. I put pressure on them. I'm grumpy and hard to live with. There's conflict.

But when God's love means more to my heart than even my family, I am much freer to allow my wife and kids to have a bad day without me being upset at them. I am much freer to come alongside and serve them with Christ-like love.



Do you see how I actually love my family best when I put God first and put my family second? My wife and kids will tell you I'm a work in progress in this regard. But it's out of the new birth that my loves are in the process of being properly ordered.

Nicodemus had his loves reordered. In John chapter 3, the text tells us that he came to Jesus after dark. Why? Well, as a religious leader, he was probably fearful of being seen with Jesus. But at the end of John's gospel, Nicodemus makes another appearance, and by that time, clearly, his loves had been reordered.<sup>12</sup>

All of the other disciples had fled, but Nicodemus, at great risk to himself, came forward with Joseph of Arimathea to claim Jesus' body. He purchased and brought with him 75 pounds of perfumed ointment for Jesus' burial. This was exorbitant, extravagant. It was fit for a royal burial—the burial of— *a king*. Nicodemus had made Jesus his King.

So who is the new birth for? It's for anyone and everyone willing to receive it.

Where is the new birth from? It's from the future. It draws on the same power God will one day use to set the whole world right once and for all, and comes into your life in the present.

What does the new birth do? It gives new you a new capacity for spiritual awareness and responsiveness. It gives you a new identity. And it reorders your loves.

As we prepare our hearts now for the Lord's Supper, we have a final question to consider:

#### **4. How does the new birth come?**

How do you actually get it? In our text, Jesus plainly says, "the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life."<sup>13</sup> So it's important to understand that the new birth comes from God. It's God's job, not ours. You can't spiritually rebirth yourself—not any more than you were able to help your mom give birth to you. The new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit and we can't manage or manipulate it. This is what Jesus has in mind when he says:

"The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See John 19:38-39

<sup>13</sup> See John 3:6b

<sup>14</sup> John 3:8 (NLT)

That said, what only God can do in bringing about the new birth remains inextricably linked with what we do. What we're called to do is repent and believe. How does that work? In our text, John gives us a fascinating illustration of what it means to repent and believe. In verse 14, Jesus says:

“And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.”<sup>15</sup>

Jesus is referring to an event recorded in the Old Testament book of Numbers. God's people, Israel, had sinned when they were wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. God judged them by sending a plague of venomous snakes that was sent into their midst. The venom that started to kill their bodies pointed to the sin that had been killing their souls.

And what Moses was told to do was to take a bronze serpent—an image of the very thing that was killing them—and hold it up on a pole. To be healed, all the people had to do was look at it. Some were so sick they couldn't have possibly gone up and touched it. But they only had to look.

Jesus says that's an illustration of what it means to repent and believe, and receive the new birth that leads to eternal life.

Except we don't look to a bronze snake. We look to Jesus. The sins that were killing us were placed upon him, and he was lifted up on a pole, so to speak—the cross—where he laid down his life for us so that you and I could receive God's forgiveness, new birth and eternal life.

I was there for the birth of all three of my kids. There was only one person in that room doing a lot of work, and it wasn't me, okay? And it wasn't the babies being born. Even the nurses and doctors, wonderful as they were, did very little work compared to Jan.

Jesus is saying, I'm like a woman in labour, and you'll be born again not just through my pain and suffering, and not just at the risk of my life, but at the very cost of my life, which I've given gladly for you.

So look to me. Look to me lifted up on the cross. Look to me.

We're going to take some time to do that now by celebrating the Lord's Supper.

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<sup>15</sup> John 3:14 (NLT)

Maybe you've already been born again. Come to the table today, and live afresh into the new birth you've received—maybe many years ago. Live afresh into all that the new birth does for you by receiving the bread—his body, broken for you, and the wine— his blood shed for you. And look to Jesus.

Maybe you're not yet a follower of Jesus. Or maybe you always thought you were a Christian, but today like Nicodemus it's come to your attention that you need to be born again. Maybe today you want to come to the table as a way of looking to Jesus, as a way of repenting for your sins, repenting for your efforts to save yourself, and receiving Jesus as your own Lord and Saviour. It's the Lord's Table. If you come, do you think he would turn you away? Come, and look to Jesus.

If you're not a follower of Jesus and want to know more about what that means, we're going to leave a web link on the screen throughout communion. It's a page especially designed for pre-Christian spiritual seekers and new Christians and it features lots of resources and opportunities to help you in your journey toward Jesus. So make sure to check that out: [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/seekers](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/seekers).

## **COMMUNION**