

Michael McGowan

John 3:1-15 – **Born from Above**

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John 3:1-15

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

You all know what a misunderstanding is, right?

Just in case you don’t, here’s a comic to help.

[SHOW COMIC]

It’s a simple misunderstanding.

Some misunderstandings are silly and insignificant like this one...

But others have more serious consequences.

We get the idea that this is what's going on in our passage this morning...

A misunderstanding.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, and leading teacher among the Jews...

Comes to Jesus, apparently wanting to know who Jesus is and what he's about:

“Teacher, we know that you have come from God.”

He doesn't ask a question, but earns a response from Jesus:

“Truly, truly I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Probably not what Nicodemus was expecting...

“Born *again*?”

“Like born a *second* time?”

“Like, crawl back into the womb and then come out again?!?”

“That's impossible!”

Being a part of the Jewish ruling council, we can assume that Nicodemus is a pretty smart guy...

So, is this an honest misunderstanding?

Or is something else going on here...

Is his misunderstanding deliberate?

When I was growing up, I would watch the Simpsons on occasion.

(I know, not the best values...)

There's an episode where Lisa is watching her brother Bart while their parents are out for the night.

Like any normal sibling relationship, Bart is giving his sister a hard time.

Finally, she loses it:

Pointing at him she yells:

“Bart, you are going to be in so much trouble when mom and dad get home! Now go to bed!”

So Bart heads upstairs to his room.

Exhausted, Lisa hangs her head and walks into the kitchen.

What she finds though is Bart at the kitchen table eating a slice of bread.

“I thought I told you to go to bed?!” Lisa says.

“Yeah, right, bread” says Bart, “You said to go to bread.”

“I said, go to BED, B-E-D!!”

“Ohhhh....bed....”

I think this is closer to the misunderstanding that was going on between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Nicodemus didn't understand Jesus, maybe because he didn't *want* to understand...

It wasn't in his favor to hear Jesus properly.

Nicodemus is a man of the Jewish religion...

And his concept of God and salvation is based on lineage and law.

The Jews were God's chosen people.

They thought that since they were physically born from Abraham...

They were set for everlasting life.

In order to stay in this place of favor, they had to keep the law...

They had to live the way God wanted them to live in order to receive this reward—

In order to reserve their seat in 'heaven.'

Jesus is challenging this understanding of God...

He's saying that physical birth doesn't have anything to do with it...

Keeping the Law doesn't have anything to do with it:

“*No one* can experience the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

The author John does something unique with this phrase: “born again”.

He's wanting its double meaning to come out.

This phrase that we translate in the NIV as “born *again*” also means “born *from above*.”

Jesus is saying, “Unless you experience a renewal that comes from God—”

“Unless you are born of God's Spirit—”

“You won't have life....”

“You need a transformation...and it can't come from yourself.”

“The way that you’ve been going about things is not right...”

Imagine how this sounds to a man of Nicodemus’ standing—

A man to whom people look for interpreting the Scriptures/Law;

A man who lives a rigid moral life;

A man with integrity;

A man with schooling, knowledge, and a following—

“Nicodemus, you’re these people’s teacher, and you don’t understand this???”

Nicodemus doesn’t want to hear this from Jesus...

So he takes Jesus’ words literally...

Not wanting to grasp or accept what Jesus is saying.

Jesus is asking this religious man to let go of his old ideas...

And accept this new way.

And maybe he’s asking us to do the same thing.

Because a lot of times we too misunderstand...

We misunderstand what Jesus is saying about his offer of life.

We are people who desperately desire life...

We want to know that everything will be okay in the end...

To know that even though our loved ones die...

That they have life now.

We want to know that even though life is tough right now—

Darkness from depression;

Constant panic or anxiety;

Deteriorating bodies;

Exhaustion and being overwhelmed;

Situations that are out of our control—

Even though our experience is difficult, we want to know that life—

Eternal life. Life in the fullest sense now—

Is guaranteed.

We want the joy, comfort, and assurance that we hear about...

But how do we go about securing it for ourselves?

A lot of times we misunderstand the faith that's passed onto us in the Scriptures.

For a lot of people—

Maybe some of us here now—

Eternal life comes to those who live the right way—who make the right decisions:

You don't cuss;

You don't drink too much;

You don't sleep around;

You don't fudge or withhold numbers on your taxes;

You take care of and love your family;

And you give your time and money to people in need.

You're basically saying, "God loves me because I do XY&Z."

Others of us may think that we have eternal life because we were born and raised in a Christian home...

"God loved mom;"

"God loved dad;"

"And now by default, God loves me...I'm safe and sound."

Still others of us have been caught up in an idea that comes out of the *born-again* movement...

That comes from our passage actually.

I don't know if it's the same here in Canada...

But in the US being a "born-again Christian" is a loaded title.

It assumes that you've had a personal conversion experience...

Where you "feel your heart being strangely warmed" (to use a phrase from John Wesley).

It's as if the Spirit of God descends on you and changes your life right then and there.

In the 60s and 70s it became the theme of crusades and even became popular in the political world...

President Jimmy Carter declared that he was a born-again Christian.

Maybe this has added confusion to your faith...

You haven't had an intense spiritual experience like this...

So you question if you're a believer at all.

Some of us are maybe like the Pharisee...

Intentionally misunderstanding Jesus.

We think, "I didn't do anything wrong..."

"Why *would* I be excluded from everlasting life?"

"It is rightfully mine..."

"I don't need to be saved from anything."

What's wrong with all of these misunderstandings—

Whether intentional or not—

Is that the focus is on us:

Our works;

Our family;

Our feelings.

All of these take the focus off of God and his grace through Jesus Christ...

Because **life is only found in Jesus Christ.**

This is what Jesus is getting at in this passage:

"Nicodemus, surrender your current way of thinking..."

"I know it's going to be tough because it's been like this for decades for you—"

"And I know your reputation is going to take a hit—"

"Your pride is going to take a hit—"

"But I want you to trust what I'm saying."

Life is only found in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says this in a way that Nicodemus will understand.

Being a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have known the Hebrew Scriptures...

So Jesus references an Old Testament passage:

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

⁶Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” ⁹So 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, they lived.

These were God’s rebellious people.

He freed them from slavery in Egypt—

And was in the process of bringing them into a beautiful land where they could live free...

This picture of eternal life—

But chapter after chapter in Numbers we read that the people rebel against God...

They complain against him and the way he’s doing things...

In rejecting God’s gift of manna, they reject his grace toward them.

They sin against God and earn for themselves punishment.

After some of the people die from the venomous snake bites...

They realize the error of their way and confess their sin.

And the Lord provides a way for the people to be healed.

There was nothing special about the bronze snake and the pole itself...(2 Kings 18:4)

It pointed to the life that God was willing to grant...

Because even though the people complained and grumbled against God...

In his mercy he turned away his anger.

This is life that could not be found outside of God’s grace...

This is undeserved healing.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up...”
(3:14)

Nicodemus couldn't understand this yet...

But soon Jesus would be lifted up on a cross for the sins of the people...

And everyone that looked on him in faith—

Everyone that believed in him as the Son of God...

And his work of redemption—

Would have eternal life. (3:15)

This is life in its fullest sense...

Life in the way we were intended to live...

In complete harmony and fellowship with God, with our neighbors and
with ourselves.

This is the entrance into God's kingdom that Jesus is talking about.

Healing that is necessary to enter into God's kingdom—

Into life everlasting—

Is only granted by the saving work of Jesus Christ.

And so the call for us in this passage is two-fold:

First, we are called to believe!

This is John's purpose in writing this Gospel—

This is what everything is pointing to:

That by believing in Jesus Christ—

Who he is and what he has done—

You may have life.

Trusting in God's only Son is enough.

You don't need to work for eternal life—

In fact you can't work hard enough.

You don't need to be smart enough—

Because you can't think your way into heaven.

You certainly don't need to fix yourself before coming to God—

Because we know that doesn't work...all we seem to do is make things worse.

And a mountain top spiritual experience is not a prerequisite—

We'll exhaust ourselves looking for spiritual highs and question the certainty of God's grace when they dry up.

All that's needed is to be born from above...

And this is done by the power of the Spirit when you believe the words of Christ.

When you look to him for healing for your brokenness...

He gives life through his broken and resurrected body.

So first, believe it for yourself.

Finally, believe it for others.

“The wind or Spirit blows wherever it pleases.” (3:8)

Nicodemus wanted to believe that God's salvation was only for people physically born of Abraham's lineage...

Only to those keeping the Law.

But Jesus is telling him that God's kingdom is wide open now...

Eternal life is open to anyone God wants to call.

N.T. Wright gives us this image:

Nicodemus, the teacher, is sitting at his desk on a warm spring day.

On his desk he has his neat piles of paper:

Things are nice and tidy...he has things figured out...

He knows the Law; how God works; who's in and who's out.

But then the wind...or the Spirit...

Blows in from the open window sending his papers flying...

Messing up his neat categories of things he thought he understood.

God's Spirit, I believe, is blowing through this community/neighborhood.

We may have our papers neatly organized in piles on the desk—

We may think that we understand how God works:

That his people dress, talk, look, and behave in certain ways—

But that inconvenient wind is blowing about.

The Spirit of God is on the move, leading people to life in Christ...

And it's probably going to be people we'd least expect...

People that may even make us feel uncomfortable.

But eternal life belongs to the Lord...

And he grants it freely to anyone he chooses.

So understand this:

Life is only found in Jesus Christ.

Life for us, and life for everyone he's calling.

Amen.