

John 3:1-15

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Date: 29 September 2024

Preacher: Zac Skilling

[0:00] Good morning, Foothills, that's my other church. Christ Family, my other church, you know what I mean.! Good morning, Christ Family Church, all you strangers. Actually, some of you are strangers. I don't recognize some of you.

If you don't know me, my name is Zach Skilling, and I used to be the assistant to the pastor, as I was affectionately called by many. I think it was affectionate. At CFC about a year ago. And, yeah, Nathan asked me to come back and guest preach. And I'm excited to be here. It feels both strange and familiar all at the same time.

I'm going to break the rule and move this. But, yeah, I'm glad to be here. Our text today is John chapter 3. John chapter 3, verses 1 through 15.

And I'll just tell you now, because I know how I think. I'm somewhat, I don't know, I guess cynical maybe is the word. I'm not sure. But I'm always trying to figure out people's motives, why they're doing what they're doing.

[1:03] So, in case you're wondering why this text, well, there's no motive other than just, when you're a guest preacher, what's better to preach on than Christ and the gospel? And this seemed as good a text as any.

So, no secret agenda here or anything like that. So, if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to John chapter 3, verses 1 through 15.

And we will read together in full in just a moment. John chapter 3, verses 1 through 15. I will give you the outline ahead of time, just so you can think about this as we read through.

And our text today, I'm going to divide in four parts. And I'll repeat these as we go, so if you don't get this now, it's okay. But four parts. Heading number one, we're going to see the problematic posture of Nicodemus.

The problematic posture of Nicodemus. Number two, we're going to see the nature of rebirth, or you might call it regeneration or being born from above, all kind of talking about the same thing.

[2:10] But secondly, we'll see the nature of rebirth. Number three, we'll see Nicodemus' fundamental problem. And number four, we'll see the solution.

So, with that in mind, please read with me John chapter 3, verses 1 through 15. The Apostle John writes, Now there was a man from the Pharisees, his name Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one is able to do these signs which you do unless God is with him.

Jesus answered and said to him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above, he is not able to see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, How is a man, being old, able to be born? He is not able to enter into his mother's womb a second time and be born. And Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born by water and spirit, he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God.

[3:28] What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I say to you, it is necessary for you to be born from above. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sounds, but you do not know from where it came or where it goes.

So it is with everyone born of the spirit. Nicodemus answered and he said to him, How can these things happen? And Jesus answered and said to him, You are the teacher of Israel, and these things you do not know.

Truly, truly, I say to you, that which we know we have spoken of, that which we have seen we testify, and our testimony you did not receive. If I speak to you of earthly things, and you do not believe, how, if I speak to you of heavenly things, will you believe?

And no one has ascended into heaven, but the one who has come down, the Son of Man. And just as Moses exalted the serpent in the wilderness, so also, or excuse me, lifted up, so also it is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up, in order that all who believe in Him may have eternal life.

This is the word of the Lord. Heading number one, the problematic posture of Nicodemus. So we're looking at verses one through two. We're going to see this unpacked.

[4:50] And just before we get straight to the problem, I want to try and read this as charitably as possible, as if we are defending Nicodemus. If you know the story, you know he's not really worth defending in this particular instance.

But I want to do this nonetheless, just to get an idea of who we're talking about. Okay, so, Nicodemus, we learn, verse one, he is a man from the Pharisees.

Now, as Christians, we've read the Gospels, so we know those are the bad guys. So we're right away alert. But again, think about this in a first century context. They didn't necessarily think of Pharisees as the bad guys.

They were the super-duper holy people, so to speak, right? He's probably a good guy is kind of the impression. And because he's a Pharisee, he probably knew his Old Testament really well, probably paid zealous and critical attention to keeping the Torah, along with the traditions of the Pharisees and so forth.

Now, we also see that he was a ruler of the Jews in verse one. So, this is a man of respect, a man of means, a man of influence.

[6:00] And of course, in our cynical age, you might hear all that and think he's got to be bad. But again, not necessarily the case. He's prominent. And so, in some ways, he's being set up as potentially a great figure, a significant figure.

And then in verse two, we see him pay respect to Jesus. And again, this is kind of shocking because John, it's the last of our four Gospels written.

And if you read the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, that's notoriously the most critical, maybe negative, Gospel about the Pharisees. I mean, Jesus does not hold up in saying what he thinks about them and their hypocrisy, their sinfulness, and so forth.

And so, you get to John, and here Nicodemus says, Rabbi. Rabbi, right? He's referring to him as a teacher. Rabbi is a term of great respect in this culture.

And so, again, this is kind of shocking when you think about a Pharisee doing this. And he seems sincere in it, right? He's not trying to trap Jesus. He's come to genuinely talk to him as a rabbi.

[7:14] And Nicodemus goes on. He says, We know you have come from God. So, you know, again, just think of other stories where the Pharisees accused Jesus of doing things by Satan's power.

Well, Nicodemus is not one of those Pharisees. He's saying, I know you come from God. I know you to be a just, good person, a teacher, a rabbi. And then he adds, We know God is with you. So, he doubles down. So, he's honoring Christ to an extent that should be recognized. And he even acknowledges the uniqueness of Jesus' abilities.

He says, We know these signs you do, you can only do if God is with you. So, he's not questioning those things. He's showing respect. So, on a first glance of reading, Nicodemus seems like one of the, quote-unquote, good guys, so to speak, in the Gospel of John.

You may even think he is a Christian or a baby Christian. I've heard people say that about this text. But, when we look closer, I think this is so evidently not the case.

[8:23] Okay, so again, he is a Pharisee. And so, this tips us off, as I already alluded. Pharisees tend to be extreme enemies of Jesus in the Gospels.

And, you know, there are exceptions. Some people think Joseph of Arimathea was a Pharisee. And if you recall, he did not want Jesus to be crucified. And he came and sought Jesus' body so that he could bury him in his own family tomb.

Of course, the Apostle Paul was a Pharisee who eventually turned away from that and came to Christ. And so, there's exceptions, but by and large, in the New Testament, they're viewed pretty negatively.

So, right away, our alert should be going off. Okay, this is a Pharisee. Further, Nicodemus is a ruler of the Jews in verse 1.

Now, in John's Gospel, he often retells stories that the other three Gospels will tell. But what John does, one of the things he does that's a little different, is you might have a story where in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it's specifically the Pharisees who come to Jesus because they sought to trap him or to kill him or something like that, oftentimes, in John's Gospel, instead of saying the Pharisees, he'll simply say the Jews.

[9:40] The Jews came. The Jews came. And lots of people speculate about why that is. And we don't have time to get into all of that. But I simply mention that to point out that when John says a ruler of the Jews, it's maybe not as positive as you might think if you're trying to be as charitable as possible.

because it's the Jews after all, in John's Gospel and the other Gospels, along with the Romans, that reject Christ, that crucify Christ.

So, John is really showing us that in a double sense this man is identifying with those who reject Christ. He's a Pharisee, he's a ruler of the Jews, right, and doesn't introduce him as a follower of Christ, but as a ruler of the Jews.

So, this is more of a negative connotation in John's Gospel. And literarily, not literally, but literarily, as in literature, John is highly symbolic and creative in the way that he writes.

And so, here he's saying by presenting Nicodemus as this ruler of the Jews that Nicodemus in a way is personifying all of Israel in this story.

[10:53] So, this is a true story, it's about an interaction that happened with Jesus and Nicodemus, but in another sense Nicodemus is representing all of Israel that rejected Christ.

So, in a sense, this is a conversation between Yahweh and Israel much like you read in the prophets, right, why have you gone the way of the wicked?

That kind of thing. And the other thing, too, to add to that is this language of we. So, if you know this story well, you know Nicodemus, he comes by night.

We'll talk about that in a second. But he's clearly alone and it's just Nicodemus and Jesus speaking. But in verse 2, Nicodemus says, we know. So, who's the we?

Right? Well, some have said it's the Pharisees because he's a Pharisee. Some have said it's the Jews in large, right, like all of Israel. Either way, though, I think it covers both because if you say Pharisees, they're the leaders of Israel in many ways.

[11:54] If you say all the Jews, well, that certainly includes the Pharisees. So, again, Nicodemus is kind of representing Israel that rejected the stone, Israel that rejected Christ.

And that is all just background to who Nicodemus is. John, in one verse, masterfully, quickly catches us up to the political, religious tensions and dynamics going on between Nicodemus and Jesus before they start this conversation.

And then verse 2, he adds, this man, Nicodemus, came to Jesus by night. So, again, if you've ever read John, you know he's highly symbolic, highly metaphorical in the way he writes.

And one of his favorite go-to's is this light-darkness metaphor or symbolism. For instance, John 8, 12, John writes, again, Jesus spoke to them saying, I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life. So, there's a clear contrast, two ways of living, one in darkness, one in light. John also wrote 1 John, and in 1 John, chapter 1, verses 5 through 7, John himself says this, he says, this is the message we have heard from Jesus and proclaimed to you that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

[13:19] If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, his son, cleanses us from all sins.

So, again, these are common metaphors for John. There's a hundred more verses like that in the literature written by John. So, the wise reader of the Gospel of John is going to know that in this story, in chapter 3, when Nicodemus shows up by night, John's not merely telling us when this conversation happened.

He's telling us where Nicodemus is. Nicodemus is in darkness, that he is not in the light, that he's not in Christ.

And if that's not clear enough, let's look at what Nicodemus says to Jesus more carefully in verse 2. So, getting more at the problematic posture of Nicodemus. So, he says, Rabbi, that sounds good and well.

We like that. We call Jesus teacher, and rightly so. And more than that, we would say Jesus is the teacher. There's no teacher greater, and that's a good thing.

[14:29] He certainly is that. But it would be wrong to think of Jesus as merely a teacher, just another teacher like me, or like Nathan, or like MacArthur, or whoever else you might think of.

That he's just another guy, he's just another dude teaching. And it's that latter sense that Nicodemus seems to think of Jesus as, just a teacher.

And notice, he refers to Jesus as teacher, but never does he say, Lord, King, God, Savior, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, or any of these other titles that would have been good and well and appropriate to describe Jesus as.

He just thinks of him as a teacher. Now, for now, we're going to keep coming back to Nicodemus, but simply understand that it is disrespectful for Nicodemus to approach Jesus and minimize who he actually is, however well-mannered and well-intended he may have been.

Right? It is disrespectful to walk up to the King of Kings and just say, Rabbi, and that's all you are. You have failed.

[15:47] Right? You have not recognized who's standing before you. King of Kings. And he goes on and says, we know you come from God.

Right? Again, that sounds nice. It sounds flattering. Right? I'd love to hear that. That would be probably, you know, it would be complimentary for somebody like me. But for Jesus, again, this is disrespectful to say to Jesus.

You come from God. In other words, you're not God. You just come from him. The other thing, too, is notice Nicodemus is consciously distancing himself from Jesus.

He says, we know this, implying there's a you and your people, there's a me and my people. We know this about you and your kind. Right? And again, I don't think he's trying to be rude, but he is careful to draw that distinction, which, in another way, is disrespectful to the King of Kings.

Right? And so, he consciously distances himself. He doesn't recognize that Jesus is God. And again, as readers of John's gospel, we have the benefit of knowing this.

[17:00] John chapter 1, verses 1 through 3, so the beginning of John's prolong. John writes, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, referring to Jesus.

He says, he was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. And when you jump down to John chapter 1, verse 14, John continues, and he says, And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

So, we have the benefit of knowing this. By the time you get God incarnate, and clearly, when we see Nicodemus say, God must be with you, you must have come from God, we immediately recognize that Nicodemus does not believe Jesus is God incarnate.

So, again, Jesus, however great in Nicodemus' mind, is just a great other guy. He's just another guy. That's all he is to Nicodemus. And the thought seemingly hasn't even crossed his mind that this is God.

So, John has introduced us to Nicodemus, more friendly and open Pharisee than maybe what we're accustomed to in the Gospels, but still very much in darkness and alienated from the light and life of the world, Jesus.

[18:30] And so, Jesus, in verse three and on, he's going to take the opportunity to lovingly talk about the nature of rebirth, or if you like systematic theology, this is what theologians often call regeneration.

So, he's going to talk about rebirth, being born from above. And this leads to our second heading, the nature of rebirth, the nature of rebirth.

John writes in verses three through eight, and Jesus answers Nicodemus and says to him, truly, truly, I say to you, Nicodemus said to him, how can a man being old be born again?

Is he not able to enter into his mother's womb a second time and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born by water and spirit, he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God.

what's born of the flesh is flesh and what's born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I say to you, it is necessary for you to be born from above.

[19:47] The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know from where it comes or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the spirit. Now in these five verses, we see at least three aspects concerning the nature of rebirth or regeneration.

Three aspects you could tease out more, but there are three for our purposes that I want to highlight. A physical earthly rebirth, and we'll unpack that and these other two more in a moment. But secondly, we see that rebirth includes a miraculously transformed life. It dramatically changes the person. And third, we see that rebirth is a work of the spirit, not man.

So firstly, rebirth is a spiritual, heavenly work, not a physical rebirth. So when you look at verse three, admittedly, at first glance, Jesus' response seems somewhat out of left field.

Okay, Nicodemus has technically not asked Jesus anything. So what prompts Jesus to respond as he does? Why start talking about rebirth? What does this have to do with Nicodemus and everything going on?

[21:05] Well, clearly, as I've already said, Nicodemus still does not really know what to do with Jesus. Who is this guy? Nicodemus is still kind of wondering.

He's confused. He's inquiring, maybe even. And so in verse two, Nicodemus is essentially saying, hey, we know this much about you. That's kind of the effect. He's saying, we know you must come from God.

Like, here's what we've figured out so far on our own, even though they're wrong, partially. But he's saying, here's what we've kind of figured out, but what aren't you telling us? Like, that's kind of the vibe, so to speak, with Nicodemus in this moment.

He's trying to figure out, who is this guy? And when we look closer, we see Jesus, per usual, he hits the nail on the head in a concise manner.

So in Jesus' response about rebirth, which again, at first seems maybe out of left field or unrelated, in talking about it, Jesus is actually what to do with Jesus. Or better, why Nicodemus does not know or understand who Jesus is.

[22:07] It's related to regeneration, to rebirth. This is why Nicodemus does not know who Jesus is. You see, Jesus, as the king, and as God incarnate, which again, John 1 has made very clear for the reader of John, as the king, as God incarnate, Jesus represents the kingdom of God.

It is not wrong, in a sense, to say that Jesus is the kingdom of God because he's the king. In ancient thought, the king was often the representative of the kingdom, so anywhere the king went, you could say the kingdom went as well, even though the villager, like me, might not go with him, and I'm part of the kingdom.

So there's a sense, there's a degree to which Jesus is the kingdom of God. Just a quick example of that, you think of Luke 17, verses 20 through 21, it's another encounter with some Pharisees, Luke writes, being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus answered them, the kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, look, here it is, or there, for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you, and I understand him to be referring to himself, I, the kingdom of God, am standing in your midst, I'm right here, but you are blind and cannot see it.

And so when you go back to John 3, verse 3, the reason Nicodemus cannot see Christ as he truly is, is because he's not been born from above, he's not regenerate, he is not a Christian.

And so what does born from above mean? What are we talking about? I keep throwing this word rebirth around. Well, clearly, it's not referring to a second physical birth, as even Nicodemus understands in verse 4, right?

[24:02] Verse 4, he says, how can a man being old be born again? Is he able to enter into his mother's womb a second time? Really not.

The way it's constructed in Greek, and I won't bore you with the details, is the question expects the answer no. Like, Nicodemus knows that's not possible. What are you talking about, Jesus? That's his question, right?

So he doesn't get it. And he's thinking about it in an earthly sense. So there's somewhat of a wordplay going on here. So in verse 3, when Jesus says, you must be born from above, the Greek term is another.

And this word can mean either again or above. And so Nicodemus seems to understand Jesus to be talking about being born again, which is ironic. But really what Jesus is talking about is being born from above.

And so Nicodemus, and you'll see this throughout this entire pericope, this entire story, Nicodemus is interpreting everything Jesus says in a very earthly, literal, human way, when Jesus is constantly speaking of heavenly, spiritual realities that have invaded earth.

[25:14] It's not to say they're separate, but we are talking about two different things here between Nicodemus and Jesus. So thus to be born from above is at least saying that we require heaven to act in some way on our behalf, for God himself to intervene and make things right, that we are waiting for God to do something to save his people.

We must be born from above. That is a work of God. God. And secondly, we see that the nature of rebirth includes a miraculously transformed life.

So in verse 5, you likely notice Jesus switched. So in verse 3, he talked about being born from above. In verse 5, he talks about being born by water and spirit.

Now some have said Jesus is talking about baptism in this passage, right? We think of water and this kind of thing. I think that's wrong because one, baptism to enter the church did not exist yet. And so as D.A. Carson points out, that would have been a meaningless thing for Jesus to say to Nicodemus when there's no church to be baptized into. Like of course Nicodemus doesn't know what he's talking about. And so I don't think he's talking about church membership and baptism and all that.

[26:39] Others have said perhaps it's the baptism of John the Baptist. Now if you recall that baptism, which is different, is merely a baptism to express repentance.

There was nothing powerful within John's baptism, however, to transform a life. And so I don't think this is talking about John the Baptist's baptism.

I don't think he's talking about baptism at all. I think this has nothing to do with baptism. I say that as a Baptist who cares about baptism. It's best to see in Jesus' words rather an allusion to the Old Testament, especially since Nicodemus and Jesus themselves share that text.

They both view it as the Word of God. So I think that's probably a good place to go and look to see what might these words evoke for a first century Jew who knows his Old Testament well as a Pharisee.

And again, throughout the Old Testament you will find language of the Spirit being poured out. Probably most famously, Joel 2, verse 28.

[27:48] This is the prophecy about the day of Pentecost that's fulfilled in Acts 2. And there, Joel writes, the Spirit will be poured out. So that very verb, you think of water, water being poured out, but it's the Spirit being poured out.

And so oftentimes water and Spirit are connected in some symbolic, metaphorical way in the Old Testament. But specifically, I think John probably has Ezekiel 36 in mind.

Many would say this. In Ezekiel 36, God is foretelling Israel of things to come, realities to come. And specifically, he's giving them a word of hope to tell them that one day God will change the hearts of his chosen, his elect, in a way that he hadn't previously, in a way that's special, in a way that's unique.

And of course, we don't have time to teach that, but essentially he's talking about the new covenant era, the era that we are in right now. He's saying, when that day comes, I will transform their hearts. And let's read it real quick.

Ezekiel 36, verses 25 through 27, God says, so notice this water and spirit language, he says, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you, and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit, the Holy Spirit, within you and cause you, I will cause you, God, to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

[29:28] And so I think that is what Jesus is referencing. He's talking about this transformed life that comes by this cleansing water, by this act of the spirit indwelling us.

Some have said this cannot be. They'll argue, well, if that's the case, Pentecost hasn't happened yet when Jesus talked to Nicodemus, so why would Jesus be talking about it?

But again, D.A. Carson, super helpful, he said, quote, the charge is ill conceived. Jesus is not presented as demanding that Nicodemus experience the new birth in that moment or in the instant. Rather, he is forcefully articulating what must be experienced if one is to enter the kingdom of God. So Jesus is simply telling him, this is the condition in the new covenant era.

This is what's about to unfold. This is how one enters the kingdom of God, being born again. And so he's letting Nicodemus know that, that that's coming and he needs to be born again.

[30:32] And this will lead to this transformed life. This is why not everyone who claims Lord, Lord, and as you think of the Sermon on the Mount, will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Because claiming the work of God in their life, and the proof that God has worked in their life, is that transformed life, a life that is bearing fruit, a life that is growing in holiness.

And this is why Jesus says in Matthew 7, 16, you will recognize them, true believers, you will recognize them by their fruits. There will be fruit.

And this does not mean we live sinless lives, right? We are not morally perfect by no means. After all, John himself writes in 1 John 1, 8-9, he says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. In other words, of course you have sin, of course you sin. We deceive ourselves if we say we have no sin and the truth is not in us. But then he says, if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

[31:42] And so he's not talking about moral perfection, but he is talking about a radically transformed life. And so let me just invite you now, you who profess Christ, to consider your life.

Right? Can you point to a transformed life? Not proudly, but humbly. Can you point out how God has changed you? And do you remember when you lived in darkness and understand how different it is to live in the light now?

Or does life really just seem the same? Right? Are you growing in holiness? What fruit are you bearing? How have you gotten closer to God?

And I pray these things are true of all of us. And for those of you who may be visiting today, who do not profess faith in Christ, I just genuinely want to ask, aren't you tired of the same old, same old? When I was in darkness, that is to say, when I was an unbeliever, I remember many hours of just kind of this inbred loop of introspective pain and suffering, just wondering over and over again, why am I the way that I am?

[33:06] Why do I do the things that I know I shouldn't be doing? Why do I mess up so many times? Why do I get angry? Why do I hate some people? Why am I this and that and so on and so forth?

If you're a visitor and that resonates, aren't you tired of that? Are you not desiring to be made new, to be made whole, to see all your sins and brokenness turned into something meaningful and something beautiful?

And Christ bids you, come all you who are weary, for I am gentle and lowly in heart. Third, we see that rebirth is a work of the spirit, not man.

Verse 6 tells us that there are two kinds of people. There are those born of the flesh and there are those born of the spirit. Now, while flesh in the New Testament often connotes primarily the idea of our sin nature or maybe even original sin, that is not the main emphasis in Jesus' usage of that term in this particular passage.

That's not to say he's denying those things or contradicting those things, it's just to say he's using the word a little differently. So I know you all are going through Romans right now or maybe finished recently, I don't recall.

[34:30] So all that stuff you learned about the flesh in Romans from Paul, that's good and true and worthy of thinking about, that's not exactly what Jesus is talking about, so don't just transport all that into John 3.

It's there, it's lurking in the background, but rather what Jesus is doing here is he's emphasizing that there are those who have only experienced this natural earthly birth, the birth we've all had with our mothers, that we've all been born of human flesh, that we all descend from Adam, this kind of thing, and that those who remain in that birth, remain sons of Adam, will perish, whereas there are those who've been born again and born by the Spirit from above, and have been given the right to become children of God.

So in other words, Jesus' emphasis is not so much on sin nature and all those things that Paul talks about, rather his emphasis is on our need for a heavenly birth, this work of the Spirit.

Only God can do it. And just think about the imagery of birth, why that's a good metaphor, right?

Just ask, did you tell your parents they ought to conceive you because you'd be great?

Obviously not. You didn't exist, right? Were you a human agent with responsibility that brought about your own birth? Obviously not. And so it is with those born of the Spirit.

[35:58] We don't seek God, we don't influence God to save us, unless you want to count our sin that made salvation necessary, which would be a backwards way of saying that.

But we don't do anything in this. This is God's story. He's the Savior, not me or you. And so rather God, who is lavish in grace, chooses to send His Spirit to save His elect.

And thus we get to verse 7. Jesus says, do not marvel. So when you read the Gospels, Jesus is known to drop some truth bombs, some jaw-dropping comments, things that are shocking to people.

But here it's as if He's saying, I know you're shocked by this, but you shouldn't be. This is no strange thing. This is nothing new. This should not surprise any of you.

This was not some mystery hidden and waiting for Ephesians or something. This was in Ezekiel 36. This was everywhere in the Old Testament. They anticipated this transformed life, this life that is indwelt by God's very own Spirit.

[37:15] So He goes on, do not marvel that I say to you it is necessary for you all to be born from above. I don't know what translation you're using. Sometimes it just says for you to be born, and you get the idea that he's just talking to Nicodemus, but the Greek pronoun there is plural, so he's actually saying you all, or you's guys, or however you want to say it, right?

He's saying you all, you all need to be born from above. Well, who's He talking about? It's just the two of them. Well, again, remember Nicodemus says we know this, we know that, look how smart we are.

And Jesus says, yeah, you and all of them, whether it's the Jews He's representing or the Pharisees, it's up for debate, I don't think it really matters. All of you people, people you represent, must be born from above.

And in verse 8, Jesus gives a powerful analogy to the work of the Spirit in bringing about this new birth. Jesus, describing the work of the Spirit, says, the wind blows where it wishes.

You hear its sounds, but you do not know from where it came or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. So the Spirit gives life to whom He will.

[38:30] We do not control the wind. How much more true is that of the Spirit? We do not even possess the knowledge of who the Spirit will give birth to. We just know that they are people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, as Revelation 7-9 says.

But whether it's Joe or Jim or Johnny or whoever, we do not know. Yet, if it is Joe and or Jim or Johnny or whoever, we'll hear wind, so to speak.

We'll see trees bend, grass bend. There will be evidence that the Spirit is at work in Jim, Joe, and Johnny. Jim, Joe, and Johnny will talk differently.

All those guys will talk differently. They'll be different. They'll use their tongues to talk about the glory of God, love for God, love for neighbor. And not only will they talk about it, but more importantly, they'll actually do it.

They'll actually love God and love neighbor. And we'll see that. Though they'll do it imperfectly, it will be different. We'll see fruit. They won't be earthly anymore.

[39:41] The rebirth that every human needs to enter the kingdom of God is entirely a work of God. There's no amount of good you and I can do to earn salvation.

There is no magical prayer to pray to be saved. You cannot even desire to be saved left to yourselves. As John writes in John 3 verse 19, so just further along after our text, he says, people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

In other words, they hated Jesus because they loved their wickedness. Right? How would somebody who loves wickedness ever seek the Holy One?

It doesn't make sense. If that's not clear enough, Paul says Romans 3 11, maybe you'll recall this from your series, he says, no one seeks God.

Period. No one seeks God. But praise the Lord that he came from heaven to save his people.

[40:47] This Jesus who John introduced as full of grace and truth. So why wouldn't Nicodemus embrace Christ?

Why would he not turn to Jesus the Savior when this has been made so abundantly clear over and over again in the life of Christ? This takes us to our third heading, Nicodemus' fundamental problem.

His fundamental problem. Look at verses 9 through 12 with me again. Nicodemus answered and said to him, How can these things happen?

And Jesus answered and said to him, You are the teacher of Israel and these things you do not know. Truly, truly, I say to you, that which we know we have spoken of.

That which we have seen, we testify. And our testimony you did not receive. You all did not receive. If I speak to you of earthly things and you do not believe, how, if I speak to you of heavenly things, will you all believe?

[41:59] So you get the sense in verse 9 that Nicodemus is frustrated. Nicodemus specifically is questioning, how can one be born again? How can this happen?

How can this thing be true that you are describing? Now it's not a question of theology. He's not nerding out and going, how does that work? What's the process like? No, he's in disbelief.

How can that be? Right? How could he be president? It's that kind of question. How can that be? So recall that Nicodemus is a Pharisee.

And scholars have long pointed out that Nicodemus surely spent much of his life as the teacher of Israel telling people how to be saved, how to be made right with God.

And so we can infer from things we read in the rest of the Gospels what he might have said. Keep Torah, love God, love neighbor, things that are good, but not things that can save you.

[42:57] And then of course there's all the traditions they wrapped around it and all these other things. But in the prior verses, in verses 3 through 8, Jesus completely demolished those wrong ideas.

They're buried behind the woodshed. They're gone, dead, meaningless. And so Nicodemus, as I said, he's not asking a sincere question. He knows the answer.

He knows the process, so to speak, because Jesus had already talked about it in verses 3 through 8. So Nicodemus is expressing his unbelief. He does not want to believe that man must be born from above by the Spirit.

And you can imagine why. I mean, the suffering he'd have to go through to give up his title as teacher, to acknowledge that everything he's taught is wrong, the social standing he might lose as a Pharisee, as a ruler.

So there's those aspects that I'm helpless in and of myself. And there's nothing a man hates more than feeling like he needs somebody's help.

[44:02] Right? We love self-sufficiency even though we are painfully, laughably not self-sufficient. And in verse 10, Jesus essentially rebukes Nicodemus.

He says, you, there's a cut here, he's mocking him, you are the teacher of Israel, and these things you do not know? In other words, how can you teach the Word of God if you don't understand this most basic truth, this most fundamental teaching of Scripture for how one is made right with God? Time and time again, from the Garden to the New Jerusalem, God, one way or another, is telling his people, this is how you are saved, and being saved leads to a transformed life, and this thing, these things, Nicodemus, man, despite man's best efforts.

And there's some Johannine irony here, right? John's being a little bit ironic here, he does that a lot. I actually got into a group text the other day with Alex and Ian Kohler and Thomas Fisher, and I was just saying, you know, has it ever occurred to you, John's probably like the funny guy in the group? You know, when you read the Gospel of John, there's a lot of funny irony where he's mocking people or showing something to be dumb or silly or just outrageous. Well, this is one of them, right?

[45:29] You are the teacher. The irony is, remember, Nicodemus came to Jesus saying, Rabbi, and Nicodemus, well-known, reputable, the teacher of Israel, not just a teacher, but Nicodemus is the teacher of Israel.

So you can imagine he probably came to Jesus maybe as equals, maybe even thinking he was above Jesus because after all, he's the teacher. And here, Jesus just outclasses him, checkmates him, you're a teacher?

Really? And so there's some irony here. And Jesus is pointing out to Nicodemus, we are not equal. You are not even a teacher and you lack the basic credentials to claim such a role.

And so, beloved, I can say to you with confidence, because of this passage and others like it, that you should never sit under a preacher or a teacher who tells you what you can do in and of yourself in order to be saved.

That idea, whatever name it goes by of Roman Catholicism or some kind of liberal theology and so forth, I don't care the name, but that is a man-centered religion and man-centered salvation, and that idea bleeds and permeates and pops its head in so many ugly ways in so many places.

[46:53] But the true church teaches we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone. And as we know, even that faith is a gift from God, according to Paul in Ephesians 2, 8.

So in verse 11, Jesus affirms the distinctions Nicodemus made earlier. So we have some further kind of irony here, a battle of wits, so to speak.

And Jesus says in verse 11, we have this and we have that. So remember Nicodemus came and he made the distinction. Jesus is acknowledging that distinction. He's saying, yeah, you're not one of us.

You're not born again. You're not a Christian. He says, we have seen this, we have spoken of it, we have witnessed this, we have testified, and you did not accept that.

And so Jesus in this verse, verse 11, he's speaking of a particular knowledge, and a particular thing that he and his disciples have witnessed. What is he describing?

[47:59] And again, you go back to John's prologue in John 1, so verses 1 through 3, which I already read a moment ago, makes it clear, Jesus is God, he was with God, all things created through him, by him.

But he picks up, we'll pick up in verse 4 and hear the rest of what John has to say in his prologue. So John writes of Jesus, he says, in him was life, and the life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John, talking about John the Baptist, he came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.

John was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He, Jesus, was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

[49:15] Now, you could do a whole study just comparing that passage with this Nicodemus passage. There are countless parallels, but the thing to note with our time and for our purposes is that the testimony in John's gospel, the testimony is this, that Jesus is God incarnate who has come to save the world.

And in John 3, this is the testimony Jesus refers to. He's saying, we've told you, I'm God, I'm here to save everyone, and you have not believed me. You have not come to me as I truly am.

Though I've given you signs and wonders which you yourself acknowledge, but you have not believed. And this is Nicodemus' fundamental problem.

He cannot see nor enter the kingdom, nor has he been born again, nor can he understand spiritual things, because he has failed to recognize whom he is speaking with, Yahweh, in the flesh.

And so verse 12, Jesus makes a lesser to greater argument. He essentially says, how do you expect to understand heavenly things, the things you want to know about? If you can't understand these things, these earthly things, if you can't understand God in the flesh, how will you understand God in heaven in the spirit?

[50:40] Right? You're not ready for that. You're not born again. You don't have eyes to see. You are blind. And so he says, I'm right here, Nicodemus, look at me.

Because all of Scripture testifies about Jesus. So, Christian, if you have lost confidence in the faith, or if you find yourself growing murky or lacking understanding, perhaps cold to God and his word, I think from this passage you can glean that you ought to focus on Christ again, go back to square one, so to speak, and work from there.

All of Scripture is about him, all of Scripture is meant to point you to him, and so look for him in the Scriptures. And visitor, if like Nicodemus, you are inquiring, you want to understand the faith, maybe you want to have faith, then don't continue in unbelief about Jesus Christ as Nicodemus does.

today is the day to profess faith in Christ and begin to see with eyes, new eyes and a new heart. We now see that Nicodemus' fundamental problem is that he has not embraced the testimony concerning Jesus Christ, that Jesus is the light of the world, that Jesus is life, that Jesus is God incarnate.

And if that is Nicodemus' problem, and by extension everyone in the world, as John says in John 1, then what is the solution to such a problem?

[52:18] Well, let's look at verses 13 through 15. Jesus continues, he says, no one has ascended into heaven but the one who's come down, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so also it is necessary that the Son of Man can be lifted up so that all who believe in his clearly speaking of himself and giving his credentials, so to speak.

In effect, he says, no one else has ascended to heaven. No one can claim to have the heavenly knowledge but me, the Son of Man. So again, he's further questioning Nicodemus' credentials. Further, Jesus is pointing out that Nicodemus ought to listen to him because of who he is and where he has come from. By referring to himself as the Son of Man, he's alluding to Daniel 7, which prophesies of the Son of Man coming who will rule for eternity and have dominion and dynasty and so forth.

So Jesus is identifying himself as that king. I'm the eternal king. I'm the king of kings. That's what Son of Man is referring to in this context. And then verse 14, Jesus references a story from Numbers 21, 6-9.

You may recall it. In this story, God punishes Israel in the wilderness. He sends serpents into their camp and they start biting everybody and they're dying. But then Moses intercedes.

[53:45] And God tells Moses what to do so that Israel can be spared. And he gives a promise. So Numbers 21, verse 8, God had just told Moses to take a serpent, put it on a pike, lift it up.

And then he says in Numbers 21, verse 8, And it shall come about that everyone who is bitten, so those who are dead, right, dying, everyone who's bitten and looks at it, referring to the serpent, everyone who looks at it will live.

So back in John 3, 14, Jesus is evoking this promise, this story. It's typologically saying this applies to me and then some because I'm talking about eternal life.

And so, Jesus is foreshadowing his crucifixion. It's great to hear babies crying at my other church. It's mostly old, so you might hear like a knee crack, but that's about it.

But, I forgot this is recorded. Shoot. But back to John 3, verse 14, he's evoking this context.

[54:57] He's saying, if you would only look to me, the serpent was just a picture of me to come. I, the son of man, who must be lifted up. If you would just look to me, you will live.

All those who look to Christ will live. That's the solution. And to look at him not merely as a teacher or merely with some level of respect. Just the other day, I've been following all this stuff with Richard Dawkins, if you know.

He's about atheists. He hates Christianity, but all of a sudden he likes it because the world's going crazy, even though it's the world he invented. And now he's saying, oh, I'm a cultural Christian.

I like what Jesus said. I just don't think he existed. Well, that's not enough. That's not looking to Christ. That's actually worse than Nicodemus.

And there are many today who do that. So don't look to him in that way, but look to him as the son of man, as king of kings, as lord of lords, believing what he says and has shown and demonstrated about himself, and you will live.

[56:02] And he says in verse 14, it's necessary that I'm lifted up. It must be so. This has to be. Why is it necessary? Well, for Jesus to die for us, sin requires a blood payment, death, and all that it entails.

The wages of sin is death. So Jesus must die on our behalf if he is to be able to be merciful and gracious while upholding his justice and goodness.

So friends, if you haven't gotten it by now, Jesus Christ is our Savior. Not yourselves, not your parents, not your pastor, certainly not your guest preacher, but Jesus Christ alone.

And then verse 15, this is why Jesus came. He says, in order that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Now, don't hear in that verse a passive threat of doom and judgment for those who do not believe, though that's absolutely true and important, and if you're not in Christ, I encourage you to think about that.

[57:15] But what Jesus is doing here is now, I think, a warm invitation. He is offering to Nicodemus. He's saying to him as if he was Israel of old.

Again, the leader of the Jews. Believe in me. Look to me as Israel of old. Look to Moses' serpent, and you will live. Now, in closing, I know I'm going a little over, so I'll cut some of this, but I just want to offer a few reflections in light of this.

I hope no one is thinking, I also understand why you may be, I hope no one is thinking that what's the point of this? Aren't we Christians?

Is this not church? You might be thinking, I already believe in Jesus. What does this have to do with me? Well, I hope you already know, right? As Christians, we never outgrow the gospel.

We are daily in need of gospel hope. As a Christian, I still find myself wanting to turn to self-sufficiency, and I look in all the dumbest places.

[58:25] I have an MD, we're a tie to church now, right? I don't actually think that way, but that's about how dumb all of that thinking is. And we're so prone to it, we're so ensnared by this self-sufficiency, this ability to drive ourselves, to be better, to be greater, and we are poor, blind beggars apart from Christ.

And so we are in need of this reminder of our daily need. Every hour, Lord, I need thee. That our faith and our justification come from Christ, not our works or anything else that are standing before God is found in looking to Christ and his life, his death, and resurrections.

And friends, if nothing else from this text, consider how everything is meant to point us to Christ, to make us look to Christ, not just for salvation, that's where it starts, but even for our very purpose and existence as human beings, for our sanctification, for our drive, why we do what we do, why we are what we are, all these things must be in submission to the Lordship and to the glory of Christ.

as Paul says in Colossians 1.16, for by Christ all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him.

And another thought for us to consider in light of John 3 is this, who are the Nicodemuses in my life? Now the way I worded that might evoke cringy youth group memories for you, it kind of does for me, and I totally understand the whole you're not David thing, I'm there, I agree.

[60:14] But what I mean is this, right, we live in the south, we live in Georgia, this is the hotbed of false, fake Christianity, there are Nicodemuses everywhere, people who respect Christ, who look up to Christ, I'm trying to do better, but they are not actually in Christ.

You work with them, you might be related to them, I guarantee you work with them and you're related to them, I mean, they're just everywhere. And sadly and ironically, while they profess Christ, which is maybe a step above Nicodemus, I guess, they still are not actually looking to Christ. They have not believed in him, but are still clinging to some other thing, maybe it's their morality, maybe it's their priest, their culture, their membership with the Republican Party or some other nonsense thing.

And I don't say that as a joke, that's a very real thing. And as disciples of Christ, we ought to confront those people in love with the true gospel as Jesus did with Nicodemus.

He didn't care that Nicodemus was the teacher of Israel. He identified the fundamental problem and addressed it head-on, full of grace and truth, inviting him into a life of peace and joy and love with the Father.

[61:42] So let us go and do likewise to the glory of Christ. And let's pray.