

John 3:1-21 // The New Birth

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[0 : 00] We're reading from John chapter 3, verses 1 to 21, which is on page 1065 of your Bible.

So John chapter 3. Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 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.

Jesus replied, Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. 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. Jesus answered, Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases.

[1 : 22] 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. How can this be? Nicodemus asked.

You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus. And do you not understand these things? 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. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life in him.

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

[2 : 34] Whoever believes in him is not condemned. But whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but people love darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. This is the Word of God.

Let's pray as we sit. May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

Amen. Well, verse 16 that we've just had read to us is probably the most famous verse in the whole Bible.

[3 : 45] But I'm not going to start there. We'll get there towards the end. I want to start with Nicodemus. That's where John starts. The end of the previous chapter, and the beginning of ours, goes more literally, for Jesus knew what was in man, and there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus.

He knew what was in man, and there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus. Jesus' knowledge of the human heart is immediately shown as he speaks to Nicodemus.

And Nicodemus comes into focus, at least in part, if we compare him with the woman at the well, whom we'll be thinking about next week.

Nicodemus, you see, is a Jew, a man, and a member of society of high social status. Next week, we meet a woman, a Samaritan, and someone of relatively low social standing.

Nicodemus might boast of his righteousness. The Samaritan woman comes as a sinner. The surprise is that the one whom one might think least ready to understand, that is the Samaritan woman, is the one who responds to Jesus, while the theologian offers nothing but questions at this stage.

[5 : 25] Nicodemus is from the Jewish ruling council. He was a rabbi, and literally the teacher of Israel, with a distinguished reputation.

He comes by night. Maybe he's seeking privacy as a result of fear. But night is the realm of evil and unbelief.

When Judas Iscariot goes out to betray Jesus, John comments, and it was night. Nicodemus comes from the night.

And as we read the passage, maybe his darkness is darker than even he knew. But he does come to the light to make inquiries.

And he comes very respectfully. Rabbi, he says, 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.

[6 : 35] But Jesus just cuts him off. Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they're born again.

Nicodemus comes for discussion. But Jesus is not very interested in discussing the fact that signs like the miracle at Cana we heard about last week authenticate him.

Jesus wants Nicodemus to have not a discussion but a relationship with God. The problem is that Nicodemus cannot see that he might need to be born again.

He is perhaps in modern terms the reverend, canon, professor, doctor. He is perhaps too confident of his own righteousness.

But Jesus says that seeing the kingdom of God entering it needs a new birth. It's that radical. And it's important to say that this isn't some strange modern thing.

[7 : 57] A born again Christian is the only sort of Christian that there is. It's not a wacky sort of person from America. Born again could be translated born from above.

In fact that's the usual way that John uses this word. When he says the word translated again or it's more every other time he uses it it means from above.

and born from above perhaps is a better translation since the whole point is that this new birth is supernatural.

The reason for translating it born again is because that's how Nicodemus clearly understands it.

You see being born from above is so important because you can't by your own efforts bring the new birth to pass any more than you could bring your own natural birth to pass.

You clearly can't do that. It really isn't a question of trying harder. Maybe your school report said could try harder.

[9 : 15] Maybe you had a friend whose school report said could try harder. Hugh Palmer had a friend whose school report read average.

needs to try his hardest. I fear he has been. Nicodemus just doesn't get the idea of being born again.

How can someone be born when they're old? Nicodemus asked, verse 4. Surely they can't enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. to Nicodemus and his literal words, Jesus restates what he's saying.

Very truly I tell you, verse 5, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they're born of water and the spirit. Now this is a crucial verse and we're going to explore it in some detail because our special theme that we're looking at as we look at John's gospel is what it means to be, is it all about water?

So what does being born of water mean? Some people take it to mean natural birth. Now if you're someone who watches Call the Midwife then you'll know what's about to happen when a woman's waters break.

[10 : 42] Or maybe water stands metaphorically for semen. men. But there's no evidence that people in Jesus' day saw natural birth as being born of water.

It also seems like a strange interpretation of this phrase in that being born of water and the spirit is parallel to being born again.

There's only one preposition in the Greek for both. It's just born of water and the spirit as it were. There's just one birth here. There's no born of natural birth and spiritual birth.

We're just talking about spiritual birth and trying to understand what it means. A second option is that water is baptism. This is possible but it would have been jolly difficult I think for Nicodemus to have understood it that way.

Jesus says you're the teacher of Israel and you don't get this. Well if it was baptism it would be quite hard I think for him to get it.

[11 : 54] I mean Christian baptism in its fullest sense is still in the future and John the Baptist's baptism is to be superseded soon.

Surely it's not a requirement for entry into the kingdom. Carson in his commentary says water is not baptism here. So we won't go for that one.

It seems that Jesus expected Nicodemus' mind to go to the Old Testament references to water and the Spirit. As I said they're a pair, water and the Spirit going together.

Here is a reference in Isaiah that perhaps helps us. 44 verse 3 for I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground.

I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants. But even clearer is Ezekiel 36 25 to 27 which will come up on the screen in a moment.

[13 : 01] I'll read it out to you. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. we've enjoyed studying Ezekiel in the morning so perhaps it's worked particularly well we get to this verse now.

It's clear that being born of water and the spirit is cleansing and renewal. It's a work of God that takes people who are dead in sins and regenerates them.

It's a work that takes Ezekiel's dry bones and makes them live. And that is being born again.

[14 : 07] That's new birth. Human birth produces the human family. New birth produces children of God.

Now Christian baptism is the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of new birth. life. And so John may well have expected that we would understand as we read that there's a reference to baptism.

But the primary message is that whatever our spiritual background what we need is the work of God. Not turning over a new leaf but being given a new life.

I'm going to come back to that. But Nicodemus doesn't get it. Perhaps he doesn't believe what Jesus says.

So that leads to a discussion about Jesus' authority. Verse 10. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things?

[15 : 24] Very truly I tell you. We speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen.

Jesus is uniquely qualified to bring God's word to us because he's the one who came from heaven, the son of man.

In verse 12 Jesus says, I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? Now I'm following Martin in this, but I'm taking earthly things to mean things already revealed in the Old Testament.

The earthly things are the things that Nicodemus should have known because he's the Old Testament expert. The new birth is revealed there and he should have known it.

Jesus has spoken of earthly things but he didn't believe. Heavenly things are the things that are going to be revealed by the one who came from heaven.

And the challenge on us is to build our lives on what the one who came from heaven has revealed to us. And the first and most important challenge this morning is to build our lives on Jesus' interpretation, his exposition of the story in Numbers 21 to which he refers.

[17 : 04] The story of the bronze serpent. This story is an incident that occurred after Israel had passed through the Red Sea.

They were going towards the promised land but they murmured against God and against Moses. Why have you brought us out here to die in this wilderness they complained.

And they were being bitten by venomous snakes as a result of that. And Moses prayed and the Lord said to him make a snake and put it up on a pole.

Anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. 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 they lived.

I've chosen a picture by Van Dyke. It's in the Prado in Madrid. And I think it's a great picture. Van Dyke obviously wasn't present in the desert to paint this.

[18:17] He's obviously painting it from the Bible. And Jesus' exposition of the passage is in verses 14 and 15 of John 3.

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

I love this picture because I love the way that Van Dyke has pictured the lifting up in making a form of a cross out of the bit of wood that Moses has used.

So that gives us very clear cross-reference. It's a verse that's got many consequences you might want to look at. What's happening in numbers is that God gave new physical life to those who are physically dying.

You can see someone dying at the bottom and God is giving new physical life to those who are dying. Now through Jesus God is giving eternal life to those who are spiritually dead.

[19:27] This is the new birth we looked at earlier and it's worth spending just a second on eternal life. eternal life means more literally life of the age life of the age to come resurrection life the life of God's age.

It speaks not so much of quantity although of course eternal life will be everlasting life but it speaks of the quality of what God is giving to us.

But the main point of connection in the story is not just that new life is being given but the connection between the bronze snake and Jesus is that Jesus is being lifted up.

It's not a word that's used lots of times by John but it's used very significantly by him. It combines being physically lifted up with the notion of exhortation.

in John 12 verse 32 Jesus says and I when I'm lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.

[20:43] and it's that strange connection between being lifted up on the cross and Jesus' glory shining forth.

Bernard of Clairvaux in the hymn we sing certainly at Harper's 4 wrote these words as you look at the cross death's pallid hue comes o'er thee the glow of life decays yet angel hosts adore thee and tremble as they gaze.

Jesus lifted up but it's more than that the son of man must be lifted up it says in verse 14 it was the only way for us to be saved.

If God could have achieved our salvation at a lower price he would surely have done so but the cross was the only way so God's love meant that the son of man must be lifted up.

And finally on this section how did the Israelites behave towards the bronze snake? Well what they had to do is to stop trying to cope with the living snakes they had to look up and live if you look at the picture some of them are still struggling with the snakes that's not what they're supposed to do they're supposed to look to look up so what are we to do we're no longer to try to reach God by new leaves and good works we're to look to Jesus crucified for us that's the only way if being born of water and the spirit says that salvation is by grace alone this picture the picture that Jesus paints using the Old Testament says it's by faith alone sola gratia sola fide now I was born in Bristol and about four miles from our house outside

[23:04] Bristol was this cleft in the rock called the rock of ages apparently the reverend augustus montague top lady splendid name hid in a storm there as he hid in the cleft in the rock apparently he wrote his famous hymn rock of ages cleft for me let me hide myself in thee that's the first how the first verse begins but I'm just going to quote verses two and three to you now because I think they've described very well what we're talking about this morning verse two goes not the labor of my hands can fulfill thy laws demands could my zeal no respite no could my tears wherever flow all for sin could not atone thou must save and thou alone it's about grace alone nothing in my hand I bring simply to thy cross

I cling naked come to thee for dress helpless look to thee for grace foul I to the fountain fly wash me savior or I die that's faith alone those two themes of this morning and so we get to the wonderful verse 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 this salvation by grace alone through faith alone comes from God it starts in his love the son's mission which ends in his being lifted up on the cross starts in

God's love and his love is for the world and this is striking not because the world is so large I don't think we find hard to believe that God loves everyone but because the world is so bad John tells us not to love the world or anything in it but there's no inconsistency between God loving it and us being told not to love it as Carson puts it Christians are not to love the world with the selfish love of participation God loves the world with the selfless costly love of redemption we're not talking about some bloodless transaction but God's gift he doesn't just send he gives he gives his one and only this morning we see not only how we're to respond to Jesus but who Jesus is God's one and only son he's the one who was sent from heaven he's the one who referred to himself as the son of man which means both a real man and it's the one of whom Daniel spoke in chapter 7 of Daniel one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him that extraordinary little passage in the old testament in which you see someone who is both God and man and that of course is absolutely fulfilled in Jesus the one who is son of man son of God lifted up on the cross and to heaven so we see this morning both who

Jesus is and why he came as Jonathan said last week John's purpose in writing his gospel was that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah the son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name so we see that who Jesus is the Messiah and that by believing you may have life and our response is to believe but in the last few verses we don't have to believe John makes it clear that we can refuse the light to refuse the light is to choose darkness and ends in perishing to use verse 16 whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son there's a story of a man going to an art gallery where wonderful old masters were displayed paintings of great beauty and genius the man looked round and said to the attendant

[28 : 28] I don't think much of your old pictures and the attendant replied sir the pictures are no longer on trial but those who look at them are the challenge is to look at Jesus in heaven from eternity born at Bethlehem teaching doing signs lifted up on the cross risen lifted up to heaven still to come John even explains why people will not come for salvation verse 20 everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed but let's not miss out on the final verse of the passage but whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be plainly seen that what they have done has been done in the sight of

God literally those words are literally been done in God I looked up in the dictionary because it's a rather rare use of that of that preposition and the dictionary suggests it means done in communion with God come into the light by looking to Christ so that you may be born again then you can live a life in which what you can do is of ultimate value not of course to earn salvation but because it's done in communion with God in response to his love gift let's pray we come Lord Jesus we come in response to God's love maybe there's someone here for whom this is coming for the first time maybe today you want to come and you want to look to the cross to stop turning over new leaves and trying to do good works but to trust

Jesus who died who was lifted up for us and for our salvation maybe you've known been born again years ago but you come we come looking to Jesus lifted up thanking coming in thanks in great gratitude for the enormous gift of God thank you Lord Amen God come to God