
Jesus and Nicodemus

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 8th March

Numbers 21:5-9, John 3:1-7, 14-17



Lets pray. Lord Jesus, as we lift our eyes and hearts to you, may we grow in understanding and in gratitude, amen.

The great 18C revivalist preacher George Whitfield preached repeatedly on the text “you must be born again”. A friend asked him one day, George, why do you preach on that text so often? He answered, “ because you must be born again.”

If we wanted to simplify and draw out key learnings in Jesus encounter with the religious leader Nicodemus we could say this:

- Salvation is God’s work.
- It comes from above and is the result of the Holy Spirit influence and power in our lives.
- It is not the result of knowledge, or religion.
- In the cross of Christ we see the ultimate sign of God’s love and the means of salvation.

Let’s back up a little because the first two chapters of John have already laid the groundwork for what comes in ch 3.

- Ch 1: points to the identity and nature of Jesus, “the Word made flesh.”
- Ch 2: Jesus changing water to wine gives us an example of his his authority over nature. Jesus cleansing of the temple gives us his authority to censure the religious system, and what it had become.
- Ch 3: Jesus as the means of salvation and the proof of God’s love.

And so we begin. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a Jewish religious leader, comes to Jesus secretly by night. Why?

Firstly, he didn't want his mates knowing he was visiting someone who was challenging the religious system and making statements about himself that amounted to blasphemy.

Secondly, something must have been missing in Nicodemus' spiritual life and maybe he sensed Jesus could help him.

Vs 2 Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus as "with" or "from" God, but his understanding of who Jesus was limited. Nicodemus needed to understand that Jesus was not just a spokesman, teacher, miracle worker even. Jesus was God in Spirit and essence, having come from above.

Jesus clearly knows what Nicodemus needs. So after Nicodemus greets Jesus, acknowledging God's work in his life, Jesus doesn't say, "that's very nice of you Nicodemus, bit late in the night, but welcome, come in."

Jesus knows what Nicodemus needs so he gets to the heart of the matter. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." "Ugh", says Nicodemus. That's a short translation of vs 4. How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb?"

We will unpack Jesus' explanation on the "how" and "why" of being born again in a min.

But first, just to help us understand the significance and effect of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, let's look at what happens to Nicodemus following his meeting with Jesus. It was very clearly the beginning of a journey. Nicodemus pops up two more times in John's gospel. First time, ch 7. Here's the situation.

The religious authorities have already resolved to kill Jesus, and Jesus is digging a deeper hole for himself by speaking up at a major religious festival.

- Jesus claims that his teaching is God's teaching.
- Jesus claims he has been sent from God, and he, unlike the religious preachers, actually knows God.
- Then on the last and greatest day of the feast he points to himself as the source of spiritual life, and living water.

The temple police are sent to arrest Jesus. But because Jesus is popular with the general crowd the religious police return empty handed.

The temple police are interrogated by the religious authorities and its here we hear from Nicodemus again.

We read, “Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before and who was one of them, asked “our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing does it?”

So a man who first visits Jesus secretly by night lest his religious mates find out, is here challenging their behaviour. Something is going on.

The next, and last time we hear of Nicodemus, is in ch 19 after Jesus has been crucified. All Jesus disciples are in hiding and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepare Jesus body for burial after Joseph of Arimathea asked pilot to let him take away the body of Jesus.”

Maybe John, as he mentions that it was “this Nicodemus that came to Jesus by night”, is trying to emphasise the change. No more hiding. No more fear. Open reverence. And so we go back to our passage.

Vs 3, “very truly I tell you.” listen up this is important. I can’t emphasise it enough. “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless you are born from above.”

Now there is only one who is born from above. The Word made flesh, Jesus. We keep that central in our thinking as we look at everything else in this passage.

So what of this “Kingdom of God?” It is not to be thought of a place in the sense of being a piece of Real Estate. The KoG is really anywhere where the King reigns. Jesus talked of “the kingdom of God being within.” That is to say wherever Jesus calls the shots. Wherever Jesus is Lord. That in effect is where the Kingdom of God exists.

Vs 5, “very truly I tell you”. Again listen up this is important. I can’t emphasise it enough. “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit”. We need to take a little time on this.....

What does it mean to be born of the Spirit? It means God has made us spiritually alive by giving us the Holy Spirit.

What of this water? Well, they’ve been various thoughts put forward. Some have thought that it’s referring to baptism.

But if that was the case it would raise a couple of problems.

What of the criminal that was crucified along with Jesus? When he turned to Jesus and said “remember me when you come into your kingdom” and Jesus responds. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

What did that criminal do?

- He recognised he was getting what he deserved. “We are being punished justly for our sins, but this man has done nothing wrong”.
Repentance.
- He turned to Jesus in faith. Remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Repentance, trust and faith. That criminal was saved.

Further, if the water referred to in that verse applies to baptism, what of Christians down through the ages who don't have baptism as part of their worship practice? Quakers. Salvation Army. Are they outside the saving and regenerating work of the Spirit?

As I understand it, baptism does not impart salvation. Baptism is about inclusion into the body of Christ the church. In the case of infant Baptism, it puts us into an environment of faith, where we can grow in faith, and go on make a profession of faith as a believer through confirmation.

If it is a believer's baptism later in life, we are professing faith and entering the church at the same time. The idea that baptism alone brings salvation discounts the need for personal faith and trust in Christ.

I have talked to distraught parents worried about the spiritual future of their unbaptised baby who sadly died at birth, or soon after. I assure them such ones are very safe in God's presence.

This washing of water can not be equated with baptism for a number of reasons I think. If we were to make a link with baptism, perhaps John the Baptist type baptism, which is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Best to think, I think, of this water Jesus talks of as pointing to the cleansing of God that follows repentance.

Vs 11, very truly I tell you, again listen up this is important. I can't emphasise it enough. Very truly, I tell you we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.

What does Jesus know? **That** he is the only one who is qualified to speak about the things of heaven, and things that are above because that is where he came from. Again, the way John opens his gospel with Jesus, the Word made flesh.

And what is that Jesus says, his having this unique, and un paralleled qualification of having come from above? Vs 14 “and just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

The OT background to Jesus illustration. The redeemed people of God had been rescued from their slavery in Egypt. As they travel through the wilderness on their way to the promised land there is a lot grumbling and complaining going on.

The people are speaking against God and Moses. No water. No food. Well nothing but this detestable stuff you serve up every day. This is nothing but a death march. Judgment falls in the form of poisonous serpents. The people realise their sinfulness and ask Moses to pray for them.

He does, and God gives a solution. Make a serpent. Set it on a pole. And whoever is bitten, if they look at the serpent on the pole they will live.

The parallels with Jesus and the cross are clear. Vs 14 “and just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

As the redeemed, though sinful people of God, looked to that which was lifted up they didn't die when bitten by these poisonous serpents. Just so, when we as sinful people look to Jesus, the one God sent, the one that was lifted up on the cross, we are saved from sin and death.

There are many things we can take from the passage in closing.

- The cross of Christ is central and the work of salvation.
- Salvation is available and open to all. “Whoever believes”. That is inclusive in the sense anyone can come to Jesus. It is exclusive in the sense that is it to Jesus they must come.
- In the sending of Jesus and the cross of Christ we find the greatest evidence of God's love. I love that is open to all but is only fully experienced in Jesus.
- Lastly, salvation, not condemnation, is the message of the gospel.

Verse 18 makes this explicit. “Those who believe in him are not condemned. But those who do not believe are condemned already because of they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

- This means, as hard as it say, that the default position of humanity is one of guilt and condemnation.

- It means that only way to change our default position is to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith, and trust in him, the one lifted up for us on the cross that we might look to him, and be saved.

In closing and by way of application how might we respond in gratitude and faith?

We let what Jesus says to us through his word change our lives just as it did the life of Nicodemus.

- One who started secretly and I dare say fearfully.
- One who thought he had the answers in religion but knew that was something missing.
- One who though he started off a bit shaky with Jesus finished well and finished boldly.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, thank you for your work on the Cross. May it produce in us the fruit of righteousness as we look to, and trust in you, Amen.