

John 3:1-15

“You Must Be Born Again”

Imago Dei Church | 7/1/18 | Sunday AM | 2 Services

INTRODUCTION

Birth is a fascinating thing, isn't it?

It's strange.

It's gross.

It's both common to everyone and wonderfully unique.

It's so raw but also so beautiful.

And as if a new human being coming into the world wasn't enough of an event, we do our best to make birth even more newsworthy, don't we? We have birth announcements. Birth plans. Birth stories.

Birth is fascinating and wonderful and traumatic and exhausting.

In the passage we're going to look at today, Jesus uses the metaphor of birth to shock the system of a man who was wrestling with the same question John has been trying to get us to wrestle with for three chapters: WHO IS THIS JESUS AND WHAT DOES HE WANT WITH ME?

And this man comes to Jesus with questions and Jesus challenges all his assumptions about himself and about God by using this metaphor—you might call it a “pregnant metaphor”—the metaphor of birth.

He tells this man: “You must be born again.”

And he does so to show him that the only way we can know and live with God is to be radically transformed down to our most basic, foundational level.

We need a new start.

This is why so often around here we talk about the insufficiency of “do-more-try-harder Christianity” or “turn-over-a-new-leaf religion” or “find-myself spirituality.”

Jesus looks at a man and says, you’ve tried hard, you’ve been religious, and you’ve found yourself, and none of it is enough to get what you need.

Main Idea: God grants eternal life to those who are born again through faith in Jesus.

I want to unpack this basic idea by simply asking two questions about being born again and let the text before us address them.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BORN AGAIN?

(JOHN 3:1-8)

John 3:1-8

[1] Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. [2] 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.” [3] Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” [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?” [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."

John introduces us to Nicodemus as a Pharisee. He clarifies that this means he was a ruler of the Jews.

Other parts of this passage suggest to us that Nicodemus is probably also a highly regarded teacher and keeper of the OT Scriptures. He wasn't just a Jew—he was an *exemplary Jew*.

He had all the answers and all the credentials.

And yet—here he is. Under cover of night, Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he's experiencing some of what we might call cognitive dissonance.

You know what that is, right? It's the discomfort/angst we feel when we try to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time.

(ILL—it's Spring training baseball optimism & knowing my team isn't very good;
it's knowing that traffic is going to be horrible but believing that I'm going to catch all the green lights and be there with time to spare;
it's me a few weeks ago when I tried to fit an 8-ft board in my small SUV, knowing that it wasn't going to fit but also knowing that I'd done this before. So I

try to resolve it & mash some of the buttons into the console.)

They don't go together, but I believe them both to be true and so I wrestle with trying to reconcile them.

That's what Nicodemus is doing here.

On the one hand, he is a member of the Pharisees—a group of religious rulers and experts of the law that were convinced that by leading Israel to keep the law of God they would be able to prevent another disaster like had befallen OT Israel (exile) and prepare the way for God's eternal kingdom on earth.

One consequence of their position was that they were almost always fundamentally opposed to Jesus and his ministry. He was a part of that group that most represents a rejection of Jesus' life and teaching.

On the other hand, verse 2 tells us that Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus is “from God” and that God is “with him.”

Nic is among the group of people John tells us about at the end of chapter 2 who on some level believe in Jesus, but primarily because of the signs he has done. Jesus knows that their faith is shallow, at best, and therefore doesn't entrust himself to them.

Nic says—we see your signs! But we hate you. So...

You might say that by virtue of his calling as a spiritual leader he is drawn to Jesus...

But by virtue of his tribe he is in opposition to Jesus.

The implicit question Nic comes with is, “What’s your deal? Who are you?”

This is the question John wants us to see and recognize that we must also be asking. WHO IS JESUS and WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH HIM? (APP)

Jesus answers Nic, but not straightforwardly. Nic has just acknowledged something is special about Jesus, but Jesus wants to shock him into realizing that he doesn’t get it.

This is where the birth metaphor begins.

He says that unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

“Again” = “from above” → intentional ambiguity

Jesus is saying that Nic thinks he sees, but he lacks this second birth that is required to truly see.

Do you see that in verse 3? Without this second birth, Nic can’t truly see the kingdom of God.

Obviously the first birth we experience is physical and natural. The second, therefore, is spiritual and supernatural.

Insofar as birth symbolizes the entrance into life (modern abortion debates notwithstanding), the second birth is the entrance into a new kind of life. It is the beginning of something new.

This would have been astounding to Nic! He was a leader, a teacher of the law, and a spiritual expert! He lacked nothing!

This language of the “kingdom of God” is not common in John’s Gospel, but it’s clearly loaded language for Jesus and Nic. They would have understood it as the anticipated rule and reign of God over his creation through his coming Messiah who would be born in the line of David—Israel’s greatest king.

Nic and others assumed that this would come in God’s timing as long as Israel kept herself pure and committed to following God’s law.

He taught others how to see the kingdom of God, and now Jesus is telling him that he lacks something (something bordering on the ridiculous!) to see the kingdom himself?!

(APP) It's worth stopping here to make a connection with our own lives. Nicodemus makes the same basic mistake that all humanity does—we assume that if we are just good enough, then we can earn a spot in the kingdom of God. That's what's basically underneath is assumption.

And to be clear, every indication is that Nic is a good guy!

Well, Nic has gotten lost in the metaphor. Taking it as rigidly literal, he wonders what kind of sorcery is needed to lead to a second birth for a grown man.

So Jesus reiterates the idea, but slightly different:
“unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Now we must be born of “water and the spirit”—couple options:

1. Natural birth and spiritual birth
2. Water baptism and spiritual birth
3. Birth “from above” = water-spirit birth

In the OT, water and spirit were often used to illustrate the special work of God in saving and renewing his people.

Ezek 36:22-26

[22] “Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. [23] And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. [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.

So Jesus is saying, “Nic, the very thing you’ve been trying to make happen with your status and your heritage and your law-keeping—you still lack it because you can’t make it happen! You must be born again of something outside yourself”

Indeed, this birth is one that can only come from God.

Verse 6 — like begets like

physical → physical

Spirit → spiritual

The new life we need can only come as a gift from God through his Spirit.

Verse 8 is somewhat confusing, but the effect is that it continues the contrast between natural/physical/earthly realities and spiritual/heavenly realities.

Jesus says you see the effects of the wind, but you don't really understand it and you can't control it. The same is true for those who are born of the Spirit—those who are the product of this spiritual birth.

You, Nic, can't really understand it;

You, religious expert, can't control it.

Jesus is emphasizing the point that there is a fundamental lack in natural man—

That lack is sin, rebellion, and rejection of God's good design and lordship over our lives.

The consequences for sin that stands over natural humanity can only be taken away by something supernatural happening. The natural and the supernatural are not kinda the same thing. They aren't close. This isn't a "that'll do" kind of situation. Jesus is trying to hammer home for Nic and for us—you must be born again from above.

So what does it mean to be born again?

To be born again is to be radically transformed at a heart level by the Spirit of God so that we can know God and live for him in his kingdom.

HOW CAN WE BE BORN AGAIN?**(JOHN 3:9-15)**

This is effectively the question that Nic asks. He's not saying this isn't true. He's asking how it can happen.

Verses 9-15 effectively answer this question in two ways:

RECEIVE HIS TESTIMONY. (3:9-13)**John 3:9-13**

[9] Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" [10] Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? [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 again expresses surprise that Nic doesn't know what he's talking about. On the one hand Jesus knows that Nic doesn't understand (he's basically telling Nic as much!). But on the other hand, he seems to think that by virtue of his role as a religious expert Nic should be able to discern that no one will enter the kingdom of God through law-keeping and religious performance.

This is one of the reasons we believe that the Bible is a unified whole. Jesus seems to think that this expert in the OT Scriptures should KNOW that something supernatural is needed in the hearts of sinners in order to see the kingdom of God.

That means we should be able to read the OT and understand that God is pointing us to the Messiah as the source of our salvation

But Nic has missed it.

So in verses 11-13 Jesus again points to the contrast between heavenly and earthly things and Nic's failure to understand them.

Jesus' teaching is what he knows and what he has seen — heavenly things. Yet Nic doesn't receive it.

So Jesus tells him, all we've been talking about is the elementary principle of the new birth—basic stuff you should have already known. How can I try to explain to you the more complicated heavenly things? (ILL)

In verse 13, Jesus isn't saying that no one else has ever ascended to heaven (Elijah, Enoch).

He's saying that never has anyone ascended to heaven for the purpose of making known divine things.

The "except" is better translated, as "but only"—meaning, only the Son of Man who has descended has come to make known these divine things.

Here's what all that means—so many people spend their lives waiting for a sign, or a word from God. They want

to believe, but they are simply waiting for something to come along and confirm the truth of the gospel.

What Jesus is saying is, “I’m here! I’ve come to make known everything you need! Receive MY testimony! Receive ME!”

REST IN HIS CROSS. (3:14-15)

John 3:14–15

[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.

Jesus directs Nic’s attention to the story from Numbers 21, in which the people are punished for grumbling against God.

Numbers 21:4–9

[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.

Jesus says, “just like that bronze serpent was lifted up, so will I be lifted up to be the focus of everyone’s attention and the object of everyone’s faith.”

This is a clear reference to his own death on a cross, the culminating event in his life’s work to usher in the kingdom of God. On that cross, Jesus was lifted up to die for the sins of humanity, and John tells us that anyone who believes in him will have those sins forgiven and eternal life granted to them.

How are we born again? How do we see and enter the kingdom of God? We receive the testimony of the Son of Man, Jesus, and we rest in his cross as our only hope of salvation.

As we trust him in faith like this, the promise of God is that the Spirit is working in us to give us a new birth, a new life in Christ that will never end.

CONCLUSION

Nicodemus appears 2 more times in John’s Gospel, and both times John directs our attention back to this moment, as though it was transformative for him.

In John 7 Nic is the sole voice among the Pharisees that argues may, just maybe, Jesus is worth listening to before they reject him.

And then in John 19 Nic has gone all in. He along with Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body after the crucifixion and prepare it for burial.

So it seems Nic came to Jesus in John 3 curious and conflicted. But by receiving his testimony and following Jesus to the cross, Nic becomes truly convinced and converted. He is, it seems, born again.