

Sunday 25th January 2015 AM Born again – A necessity – John 3v1-21

Title: Born again – A necessity – John 3v1-21

Purpose: To learn lessons we can from Nicodemus' night lecture with Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

Back in the day of vinyl I had a precious single and on the back they would put a track of very little worth – and on one I had they put a song called “I’m walking backwards across the Irish Sea” – I recall it was by the Goons. Well this morning I want to start by doing some walking backwards through John’s gospel looking at a man called Nicodemus.

We see him at the end in John 19 and there he is a man of great DEVOTION providing burial spices for Jesus.

In John 7 we see him beginning to try and make up his mind about Jesus as he stands for the right for someone to be properly assessed before making a snap judgment. This is a point of DELIBERATION.

Well that lead us to where we are going to be looking, back to John 3.

We’ll tackle our portion here under three simple headings:

- The necessity
- There’s mystery
- The possibility

1. The Necessity

A non-typical encounter

Here we have something a little unusual in that 90% of the time Jesus is mingling and meeting with people who are the average run of the mill people. Nicodemus is really not in that bracket at all, he is one of the **ELITE** of Israel.

Q. Now why do I say that?

Well the passage itself gives us a couple of clues in Verse 1 where we read:

"Now there was man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council."

Only 6,000 Pharisees

Now in the time of Jesus there **were never more than 6,000 Pharisees** and they formed themselves into societies where they bound themselves to a strict obedience to all the scribal laws. Even the name Pharisee is thought to derive from a word meaning "separated".

So these people were **not on the same level as the average Jew**.

One of just 70 people

Now, not only was Nicodemus one of around just 6,000 - he was actually **one of just 70**, because he was a member of

the Jewish ruling council know as the **SANHEDRIN**.

Perhaps one out of one

So it is clear that:

- he is in a privileged class – one out of 6,000
- that he's in a ruling set – one out of just 70

However, **Verse 10** seems to put a strong seal his seniority as a Rabbi in his own right.

Where Jesus says to him **"You are Israel's teacher..."** (really the Greek text has the definite article – so really it should be **"You are THE teacher of Israel..."**).

Also, one more thing that helps to put a proper focus on this man Nicodemus, was the fact that he was quite wealthy, perhaps one you might designate an aristocrat.

Q. How do we know this?

Well in **John 19 Verse 39** we read "He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds."

This was very much in line with other gifts brought to Jesus, either at his birth by the Magi and pointing on to his death, or with the very expensive and expansive use of the ointment of pure nard that Mary of Bethany used to anoint him. So it is pretty clear that he must have been a man of some financial substance.

Q. What did it mean to be a Pharisee?

Now Q. What did it practically mean to be a Pharisee?

Well it meant that you were set apart to obey all of the scribal laws down to the letter, the very name itself means "one separated".

To the Jew, the Law of Moses, (Genesis through to Deuteronomy, the first five books of the OT), was the most sacred thing in the world. And because of this, **they believed that it contained everything a man needed to know for the living of a good life, if not explicitly then implicitly.**

The assumption was that if it was not there stated in so many words then it could be deduced. The Scribes took this to new heights around the time of Jesus

To them (the Scribes) the Law must house **a regulation to govern every possible incident, in every possible moment, for every possible man.**

So the Scribes of the Jews set out to extract and deduce an infinite number of rules and regulations to cover any and every situation imaginable. These used to be preserved as the Oral Law passed on verbally from one generation to another, but soon enough they became written down and thus we have them preserved today in a Jewish document called **the Mishnah** (this is the codified Jewish Law) and also in **the Talmud** (which provide additional explanatory notes).

The Sabbath Day – An Example

So let me give you a small flavour by dipping into the topic of the Sabbath Day - the Mishnah has a slim 24 chapters on this.

Now **one of the issues with the Sabbath was that of REST AND DOING NO WORK ON THAT DAY** (So you can see that in commandment #4 in the Ten Commandments).

So they began to enumerate practical situations in order to decide what did and what did not qualify as work.

They figured that to tie a knot on the Sabbath was work.

Q. But what qualified as a true knot?

Well a sailors knot or a camel drivers knot and also of untying them too. But a knot used to tie up a woman skirt, or bonnet or girdle, that was ok.

So if a man wanted to draw water on the Sabbath from his well, he could not tie a rope onto it, but he could tie it to the strings of a woman's girdle and let it down!!

So chasing down these things was life and death to a Pharisee. Jesus called it straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel.

Hopefully you get a flavour of the sort of legally-minded piety that Nicodemus floated around in.

Nicodemus comes anyway to Jesus at (night)

Well whatever we say about Nicodemus (his name means 'Victor of the People'), the fact is that he was concerned about his soul and he was interested enough not to stay at home.

Q. Why is it that he comes at night?

Well there are a couple of possibilities:

- FIRST, it might simply be that he did not wish to be seen publicly with Jesus. It may have been his means of self-preservation amongst a group of peers who would have very much kept their distance from a radical teacher like Jesus.
- SECOND, it might have been that the evening time was that occasion where a Rabbi will no longer be disturbed by the interruptions of pupils and therefore afforded a much better time to have "quality, uninterrupted time with Jesus one-on-one.
- A THIRD reason, may well come down to the fact that despite Nicodemus' high position, despite his seeming high achieving, he is still empty on the inside and he realises, for all his striving to make the grade, he is still deeply frustrated and unfulfilled.

A troubled soul

So my sense is that Nicodemus is really, deep down, a troubled soul, just like so many of us.

Here is a man who is, at many levels, *NOT LIKE US* AND also at the most important levels *JUST LIKE US*.
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A more basic question, but also important, is:

Q. Why did he come at all?

Verse 2 says "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Q. Is this just flattery to get a hearing and to put Jesus off guard?

No I don't really think so.

Nicodemus is saying, in effect: "Jesus I can see that you have something."

You have something that clearly I do not have, despite all my questing after God and after obedience to His divine Law.

Jesus' life, at a most practical level, exerted a real power of attraction. People watched on and they saw something distinctive and unique. Clearly that was not limited merely to his miracles, such as turning water into wine. It was also what he said and the way he said it that carried a uniqueness that could not be ignored.

We should never for a moment think that we are not supposed to have that certain "**GOSPEL 'X FACTOR'**" that makes us stand out, ***not*** like a sore thumb, ***but*** like a bright light in a rather dim world.

No beating around the bush

Now with Jesus we don't really get any beating around the bush, instead we simply have Jesus moving to where the real issue is AND, at the end of the day, I suppose that is what we want.

Imagine you went to the doctor and he says to you: "How can I help?" – and you say: "Well, I've been getting these splitting headaches occurring pretty well every other day and this has been happening more and more for the past two months and yesterday, the pain was so bad that I actually fainted in Tesco's!"

And imagine that the doctor then says to you, well that certainly is plenty of symptoms.

By the way: what do you think of the parking arrangements outside since they put the pay and display in? "oh yes, very annoying actually?"

Q. How was the waiting period this morning, did you find those health adverts we put on the monitors interesting? A lot of people have been encouraged to try and quit smoking since seeing them.

I imagine that you would soon, very soon in fact, get a bit off-hand and bring the doctor back to the issue in hand.

Thankfully, Jesus, who is the Master Physician and the No.# 1 Consultant on Spiritual Dysfunction – he does not wait around in fact he is a little bit like that character Dr Gregory House (played by Hugh Laurie in the medical drama simply called House) where, because he is so brilliant, he tends to simply go right to the heart of the problem without any of the usual formalities.

And this is what we find in Verse 3 where we read:

"In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'"

Born again

And immediately Jesus says, in effect, “Nicodemus – one thing you lack” – “Yes, Rabbi – what is it?” – “Well, you need to be **BORN AGAIN.**”

Now I imagine that you have heard people using that phrase outside of a church context. Perhaps you have been on the end of someone saying: “You’re not one of those born-again are you”?

It has become a term of derision BUT THE QUESTION IS: Q. What does it really mean? Q. What did Jesus actually mean by it?

Again OR from above

Now the word which the NIV translates as AGAIN (Gk. anōthen), can also mean “from above” – and so this is why a handful of translations have something similar to the NRSV which has:

(John 3 verse 3) “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being **BORN FROM ABOVE.**”

One commentator (William Barclay) adds one more possible meaning which is “from the beginning” or “completely radically”. And he says:

“It is not possible for us to get all these meanings into any English word; and yet all three of them are in the phrase born anew. To be born anew is to undergo such a radical change that it is like a new birth; it is to have something happen to the soul which can only be described as being born all over again; and the whole process is not a human achievement, because it comes from the grace and power of God.”

Q. Why does Jesus begin here with Nicodemus?

Now one thing that is worth noticing is that Jesus does not seem to have a “one size fits all” approach.

On more than one occasion people come to Jesus and essentially they want to know OR Jesus himself wants them to know – HOW THEY CAN GET INTO HEAVEN OR INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

So, given that: Q. Why does Jesus use the BORN AGAIN approach with Nicodemus?

Self-satisfaction

Remembering who Nicodemus was, in the general scheme of people:

- he was **successful**
- he was one who had **made it in his profession**
- he was part of the **elite**, the **crème-de-la-crème**
- he was **“THE teacher of Israel”**

So putting all this together, he may well have known a substantial amount of what you might term:

SELF-SATISFACTION – after all it would take quite a rare and humble type NOT to feel **pretty smug and good about yourself.**

And so this is the area that he is potentially pressing him on – after all, think about it – Q. What part did you, or

anyone else, play in their BIRTH? Well none of course, and Nicodemus has spent his whole life striving and earning his way and now Jesus says THIS STOPS HERE.

Human effort, moral effort – gains NO TRACTION WHATSOEVER when it comes to the Kingdom of God.

I think this definitely would have got Nicodemus' attention.

Takes it literally

Now straight off the bat, Nicodemus takes it rather literally and he is completely confused – and Nicodemus isn't exactly alone in this, many times the disciples of Jesus did exactly the same thing.

However Jesus goes on to EXPLAIN and to EXPAND:

Verse 5-8 “Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is 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. 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.”

Now notice the parallel expression at the start. Both **Verse 3** and **Verse 5** start with almost identical words and so we can see that being BORN AGAIN is the same as being BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT.

Water and the Spirit

So clearly our next step is to know what Jesus has in mind by that.

Here are the possibilities – and maybe you have already assumed one of them to be what Jesus means – the first three of the options have in common that they see two rather separate events in view - so:

- **Option 1** – the water means human birth (so it is a picture of the amniotic fluid in which a baby sits/floats) and the spirit is indicative of divine/spiritual birth by contrast
- **Option 2** – the water is perhaps John the Baptist's baptism
- **Option 3** – the water is perhaps Jesus's baptism
- **Option 4** – is that water and spirit are really part and parcel of one and the same birth

This is the way that **Don Carson** puts it:

“In short, ‘born of water and spirit’ signals a new begetting, a new birth that cleanses and renews...Apparently Nicodemus...if he was like some other Pharisees, he was too confident of the quality of his own obedience to think he needed much repentance, let alone to have his whole life cleansed and his heart transformed, to be born again.”

The Necessity

Now you may recall I headed this first of our 3 points: “The Necessity” (that is the Necessity of being Born Again – just in case you've already forgotten the central idea in this passage) and so I want to just point that out before we move quickly on.

And it is really not too hard to see this aspect.

Verses 3 and 5 both use the phrase “no one” and the word “unless” – so these are all pretty categoric types of language.

And then Verse 7 kind of drives it home when it says “You **MUST** be born again”.

So what this means, at a very simple level is that there are no other types of Christians. Jesus would say:

“If you’re *not* born again, you’re *not* a Christian and you should *not* try and claim the name.”

And this was a very hard lesson for the Pharisee who thought that he was a very long way already along the path to the Kingdom of God.

Ok – let’s move onto #2 (The Mystery):

2. The Mystery

This comes out in two ways:

- **FIRST** of all there in Verse 8 where Jesus tells us something that we all know (it is a TRUISM):

“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.”

Actually this is a very fitting picture for birth by the spirit of God because in both the OT and in the NT the Hebrew and Greek words for Spirit can also be translated as breath or wind.

And the meaning is that in just the same way that the wind **cannot be controlled OR totally predicted** so it is with those that come to be BORN AGAIN of God, of God’s Spirit.

John Chapter 1 and Verse 12-13 “ he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

So with being BORN AGAIN, there is a mysteriousness, just like with the wind, tied up with the Sovereign will of God HOWEVER, that said, there is an undeniable, an un mistakeable POWER to bring NEW BIRTH to pass.

- **SECOND**, at Verse 14, we are introduced to another ANALOGY, but this time one that is actually HISTORICAL and not METAPHORICAL:

(Verses 14-15) “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

If you know your OT history reasonably well, you will remember that this is recorded back in the events of the wilderness when the people are becoming restless and they start grumbling again and so God sends amongst them fiery snakes that bite them and the people start dying. So when they repent Moses prays to God and this is what God says to do: (Numbers 21 verses 8-9)

“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, he lived.”

Now on first inspection, this seems a bit of an odd story, but really it is a continuation of what we were seeing earlier. Q. What part did the sinful Israelites play in their healing? Well, no part. Just like when we are born to life we play no part, we are a fully passive player, we are an actor who has no lines, we don’t even have a cue as to when we are to arrive on the stage, we simply get pushed on to it.

Similarly all they could do for their new life, was to LOOK to the symbol that had been raised up upon a pole.

Understand that Jesus was once again thinking of his death – he did this at **The Wedding in Cana**, he does it **again during a secret one-on-one session** with one of THE most influential Jewish teachers.

His being lifted up is a reference to Jesus death on a cross.

So once again, there is the mysteriousness of being able to JUST LOOK at one upon a stake, upon a cross and be made whole and saved from certain death. Yet once again Jesus is giving his CALLING CARD as one that can draw the POISON of the STING of DEATH and give instead ETERNAL LIFE.

So **The Necessity (You must be born again), The Mystery (The wind and the pole)** and now **#3**

3. The Possibility

Q. How can all this be made possible?

Not automatic

Well, we should realise that **it isn’t automatic** that there would be a way through with God **OR** that Nicodemus himself would take it and experience NEW BIRTH (or REGENERATION as it is sometimes called).

However, as we look at these last verses from 16 through to 21 we are introduced to the POSSIBILITY – and it is explained in very short measure.

John 3 verse 16

John 3 verse 16 – has been described as “**Everybody’s Text**” – a verse above all other verses that people tend to have heard at some point:

“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.”

Now time doesn’t permit me to unpack or decompress this verse, but you can see that it is probably without equivalent anywhere else in all of Scripture as a statement of the GOOD NEWS (the Gospel) IN A NUTSHELL.

It speaks of the extent of God’s ACTIVE LOVE that He would not hold onto His one and only Son but would give him up

to die on the cross so that THROUGH OUR ACCEPTANCE of this once-for-all-time SACRIFICE that we would NOT DIE but have ETERNAL LIFE.

Possible BUT NOT probable

So we see, without any shadow of a doubt that SALVATION FROM CONDEMNATION is entirely possible.

HOWEVER, the following verse go on to show us that:

“despite being entirely POSSIBLE – this salvation is *not* entirely PROBABLE.”

Verse 19 makes this sad aspect apparent:

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”

So really, in these end verses we meet TWO and *not* just ONE thing – that is ENTIRELY POSSIBLE:

- it is POSSIBLE that we can and may be ETERNALLY SAVED
- also – it is POSSIBLE that we can and may be ETERNALLY CONDEMNED

Man not appreciating Masterpieces

The story is told of a man who was being taken around an exhibition of some of the world’s finest masterpieces, ones that were beyond beauty and whose price tag was almost beyond reckoning.

At the end of the tour the man said to the attendant – “Well, to be frank, I just don’t think much of the old paintings.”

The attendant quietly said back to him: “Sir, I would remind you that these pictures are no longer on trial, BUT that that look at them are.”

The Masterpiece of Calvary

At Calvary, 2 millennia ago, God painted his MASTERPIECE.

His brush stroke of giving up His Son, was truly a MASTER STROKE, a work of TRUE GENIUS:

- fortunately YOU do not need to be a TRUE GENIUS and it is FULLY POSSIBLE for you to recognise that
- equally though YOU MAY be blinded enough to say: “I don’t think much of the old paintings!” and for that MASTER STROKE of SALVATION to become your JUDGE and to bring your CONDEMNATION.

CONCLUSION

So being ‘Born Again’ – Q. Did Nicodemus get born again? Well thankfully this story is not left as a cliffhanger with no resolution, as we follow the story in John we see that he was.

Q. So what of you? It is possible through the work of Jesus on that pole of crucifixion (just like the snake) you just need to look to him and not try and bring anything of your accomplishments. Trust, be saved, be born again. AMEN