

“Nic at Nite”

John 3:1-15

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Introduction:

****PPT**** According to the website for the United States Marshals Service, the Witness Security Program was first authorized back in 1970, and since its beginning, nearly 17,000 people have been relocated and given new identities as a result of the program. The site explains that witness protection has been a valuable tool and that the conviction rate currently stands at 89% as a result of the testimony that has been given so far. Witnesses and their families are usually given completely new identities, including the authentic documents. But as a condition, the witness must sever all ties with former friends and family and associates. Those who participate must give up all school and military records, even professional degrees, and marriage licenses, social security numbers—even family heirlooms that might be used for identification. And as the marshal’s office proudly points out on their website, not a single person who has followed the guidelines has ever been harmed while under the protection of the program. Someone has described witness protection as a social death with an attempt at rebirth.

With that in mind, I would like for us to look together at a sermon request from one of the men of this congregation—a request that was first made almost three years ago. One of our men has asked for a lesson on **what it means to be born again**. Perhaps some of us here this morning have wondered what it would be like to start over completely. I suppose it is even possible that someone here this morning is in the program! I don’t know, but regardless of what we think about the idea of starting over, we need to go back and give some serious thought to what it means to be born again.

Certainly over the past thirty years or so, the term has been used and abused. In fact, it has been twisted even to the point where many people have no idea what the term really means or where the term is first used in the Scriptures. Here in the United States, the term became popular in the mid to late 70’s (primarily due to the influence of Charles Colson) and hit a peak during the presidential campaign of that year when Jimmy Carter described himself as “born again”; interestingly, he used this term in the first Playboy magazine interview ever given by a candidate for President. Those who have claimed the description range from Johnny Cash to Mr. T and from President Bush to Alice Cooper. And so there are many who have used the term.

Many, though, may not understand that the term **“born again”** is first used in the Bible as Jesus has a conversation with a man named Nicodemus in **John 3**.

****PPT**** If you will, please look with me at **John 3**, because in **John 3**, we are

about to listen in on one of eleven personal conversations that Jesus had with individuals in the book of **John**. It takes place at night. So if you will, please imagine with me that Jesus has had a hard day of teaching and preaching. In fact, if the chronology lines up as I think it may, it appears that this is perhaps the evening of the same day that Jesus made a whip and forcibly removed the moneychangers from the temple. If it is not the same day, then it appears to be just a few days later at the most. ****PPT**** As we think about the idea of starting over and being born again, I'd like for us to look together at **John 3:1-15**...

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 have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered and said to 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? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into 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 be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."

As we think about what we have just read, and as we think about what it means to be born again, I'd like for us to start by looking together at who Nicodemus really was, I'd like for us to then move along to the meaning of what Jesus had to say (and how it fits into the rest of the New Testament), and then I'd like for us to close by considering the rest of the story.

I. But for now, we need to start by looking at Nicodemus—he is the focus of this account—and in the opening verses, we discover a problem that hits us right in the face, because ALTHOUGH HE IS A RELIGIOUS MAN, **PPT**** NICODEMUS IS STILL IN A LOST CONDITION.**

The first thing we find out about this man (in **verse 1**) is that he is one of the Pharisees. We know from history (and from the Bible) that the Jews were ruled by a council of seventy men, known as the Sanhedrin. Within this council, there were three basic divisions. There were the priests who took care of the worship in the

temple. There were the Sadducees who were made up of the powerful land owners and the wealthy—basically secular. And then there was a third group—the attorneys and those who specialized in the Law of Moses—they were known as the Pharisees and represented those who took responsibility for keeping the nation of Israel religiously pure. The word Pharisee literally refers to someone who is “separated.” And they were definitely different. There were only 6,000 Pharisees at any given time, and they were fanatics at keeping the Law of Moses. In fact, they made safeguards around the Law. And so not only was it a sin to work on the Sabbath, for example, but they defined what work was. They narrowed it down and made it very specific. According to the Pharisees, tying a knot was considered work...unless the knot could be tied with only one hand. And they dedicated their lives to teaching and defending the Law of God along with all of the safeguards. And so we find in **verse 1**, therefore, that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and that he was a **“ruler of the Jews.”** In other words, not only was he a Pharisee, but he was apparently on the Sanhedrin, a **“ruler”** of the Jewish people. As a **“ruler”** we can probably very safely assume that Nicodemus was a highly educated man. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee before he became a Christian, and Paul had certainly been educated at some of the best schools. Nicodemus and Paul were probably very similar to one another at one time. Not only was he educated, but in **verse 10**, Jesus refers to Nicodemus as **“the teacher of Israel.”** In other words, he was not one of many, but Nicodemus was **“the teacher.”** Nicodemus was at the top. Nicodemus was the “Education Director.” Nicodemus was the “Secretary of Education.”

Well, we find in **verse 2** that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Some people have tried to make a big deal out of this—saying that Nicodemus was afraid to be seen with the Lord, and yet we are not really told. Nevertheless, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, and he comes with an interesting observation. In **verse 2**, we find a rather bold and honest statement—**“Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”** If you are familiar with the Bible, then you know that this is rather rare for a Pharisee! Normally, the Pharisees were challenging Jesus. They were always trying to trick Him up and trap Him into saying something unpopular with the people. One time they asked Jesus if they had to pay taxes to Caesar, another time they asked him about marriage and divorce—their goal was to make Jesus look bad. But we find here that Nicodemus was different. He came to Jesus with what appears to be an honest observation. He admits, based on the evidence, that Jesus is from God. We are reminded here this morning that the purpose of miracles was primarily not for the benefit of those who were healed, but to convince people that Jesus was a messenger from God. Nicodemus got the message!

Nicodemus, therefore, is a pleasant surprise. Nicodemus appears to be honestly looking for the truth. He has even gone a little further—he is even at the point of belief—he believes in Jesus as being from God! And yet in spite of all of this, the Lord basically interrupts and tells Nicodemus that there is something else he needs to do. In spite of his credentials, in spite of his education, in spite of his adherence to the Law of Moses, in spite of serving as a respected ruler, in spite of being **“the teacher,”** and even in spite of believing in Jesus as being from God, Nicodemus is still in a lost condition. This is a message that people today need to hear—you can be

a good person, you can be a leader, you can be religious, you can be a believer—and yet you can still be in a lost condition. And so we see that in spite of all of his good qualities, Nicodemus was lost.

II. We know this, because in verse 3 Jesus answered a question that Nicodemus was not asking, as the Lord tells this ruler (this teacher, this moral man, this believer in God) that, "...UNLESS ONE IS BORN AGAIN HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD." **PPT******

And then in verse 5 Jesus says it again, "...***unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.***" And then He repeats it one more time in verse 7, "***You must be born again.***" Over, and over, and over! Why was Jesus talking in terms of a birth? Well, we know that for the Pharisees, everything was tied to their heritage, to their ancestors. They were proud to trace their history back to Abraham. And so Jesus had to say here, "***You must be born again.***" We must make a break with the past.

Today, we understand the importance of proving that we were born. In our family, we have just gone through the process of getting passports for Keola and the kids. We had to order birth certificates, and sometimes it is not very easy—for a reason. We had to order Keola's birth certificate from Washington State, where her dad was serving in the Air Force at the time. When I register people at the polls on election day, a birth certificate is obviously an important form of identification. And so even here in our society, we value knowing when and where a person was born. But here we find that Jesus was making a distinction between physical and spiritual birth and He was emphasizing the spiritual.

According to Jesus, the spiritual birth has two parts—in order to see the kingdom of God we must be born of water and the Spirit. These are two aspects of the same birth. Both of these are necessary in order to be born again.

As we know from other passages, the Spirit was responsible for revealing the word of God to the inspired writers of the New Testament. In John 6:63, Jesus said, "***It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.***" And so the words of Christ are communicated to us through the influence of the Holy Spirit in the written word of God.

When we read the word of God, the seed of God's word is planted, and it sprouts and grows in our hearts. As Peter puts it in 1 Peter 1:23, "***...for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.***" James says basically the same thing in James 1:18, where he says, "***In the exercise of His will He brought us forth [or caused us to be born] by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.***" The Spirit, then, is a critical part of being born again, because the Spirit is responsible for communicating the word of God through the gospel.

The water and the Spirit are combined in **Titus 3:5**, *"He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."* We notice here in **Titus** that Paul counts himself among those who have been saved in this way. We think back to Paul's conversion. He learned the word of God through a man named Ananias, and in response to hearing and understanding the word of God, Paul was immersed in water (according to **Acts 22:16**) so that his sins could be washed away. Later in his life, Paul would write in **Ephesians 5:26** that Christ gave Himself for the church, *"...so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word."* Paul, then, was born again—he heard the word of God through Ananias, and then he allowed himself to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of his sins. He was cleansed by, *"...the washing of water with the word."*

We can see another example on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2**. Peter preaches a gospel sermon, and starting in **Acts 2:37**, the Bible says, *"Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" In **verse 41**, the Bible goes on to say, *"So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls."* And then in the very last verse in **Acts 2**, the Bible says that they were, *"...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."* They heard the word of God (the seed was planted), and then they responded by being baptized, at which point God added them to the church. They were born of water and the Spirit.*

When we speak of being *"born again,"* therefore, we are talking about becoming a Christian. And so when someone refers to a "Born Again Christian," they are actually being redundant, because there is no such thing as a Christian who has not been *"born again."* The new birth is the process of hearing the word of God, accepting it, and acting on it through the act of baptism—putting our faith in the power of God.

In the closing verses, we find that Jesus refers to a rather strange account from the Old Testament—he basically looks into the future to the time when His own death and resurrection would make the new birth possible. In **verses 13-15**, Jesus speaks of being lifted up like the bronze serpent in the wilderness. He was referring back to a situation in **Numbers 21** where the people were whining and God sent poisonous snakes as punishment. The people finally admitted their sin and asked Moses for help, at which point God told Moses to make a bronze serpent, to mount it on a pole, and that anyone who looked to the serpent would be saved. Only those who heard the word of God through Moses and had enough faith to act on it would end up being saved. In a similar way, under the New Covenant, in order to see the kingdom of God, we must believe the word of God, and then we must have enough faith to do something about it through baptism. We must be born again.

III. Before we close our study this morning, I'd like to take just a few minutes to consider THE REST OF THE STORY. **PPT******

In John 3, we have no record of what happens next—we do not know what Nicodemus did with this information. However, the next time we read about Nicodemus is found in John 7. The Pharisees send out soldiers to bring Jesus in for questioning, but when the soldiers get there, they are amazed and report back to the Sanhedrin in John 7:46, "**Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.**" Well, of course, that made the Pharisees pretty upset, and so whoever was leading the prosecution says, "**No one of the rulers or the Pharisees has believed in Him, has he?**" And at that point, the Bible says (in John 7:50-51), "**Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, being one of them) said to them, 'Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?'**" Very interesting! Apparently, Nicodemus has progressed—he has gone from a private meeting at night to now defending Jesus before the others on the Sanhedrin.

The Bible is silent from there until we hear of him again in John 19:38-42. Right after the crucifixion, the Bible says...

³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. ⁴² Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Nicodemus, therefore, comes forward after the crucifixion and volunteers to prepare the Lord's body for burial. Here in our society, I think we have forgotten what it means to prepare a body for burial. I am sure it must have been a very personal experience. As the body of Christ was taken down off of the cross, these two men took it away. According to their custom, they would have washed the body. Can we imagine what an honor it would have been to wash the body of Christ? To carry that weight, to wash the blood that forgave our sins, to wash the Lord's hair that was matted from the crown of thorns, to wash His back, to wash His hands and His feet? What an honor that would have been!

And then we find in John 19:39 that Nicodemus brought along about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloe. In those days, with people generally being smaller than they are today, those spices might have weighed almost as much as the body itself. What an honor that would have been!

We are not told whether Nicodemus ever made the decision to be born again, and yet we know from the Scriptures that there appears to be a progression in his faith—he went from questioning, to defending the Lord publicly, to actually preparing the Lord’s body for burial. The amazing power of the word of God!

We are not told what happens to Nicodemus, but it seems that names are always mentioned in the Bible for a reason. We remember that the book of John was actually written a number of years after the fact. I would love to think that as John was writing years later that he was mentioning Nicodemus by name for a reason—that he was known by the first readers as a follower of the Lord.

Conclusion & Invitation:

The good news this morning is that we do not need to be a part of the Witness Protection Program in order to have a fresh start. We do not need to testify against a gangster to get a “do over” in this life. But the Bible teaches that we must be born again. It is not a physical birth, but it involves being born of water and the spirit. We hear the word of God, and then the word takes root to the point where we allow ourselves to be immersed in water so that our sins can be forgiven. The requirements for becoming a Christian are the same today as they were almost 2,000 years ago in **John 3**. If you are ready to obey the gospel, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org

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