



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The New Birth

St. John 3:1-8

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This morning we're continuing our look at what John's Gospel teaches us about evangelism with chapter three. We'll be looking at verse 1-8. This is where we read about Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. I want to talk this morning about being "born again"—and that means there are two sides to what we'll be looking at today. If we're going to be engaging in evangelism, we obviously need to know what it means to be "born again". New birth is one of the most important things that the Gospel is about. But this is something I hope each of us takes some time to think about in terms of how it relates to us. As we look this morning at what Jesus says about being born again, everyone should be asking: "Does that describe me? Have I been born again?"

John tells us that this encounter with Nicodemus took place just after Jesus was baptized by John and just after he went to Jerusalem and cleansed the temple. This was at the beginning of Jesus three-year ministry. John had been telling people about him, so quite a few people knew who he was, at least to some extent. He was travelling around teaching like other rabbis did. But when he got to Jerusalem and went to the temple, he definitely did something the other rabbis weren't doing. He saw moneychangers and people selling animals for sacrifices. He saw they were ripping off God's people right in God's own house and he got angry. He turned over their tables and ran them out. And that got the attention of the religious leaders—especially one man in particular, named Nicodemus.

John tells us in verse 1:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. That means he was a member of one of the two dominant Jewish religious parties. There weren't a lot of Pharisees, mainly because being a Pharisee meant living up to an extremely high moral standard. Most people couldn't cut it. It also meant that he was highly esteemed by most good Jews. Everybody looks up to a "holy man". Lots of people would like to be a "holy man" or a "holy woman", but most of us are realistic and honest enough to know that no matter how hard we try, we're still sinners. Not so the Pharisees. John also tells us that Nicodemus was a "ruler of the Jews". That means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin—the governing religious body. That put him in doubly good standing with good and pious Jews. It also means that he was a scholar. He knew the Scriptures and he knew them really well. His name tells us something too. Remember that Judaea had been ruled first by the Greeks and at this time by Greek-speaking Romans. Jews—especially upper class Jews—were immersed in Greek culture, so they usually gave their children two names, one Hebrew and one Greek. The fact that Nicodemus went by his Greek name suggests that he probably had high standing with the Greeks as well as the Jews and probably that he had studied Greek culture and philosophy. Nicodemus was not only intelligent and well-educated, he had some real status both religiously and politically. He exemplifies the intelligent and wealthy man of good works and self-righteousness. The specifics may have changed with time, but even today I think we can all think of people we've met who are very much like Nicodemus. There are lots of them in our churches—people who do good works and are known for them, maybe they're well-educated or maybe they're just well off and are benefactors of good causes, but they're also people who expect to get into heaven someday on their own merit.

In verse 2 John tells us:

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."

Contrast that with so many of the other people who came to Jesus. Contrast this especially with the people who were physically or spiritually broken who came to Jesus. They came to him in the daylight. They pushed their way through crowds to get to him. They weren't afraid to be seen by others. They weren't afraid for other people to know that they had a need. And they came to Jesus, often throwing themselves at his feet and crying out for help—crying out things like, "Lord, have mercy!"

Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of darkness. What he says suggests that he might have even been sent by or come as a representative of the other Pharisees and yet even still, he comes when no one would see him associating with Jesus. And when he comes, he comes not as a worshipper. He comes as an equal. He calls him "Rabbi"—that was his own title and that's how rabbis addressed each other. And he says, "We know you're a teacher from God." What he's doing is acknowledging Jesus as an equal, but even then he does it in a very patronizing way. We've all met people like this. Almost everybody is happy to accept Jesus as a good man or a great teacher, but when it comes to acknowledging him as Saviour and Lord, that's another story.

And Jesus immediately saw the problem. If he was just a good man or a great teacher Nicodemus would have been stroking his ego. But Jesus is more than that; he's more than just another rabbi and more than just Nicodemus' equal. So Jesus cuts him off and goes right to the heart of the problem. In verse 3 we read:

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

On the surface this seems like an odd way for Jesus to respond. Nicodemus was being patronising about being a rabbi and a teacher from God and you'd think that Jesus would respond by either affirming what was right in Nicodemus' statement or maybe by telling him that

he's actually more than *just* a rabbi or a teacher. Instead he changes the subject and tells him that he can't see the kingdom of God without being born again. But if we look at some of Jesus' other encounters this starts to make more sense. When the rich young ruler confronted him, Jesus told him to sell his worldly possessions and to give the money to the poor. When he met the woman at the well he offered to give her living water. Nicodemus was a man proud of his heritage, proud of his standing in society, proud of his power and influence, and proud of his works. If there was anyone who epitomised what it meant to the Jews to be part of God's kingdom, it was Nicodemus. And Jesus cuts through it all. Jesus always cut through it all and took people to their *real* need. The rich young ruler's wealth wasn't going to save him. The woman at the well was thinking only of her physical needs. Jesus cuts through our worldly sources of confidence.

So he tells Nicodemus: "By birth and standing you're a 'Hebrew of Hebrews'—to borrow a line St. Paul would later use—but that hasn't earned you any favour with God. If you want to see God, you need to give all that up and be born again." *Everything* there is about your life right now needs to be changed. You're living the *wrong* life. You need to start over—*completely*. Bishop Ryle described what it means to be born again this way: "It is a thorough change of heart, will, and death to life. It is the implanting in our dead hearts of a new principle from above."

Those words "from above" are important. Some of your Bible translations might actually say that Jesus told him that he must be "born from above." You can actually read the Greek either way: "born again" or "born from above"—and this is one case where Jesus has both meanings in mind. To enter his kingdom you have to be born again, but being born again means being born from above. Back in the prologue to his Gospel, John wrote, "To all who did receive [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, *who were*

born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). You have to be born again, but the new birth isn't something we can do on our own power. Nicodemus didn't get it and says in verse 4:

"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

He missed the point of this new birth being from above and he mocks Jesus. Obviously, even if he could be *physically* born again, he'd get a 'do over' on his life, but that wouldn't change his basic problem. And so Jesus answers him:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Presumably Nicodemus had heard the things that John the Baptist had been teaching. Certainly those things will be in our own minds as we read John's Gospel—John the Baptist was pointing people to Jesus and telling them that while he baptised with water, Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit. But all that itself was rooted in the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. These were things that Nicodemus would have known—it's just that he hadn't connected the dots. Through Ezekiel, God had told the people what Jesus would do: "I will *sprinkle clean water* on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you *a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you*. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

To be born again means having our sins washed away by water so that you have a new standing before God, but it also means being transformed by the pouring in of the Holy Spirit so that your heart and mind are renewed and regenerated.

That's new birth. It's about giving up the old man and putting on the new.

And it's *not* optional. Twice in these verses Jesus uses those words "Truly, truly I say to you" to stress the importance of new birth. In verse 6 he says:

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Do you ever wonder why some people have zero interest in God, zero interest in Jesus, zero interest in the Gospel or in what the Bible has to say? It's because until we're born again, we're of the world, not of God's kingdom. If the only birth you've experienced is the birth of the flesh, then you're of the flesh. You're not only not part of God's kingdom, but you're actually an enemy of his kingdom by birth. Ephesians reminds us that before we were born again, we were spiritually dead. Life only comes as Jesus calls us to himself like he called into the tomb to Lazarus. The only way we can be "of the Spirit", the only way we'll ever understand or identify with the things of the kingdom is to experience spiritual new birth through the power of Jesus' own Spirit.

Think of Nicodemus. This was a man who had spent his life studying, learning, and even memorising the Scriptures. He lived his whole life according to them and in devotion to what he thought they taught him about God, and yet when he was face to face with the Messiah, when Jesus told him that he must be born again, he couldn't wrap his mind around any of it. I've known lots of people like that. I've known Bible scholars and bishops who know the Bible, but they don't really *know* it, because they don't know Jesus and because he hasn't given them a new heart and a new mind to see and to understand. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 St. Paul tells us: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." This is why there's no other way into the kingdom than the new birth.

But, brothers and sisters, as much as we need to understand the necessity of new birth, we also need to understand something else Jesus stresses here: the new birth is the *supernatural work of God*. How many people here were born the first time of their own will and on their own power? No. None of us is here on our own power. We're here because of our mothers and fathers. In much the same way, we can only be born again on our Heavenly Father's initiative. We can't do it on our own. No one enters the kingdom based on his own effort or his own initiative. We enter only on the merits of Jesus and we can only come when Jesus himself calls us and when his Spirit has done the work of changing our hearts.

Finally, in verses 7 and 8, Jesus tells Nicodemus:

Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 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."

I was in Orlando in 2005 when Hurricane Wilma passed through. As hurricanes go it wasn't a huge one, at least not where I was. But it was bad enough that we weren't allowed to leave the hotel where our conference was held. I remember watching out the window at the driving rain. At the peak of the storm I saw two things that were amazing to watch: I saw a palm tree blow over. The winds were so strong that they rolled it across the parking lot. But what really amazed me was to see the winds not only push over a motorcycle, but they actually pushed the motorcycle along the ground, moving it about twenty feet. Now, I couldn't see the wind itself. I could only see the effects and hear the sound of it, but I knew it was there. The work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is like that. We can't see the Holy Spirit, but we can—and we *should*—see the *dramatic* effect of him working in us. In Ephesians 4:24 St. Paul tells us that to be born again is to be “created after the likeness of God

in true righteousness and holiness.” Is that the kind of re-creation people see when they look at us?

Let me close with two points of applications. First, going back to the knowledge that new birth is God's initiative, let me ask: How often do you pray for others to be born again and how often do you pray for opportunities to share the Gospel with them? If God is sovereign when it comes to the regenerating power he works by his Spirit, that means that we need to be praying. We need to be living witnesses and we need to be sharing the Gospel message with people, but we need to be praying about it too. We need to be asking God to send his Spirit to change the hearts and minds of the people with whom we share the Good News. That really struck me this week as I was thinking about these verses. I pray daily for opportunities to share my faith—and the eyes to see those opportunities when they come—but I realised that I don't pray enough for specific opportunities and I don't follow up my encounters with people with enough prayer. We need to remember that if God is the one doing the work, we need to be asking him to do it, asking him for opportunities for us to share and asking him to be at work in the hearts and minds of those people who will see us, who will hear the message we have, and that he will continue to work in them afterward.

Second, being “born again” really does mean something. Like we see the dramatic effects of the hurricane even though we can't see the actual wind, people should see the dramatic effects of the Holy Spirit in our lives even though they can't actually see the Holy Spirit. When I lived in Oregon I was reading a story in the newspaper about religion. Only eight percent of Oregonians attend church regularly and yet about forty percent of all Oregonians claim to be “born again”. First, how can you be born again—which means loving and trusting Jesus—and forsake his Body? Second, what kind of witness does that send to unbelievers? Lots of people claim to be “born again”, but how much evidence do we actually see?

Even amongst evangelical Christians things like divorce and abortion happen at the same rate—and sometimes at a higher rate—than they do in the general population. Not only do we often see a profound lack of holiness in the Church, we see a lack of trust in God. Being born again is first and foremost about trusting in God and his promises, but churches and ministries routinely struggle financially, which means Christians are afraid to let go of their money and trust that God will take care of them.

Brothers and sisters, this is one big reason why our witness is so often weak. Where the witness of Christians is strong, people flock to Jesus. I'm sure that the wind blows in Orlando every day, but when I was there in 2005 crowds of people were gathered around the hotel windows watching the winds. I'm pretty sure they don't do that most of the time. No, we were watching because the wind was doing something dramatic. And friends, if people can see Jesus doing dramatic things our lives, they're going to gather around to watch us too and when we want to share our faith with them, they're going to be more interested in hearing what we've got to say. It's imperative that we share the message with people that they must be born again, but it's just as imperative that we remember those same words. We must remember that *we* must be born again and we need to remember what that means.

Let us pray: “Father thank you that by your grace and through the gift of faith you give us new birth from above. Help us to remember that we must be born again to see your kingdom. Give us boldness to share that message with others and give us the grace we need to radically transform our own lives that our words might be backed up by how we live. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.