

The religious expert meets Jesus \* John 3

October 16, 2022 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

When I was in second year university, I had a class on interpersonal communication with a really crummy professor. He was clearly there just to collect a pay cheque and hit on the cute girls in the class.

But he was sick one day and so the faculty brought in another professor to teach the class that day, and I'll tell you, it was night and day. This guy spoke with enthusiasm and conviction, he brought the material to a whole new level; I left that class that day with a whole new perspective on the world.

And looking back, meeting that professor had a profound impact on the trajectory of my academic career. I ended up taking a bunch of classes with him, I translated some academic papers for him and he's the one who got me the job as a teaching assistant at Laurier (WLU). Meeting him had a profound impact on my life.

Have you ever met someone like that, who shaped your life in a significant way? I suspect that we probably all have.

If you've met someone like that, imagine then what it would have been like to meet Jesus, the Son of God, in the flesh. The Gospels are full of stories where people from all walks of life encountered Jesus and went away changed; wouldn't it be nice if we could meet Jesus like that too?

As it turns out, we can. We can meet Jesus in His Word, and experience His life-changing power through His encounters with real people in the pages of the Bible.

So what we're going to do from now until Advent is look at a series of 'Encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John,' where people met with Jesus and went away changed. The goal for each sermon will be to ask – 'What happened when this person met Jesus? How did He change their life or worldview? And how does that change us?' The plan is to look together at a handful different people in the Gospel of John and meet Jesus vicariously through them.

Today we are going to kick things off with Nicodemus and go with him to meet Jesus in John chapter 3. Turn with me to John chapter 3 and we'll look at this episode that I often think of as 'Nic at night.'

Now Nicodemus I think represents the kind of person that loves 'religion.' They love the tradition of it, they love the morality part, they love feeling superior to others because their lives are more regimented and holy; Nicodemus is the quintessential self-righteous Pharisee who uses 'good behaviour' to insulate himself against God. Oxymoronic right – using good behaviour to insulate yourself from God seems like a weird idea, but this is what religious people do – they essentially say – 'here God, look at my outward behaviour; I'm a good person,

so no need to look deeply into my heart, and there's no real reason for me to depend on you.' Do you know anyone like that? Are you at all like that?

Nicodemus certainly was. Don Carson likes to call him the 'regius professor of Divinity at Oxford College' – way up in the pecking order of theology experts. And he seems like the kind of guy who is so hung up on the human aspects of religion that he can't perceive what God is doing. But he did have the insight to see that God was doing something through Jesus, so he went to Jesus at night. Let's look at their encounter starting at John 3, starting in verse 1.

NIV John 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

2 He came to Jesus at night (what time? I think that's important later on) and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

So at this point in John's Gospel, Jesus has just started His public ministry. At BTT the other night we saw the miraculous signs He was doing in His public ministry - He healed people, He turned water into wine – and apparently those miracles had caught the attention of the religious establishment. We don't know if he was sent or if he came of his own accord, but either way, Nicodemus came to suss things out and to see what was going on.

Right off the bat, he opens with a sign of deference – Nicodemus calling Jesus 'rabbi' is a bit like the pope called me 'wise teacher' – Nicodemus is a religious expert with a whole alphabet of degrees behind his name and as far as he's concerned, Jesus is some grassroots, 'self-taught' country bumpkin and yet, he still addresses Him graciously. And he says 'we've (collective? Exaggerating personal?) seen what you've been doing and it's clear that God is with you because no one could do what You are doing without Him.'

Now I would really love to know what Nicodemus intended to say next, because I think that there are a couple ways that this conversation could go. One, he says: "We've seen You're from God and would like to know more" but just as likely, two, he says: 'look, I know you're new around here and You're real idealistic and young but we have a certain way of doing things around here, and you're kind of ruffling some feathers. If you're truly from God, you'd do things the way WE do them, so if you just change things up a little, you'll fit right in with the religious establishment.' He MIGHT have been about to say that but we have no idea because Jesus takes the conversation in a whole different direction. Verse 3:

3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. "

Boom. There it is. Nicodemus wants to talk religion and Jesus says – 'No. We need to talk about transformation.' No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

Now to his credit, Nicodemus is willing to play ball. He picks up Jesus' mic drop and says -

4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

He's thinking in purely human terms – 'I must be born again? That's silly. I can't be born again; a person can only be born once.'

And Jesus says – 'no dummy, I don't mean like literal birth, I'm talking spiritual rebirth here.'

5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

Now Jesus is saying something very important about human nature here. When we are born the first time, as babies, we enter into the world as worldly beings – that's what 'the flesh' means. We are shaped by the world and by the Fall and so our tendency is to love the world more than we love God.

Religion, the way that Nicodemus have been living, says 'no problem, just do enough righteous things to show that you love God more than the world and you're all set.'

But Jesus comes along and says, 'no, that's not going to cut it. You can't just paper over the Fall. You must be born again. Born not of the flesh but of the Spirit. You must be transformed from the inside out by the power of God if you want to see the kingdom.'

Verse 9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. He's spent his whole life trying to be righteous, being a good person, keeping all the rules –

And verse 10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

I mean, Nicodemus has probably spent his whole life studying the OT; he probably has the whole thing memorized and yet he's entirely missed the message of transformation. He knows all the rules and all the sacrifices but he's so hung up on them that he's missed the point – the heart condition that they address. He wants to put a nice veneer around his heart of stone; instead, just like Ezekiel says, Jesus wants to take out that heart of stone and put in a heart of flesh. Jesus wants him to be born again.

And to explain how you can be born again, Jesus points him to another OT story. Verse 14 -

14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,  
15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Let me tell you what He's talking about. Number 21:4-9; God has just rescued the people of Israel from a life of slavery in Egypt. They're out in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land and then get impatient. They're like the kids in the back seat – saying 'are we there yet?'

But they take it one step further and say 'if it's going to take so long, why did you bother getting us out of Egypt in the first place?' They whine and complain about the food God is giving them and the water situation and God says 'ok, that's enough' and He sends fiery snakes into the camp to put them in their place.

Well the people start dying from the snake bites and they say to Moses – 'we were wrong, we sinned against you and against the LORD by complaining about what God provided; save us, please, save us!' – and the LORD said to Moses:

8 The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."

9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

Jesus says – 'just like that snake, I am also going to be lifted up. And just like when people in the OT looked on that snake were cured and lived, anyone who looks on me with faith will also live. And not just in this life, but in the next. Anyone who looks on me and believes will be born again into eternal life.'

And then of course we get one of the most famous verses in all of the Bible:

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God is so gracious, so full of mercy, that He chose to give His one and only Son to bear the punishment for our sin, so that we could be delivered from sin and saved by grace. And look how He does it – not by righteous living, not by keeping rules, God has made it so easy that anyone can do it – whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

When we believe in Jesus, the way that the Israelites looked at the snake, we are delivered from sin and born again into a new and everlasting life.

Because – look at verse 17 -

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Jesus didn't come to pay us back for sin, He came to pay the price FOR our sin; not to condemn us but to save us – and verse 18 -

18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

God has made salvation as simple as possible – He’s given it as freely as possible – so that there is no excuse for anyone not willing to be saved.

19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

This, I think, is where the time of day becomes very important. When did Nicodemus come to Jesus? At night. I think that this is John very subtly telling us what Jesus was telling Nicodemus – Nicodemus, as outwardly righteous and fervently religious as he was, was still living in the dark. He was willing to give God his outer life, but his inner life, he kept to himself, in the shadows. Now the light of the world was right in front of Him; what would he do? Hide in the darkness and remain in sin or come into the light and be made new?

This, I think, is how Jesus challenged Nicodemus’s worldview. He pushed him to look beyond the human aspects of religion, like morality and tradition, to the supernatural, spiritual elements of Kingdom life – coming into the light to be born again. To be transformed from what you were when you were born the first time.

And you know what? I think Nicodemus answered that challenge. He appears a couple more times in the Gospel of John – John chapter 7 – the Pharisees are willing to go after Jesus because He’s not respecting their traditions and Nicodemus, who had a seat on their council, spoke up for Him, saying ‘you can’t just condemn someone without finding out what He’s doing.’ They ostracized him for it but he had made a stand for Jesus.

And then after Jesus’ crucifixion, John 19:39, Nicodemus showed up with Joseph of Arimathea with a boatload of spices and aloes to take Jesus’ body from the cross and give Him a proper burial. Just as the Israelites looked on that bronze serpent and lived, I think Nicodemus looked with faith on Jesus and was born again.

So that’s Nicodemus’s encounter with Jesus; how does that change us as WE encounter Jesus?

I think this gives us a really good opportunity to talk about what it means to be born again. Because born again has become so overused in our culture that it’s practically meaningless in the popular consciousness. James Dobson claimed that Donald Trump was born again – albeit a ‘baby Christian.’<sup>1</sup> (I have my doubts).

So what does it mean to be born again?

Four things – and I’ll draw these from Nicodemus’s encounter with Jesus -

Being born again means: transformation, trust, salvation and light.

So first, being born again means transformation.

Being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus, is not primarily a human endeavour. It's not all about what we've done; it's not even about how often we go to church. The Christian life is all about transformation – being born again, from an old life in the world of self-centredness and sin to a new Kingdom life of light and love. This quote has appeared in many forms but it's exactly right – Jesus didn't come into the world to make moral people better; Jesus came into the world to make dead people alive. He came into the world to make sinners into saints.

You and I, before we know Jesus, belong to the world. We are just like Nicodemus who uses religion to put a righteous sheen on our otherwise selfish actions. But then Jesus comes along and says – 'forget trying to make your sin look shiny; be born again. Let me transform you from the inside out.' There's no halfway here – that's why Jesus uses the language of being born again. You've either been born once and so belong to the world, or you're born again and belong to the Kingdom.

Being born again means transformation.

Being born again means trust.

That's how we come to be transformed. Not by works but by faith, by belief, by trusting in the goodness of God, no matter how absurd it may seem. I think that's why Jesus used the example of the snake in the wilderness with the people of Israel. I mean, just think about how that must have seemed to an ancient Israelite who'd been bit by a poisonous snake. 'I've been bitten by this poisonous serpent and its venom is coursing through my veins and you want me to look at a bronze snake on a pole? Are you crazy? Suck out the venom! Give me an ointment or some leeches or something! I've gotta get this stuff out of me.'

And yet, what did Moses say? 'Look with faith and live.' The guy lying next to the first guy says 'this doesn't make any sense, but I trust that God knows what He's talking about.' That guy looks at the snake and lives. He gets a second chance at life.

We too have venom in our veins. It's not fiery and it's not killing us as fast as the snakes in the desert, but we gotta get rid of it somehow. Jesus tells us that the way to do that is trust, belief, whole-hearted faith. It means saying 'as absurd as it may seem to an outside observer, I will trust in a crucified and risen Saviour, knowing that He will save me.' I think God made it absurd on purpose, so that we can claim no part in it, but know without a doubt that it was Him that saved us.

Being born again means trust.

And look what that gets us. Being born again means salvation.

And not just salvation, eternal salvation. Twice in a row, Jesus says that ‘everyone who believes in me will have eternal life.’ That’s verse 15 and again in verse 16: whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

When we are born again, by faith, we are saved, not just for this life but also for the next. We are no longer condemned because of our sin but we are delivered from it and promised eternity in the presence of God.

I’m pretty sure that the first verse I ever memorized for an Awana program was John 3:16 - John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (Joh 3:16 KJV).

I didn’t want to perish; I wanted everlasting life. That is what we are saved to when we are born again.

Being born again means salvation.

And being born again means light, specifically living in the light.

I’m just as guilty of this as the next guy; I think that often times when we read John 3, once we hit verse 16, we just kind of stop paying attention because it’s so prominent and famous. We think once we’ve got it, we don’t need to know anything more, but in truth, we do need to know more, we do need to go further. And verses 21 and onwards say something very important about how we live when we’ve been born again.

21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God" (Joh 3:19-21 NIV).

If you live by the truth, then come into the light. Once we are born again, we will do everything we can to stop living in the darkness of selfishness and sin and come out into the light. That’s why I said that the Christian life is not PRIMARILY about what you do or how often you go to church – because those things don’t save us, but those things **are** a part of living in the light once you’ve been born again. Verse 21 – ‘whoever lives by the truth comes into the light’ – live your life in the light.

Being born again then means transformation, trust, salvation and light.

So how does encountering Jesus change us? Well, I think it challenges us to ask ‘am I born again?’ That is, am I using religious tradition and righteous deeds to keep God at bay, or am I daily inviting Jesus into my heart to take out the hard heart of sin and put in a heart that is sensitive to what God is doing by the Spirit in my life? Sometimes we think of being born again in very mystical terms, but it’s really as simple as experiencing a clean break with the old way of things and living by Jesus’ Spirit in the new.

If you're the first one, I'd say the same thing Jesus said to Nicodemus in 3:3: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (Joh 3:3 NIV). Sin is a venom that flows in our veins that's gotta be dealt with and no amount of good deeds can do it. You gotta be transformed from the inside out.

But look, look at how simple it is – look with faith and live. Trust in Jesus as your Saviour and just like that, He gives you the Spirit and you are a new Creation. It was costly – this salvation cost God the life of His beloved Son – but He gives us the benefit more freely than any gift has ever been given. So look with faith and live.

And if you have done that and you've been made new, look with faith and live... in the light. Let all that you do be done in the light. Don't live life with a five o'clock shadow where you can tuck your deeds you don't want any to know about; but live with the noonday sun shining overhead, so that you are surrounded by God's life-giving light.

Look with faith, be born again and live in the light.

This morning as we prepare our hearts for Communion, I want to focus our attention on one verse from John chapter 3 and that verse is John 3:16.



For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (Joh 3:16 KJV).

I don't know about you but I can rattle that off just like that. But this isn't the kind of verse you just rattle off; you stop and soak it in, so let's spend a few minutes soaking in John 3:16.

How does it start?

For God so loved the world...

God loved the world SOOOO much... that He gave His only begotten Son. Have many of you have heard that before? God loved us SOOOOO much. In that case, the 'so' tells us 'how much' God love us – soooooo much. And I think that there's something to that. Because over in Ephesians 3:18 and Paul says that God's love for us is so wide and so long and so high and so deep that we will never truly see the end of it. So it's true, God did love us SOOOO much.

But I think that John is literally saying something else – this is HOW God loved us – He loved us so' – in this manner. He loved us so much that He loved us in this way – He gave His one and only Son.

God's love is not Hallmark love. It's not mushy and sentimental. It's practical and redemptive. It takes root at the point of our deepest need, our alienation from God, and it grows into forgiveness and mercy.

This is how God loved us – He sent His one and only Son – His beloved Son – Jesus (do you hear the echoes of Abraham and Isaac there?) – into the world to redeem us. Not to pay us back for sin but to pay the price for sin, so that we could be transformed, born again into completely new people, led the Spirit.

How do we take hold of that? By faith. By believing. WHOSOEVER BELIEVETH IN HIM. Now I think there's something to be said here about predestination because I think that that's something that the Bible talks about, but it's something that really only God understands, so from our point of view, this is our rule of thumb – anyone who believes in – it doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter what you've done – you...

Will not perish but have eternal life.

That deserves to be on signs at the ballpark. That deserves to be on the radio with Keith Urban singing: 'John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16.' That deserves to be the cornerstone of our hearts.

If you have believed in God's one and only Son and made it your life's purpose to live in the light, then you are born again. And if you are born again, then you are welcome at this Table. Let's pray.

God, we thank You for Cross. We thank You for Your love. Not sentimental, theoretical love but real love, redemptive love; love that accepts us where we are and then makes us new to live for you. Father, You gave Your one and only Son. At the Last Supper, your one and only Son gave His disciples bread and wine; now Spirit you give us the benefits of the one and only Son's atoning death: forgiveness of sin, life everlasting, fellowship with you. We pray that as we receive your gifts, You would nourish our souls and strengthen us to live for you.

Galatians 2:20 – The Son of God loved YOU and gave His live for YOU.

Words of Institution: Bread

Pray

Jesus, we thank You for the Cross. There You gave up your life, freely. You said: No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again (Joh 10:18 NIV). And that gives us tremendous hope. The OT says that 'the life is in the blood;' when we receive the cup, Your life flows in our veins, giving us the promise that just as you took up your life again, we too will be resurrected. May Your life in us move us, comfort us, motivate us to live for you. May it give us courage in the middle of the night, in the middle of the storm, in the midst of sharing you with others. Amen.

Words of Institution: Cup

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/us/politics/a-born-again-donald-trump-believe-it-evangelical-leader-says.html>