

John 3:1-15: Jesus and Nicodemus

I remember so much of the journey when my wife and I got pregnant. I remember when we found out, going to title wave, and getting as many books on pregnancy I could find. I remember the first time we hear our baby's heartbeat. I remember all the different stages of pregnancy for my wife. I remember packing a hospital bag and waiting each night with anticipation of when our baby might show up. I remember eating spicy food, rubbing my wife's feet, and scaring her, all on purpose, because she was done being pregnant and wanted that baby out!

I remember getting to the hospital, and spending 18 hours of contractions, and pitosin, and heavy breathing, and angry looks from my wife like, "you did this to me."

I remember as the baby came down the canal, and it was time to push, they paged the doctor, and they couldn't find her, so I started to deliver the baby with another nurse.

I remember my wife eyes changing from this hazel color to this gray color, and the look of sheer will and determination to get this baby out.

I remember once the doctor finally came, and I stepped back, staring at everything that was goin on down there, and going into shock. In fact, here is a picture of my face. You can see the shock setting in. Here's another picture five seconds later, you can see instinct has kicked in, and I am breathing through an invisible paper bag. Nice Erik, nice. Also notice, that the nurse is holding me, because apparently I needed a hug.

But serisouly, the birth process is the most incredible processes to be a part of.

And as incredible as a natural birth is. And it is incredible. It pales in comparison to the miracle that is spiritual birth.

Even though each one of us here has got through that process of physical birth, and we were born healthy, all of us were born spiritually dead. We are all spiritual stillborns. We are all born spiritually dead.

Ephesians 2:1 tells us clearly that we are dead in our sins.

What's really tough about being spiritually dead is it is like one side of a coin. If you're spiritually dead, then scripture says you are also spiritually blind. In Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians he writes:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

And these threads of spiritual death and spiritual blindness are woven all throughout our story tonight in John 3 of Jesus and Nicodemus.

So let's dive right into it.

Let's start in verse 1:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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.”

So, a guy named Nicodemus comes to Jesus. now Nicodemus is a Pharisee, which means he's part of the religious elite of Jesus' day. They were the church people. They were the people closest to God. These were the people who had it all figured out. These were the people that everyone in that community looked up to concerning God, and how to know him and how to be close to him. They were 'experts'. These guys were the Francis Chan's of their day, ok? And these details are important to remember as we unpack this conversation with Jesus.

So Nicodemus basically says to Jesus, “Listen, you're doing all this stuff, obviously God is a part of what you're doing.”

Something to understand here is that with this statement from Nicodemus, there is this implied question coming from this statement, and that question is. “So who are you?”

Then Jesus responds in verse 3:

³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

We'll get to what Jesus means here by this statement of being born again, but for now we'll keep working through the conversation.

So Nicodemus responds to Jesus' statement in verse 4:

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

Nicodemus' response shows how clueless he is, and remember, this guy is a respected expert.

So Jesus responds to Nicodemus' ignorant response, and rephrases it, and Jesus even expands to try and get Nicodemus to understand. He says in verse 5:

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ 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.”

Understand here, that Jesus isn't giving some sort of new revelation that's never been heard before. He's speaking of things that have been written for centuries in scripture.

Unless you are born of ‘Water and Spirit’ you cannot enter the kingdom of God is Jesus referring to very specific things in the Old Testament.

Many old testament writer looked forward to the messianic age when God's Spirit would be poured out on humankind, with the result being blessings, and abundance, and righteousness.

Hopefully your seeing some of the connective tissue here with the 1st miracle of water into wine and all that symbolism wrapped up in that miracle as we talked about last week.

But the messianic age, this age of blessing, this age of abundance, this age of righteousness, this age of God's Spirit being poured out on mankind, these were all things that would be ushered in by the messiah, by the Christ.

In the book of Ezekiel in chapter 36, it prophesies of the messianic age and this idea of 'water and spirit' are explicit (Eze 36:24–27):

²⁴ I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Did you hear that? I will sprinkle water on you, and clean you from your sin. I will give you a new heart and a new spirit within you.

These are things God is promising when the Messiah comes.

The Scriptures of Jesus and Nicodemus, the OT, are peppered with these references to a time when Messiah would come, and transform people.

And in verse 9, Nicodemus says:

"How can these things be?"

And Jesus says in verse 10:

"Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Jesus here is really slapping Nicodemus in the face here with this question. “Nicodemus, you’re an expert of the same Bible I read, and yet, you have no idea what I am talking about.”

That’s what Jesus is saying. You should know these things!

Jesus continues in verse 11:

¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.
¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Jesus is basically saying to Nicodemus, “We’re talking about simple things here that you should know and understand, and you don’t understand them, so how can we talk about deeper things?”

And my favorite part of this dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus is found here in verses 14 and 15. Jesus quotes an OT story from Numbers 21.

Look at verse 14 & 15:

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

In an effort to get Nicodemus to understand what Jesus has been saying about being born again and being born of water and of Spirit, Jesus turns to a story from the OT and the Israelites.

This story from the OT, will really help us unlock the meaning that Jesus is trying to get across.

So, let’s read that story. Turn to Numbers 21:4, and we’ll go through it:

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the

way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶ Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

So it's pretty clear what happens in this story from numbers. God's people are in the dessert, literally being led each step of the way by the Lord. And as they're going along, they complain and speak against God and against Moses. God is literally providing for them food so that they don't starve, and they are complaining about that too!

So, because of this, God sends judgement in the form of venomous snakes.

And these snakes attack the people , and many die.

And in that place of judgement, and death, and sorrow, the people confess that they have sinned, and spoken against God.

The people beg Moses to intercede on their behalf, and he does, and God tells Moses to make a metal snake made out of bronze, stick it on a pole, and hoist it in the air with the promise that anyone that anyone who looks upon the snake with their eyes and has been bitten will not die of their wounds and will live.

And Moses does what God says, and anyone that was bitten and surely dying, could look upon the snake and be healed.

Let's distill this story down to it's basic elements.

You have an ungrateful people, who have sinned against God, and are standing in God's judgement.

And the only way that the people will be saved from that judgement is if God makes a way for them. And in their repentance, God makes a way, the bronze serpent.

The situation of Nicodemus isn't any different here than that story of the Bronze snake.

Clearly, Nicodemus sees himself, and the religious elite like him, as being capable of standing in judgment of Jesus, when in fact Jesus exposes he really has very little understanding of what Jesus is talking about even though he should.

Nicodemus and the world around him is condemned and perishing and facing the judgement and wrath of God.

And the only hope they have is in the provision that God makes — in something that is lifted up on a pole, or more precisely, in someone who is lifted up on a cross.

The only remedy, the only escape from God's judgment, the only way to counteract the venomous deadly sting of sin and spiritual death depends on looking to this provision God has made: We must believe in the Son of Man who is "lifted up" if we are to have eternal life.

Our only hope for rebirth, our only hope for transformation is to look to the One who was hoisted on a pole.

That's what this conversation with Nicodemus is all about.

It's all about our inability to save ourselves, and God's ability to not just make us better or good, but God's provision to literally transform us. To literally bring us from death to life. To literally make us re-born, born again, transformed.

See Nicodemus, had it all together. He had all the boxes checked. He was elite.

And Jesus is saying, "No matter how much you have it together, no matter how "good" you are, you must be born again."

But the inverse of that is true as well. No matter how messy your life is, no matter how broken you are, you can be born again.

I read something this week, that was really helpful and profound in explaining being born again. and it's this:

Jesus is claiming that true spirituality is *not* discovering some latent capacity within the human soul and fanning it to flame. It is *not* uncovering a moral consciousness that is hidden by sedimentary layers of civilization's corruptions. Nor is it inspiring aesthetic qualities that promote society in its finest form. It is *not* a "horizontal" experience that takes up the materials available around us in the world.

Rather, Jesus claims, true religion is "vertical." It has to do not with the human spirit, but with God's Spirit. It is a foreign invasion, sabotage of the first order. True religion unites humanity with God's powerful Spirit, who overwhelms, transforms, and *converts* its subject.

Our role in this transformation is belief, and yet it is a belief that is aided by God's work within us since we live in the darkness and have our spiritual capacities handicapped by sin.

And as we close tonight, wrestling with what this means for us today. There are two really critical applications here. The 1st is obvious the 2nd, not so much.

The 1st is this:

There is something wrong with us. There is something broken in us. And we can try hard to fix it. We can try even harder to search the world for answers. We can bandage over that brokenness with all sorts of remedies, but they won't last.

We are unable to save ourselves. But God makes a way. God Provides for us a way to not just bandaid our lives, but to transform, to make us re-born, born again.

And all we have to do is look to Jesus.

All we have to do is look to the God-man lifted up, and believe, and God makes us new.

This is incredible news.

Here's the second application, that's not so obvious, and I want to be honest here, this is a really hard one to swallow, but it's important to wrestle with.

The 2nd point of application is this:

It is possible to get your theology right, but to get your relationship with God all wrong.

That's where Nicodemus was at. Nicodemus was a theologian, he was part of the religious elites. Nicodemus was a theological fathead, and yet for all the things he got right Theologically, his relationship with God was all wrong.

Could it be possible that there are people in these seats tonight, who know a lot about God, who do a lot of church stuff, who have done this study and that study, and know this term and that term, and yet whose hearts are far from him?

Could it be that there are a bunch of Nicodemus' in here, reverting back to relying on what they've done for Jesus. Could it be that there are a bunch of people in here, that are running around with deadly venomous snake bites, who are trying to bandage the wound with good works and or theological knowledge?

Could it be, with all our busyness, and all our conscious and unconscious efforts to treat our snake wounds with bandaids that God is calling us to stop running, and to stop and look at Jesus?

And I really want you to wrestle with that statement this week, because I am wrestling with it myself:

It is possible to get your theology right, but to get your relationship with God all wrong.

It is so easy for us to take our eyes off of Jesus. It is so easy to take our eyes off of Jesus, and put our hopes in our efforts and our knowledge, and how holy we think we are, or how much we've got it together.

And the whole point of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is that we need to stop looking at what we can do, and start looking at Jesus, the one who is lifted up on the cross. Thats where we find hope. That's where we find life. Thats where we find true transformation. That's the new birth that Jesus is talking about here.

And we're going to do something different tonight, but we really feel like tonight's passage really points well to the celebration of communion together.

Jesus commands his followers to remember his vicarious death and sacrifice through the communion celebration.

Jesus reminds us to celebrate him being lifted up on the cross. And we're going to do that together tonight. And how it will work is I am going to pray, and then we are going to transition into a time of reflection.

And I would encourage you to reflect on Jesus during this time, and his sacrifice for you. And after that reflection time, we will jump back into worship, and while we're worshiping, when you're ready, come on up to the front, and come grab the elements, and take them as you feel ready. we'll also have Ben up here so if you need prayer, he'll be there to pray for you.

Let's Pray.