

'You Must Be Born Again.'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

I think this might be the ultimate torture – to expect a preacher to do justice to the third chapter of John's gospel with such a narrow time constraint. There are so many sermons which could emerge from this passage – and of course, the most quoted and loved Bible verse of all time is right here: John 3:16, but that, in itself is intriguing to me. It's a great verse, but it's contained within one of the most confronting narratives in the whole Bible and perhaps that's why John 3:16 is usually quoted outside its context – because it's not confronting at all by itself. But this exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus gives us the truth behind John 3:16 and it's foundational to our entire understanding of what makes us a disciple, what it means to be 'a Christian.'

Verse 16 may well be the most loved and quoted verse in the Bible, but verse 3 is far more important and until it's clearly understood, John 3:16 is just romantic nonsense without a theological context. Verse 3 contains Jesus' first response to Nicodemus where He said, "...truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Nicodemus is a Pharisee – the cream of the crop – the religious elite – they're the ones who claim to really know how to live a life pleasing to God. But he's speaking to the One who would eventually call the Pharisees 'a brood of vipers' and 'white-washed tombs' which look good on the outside but are full of death-inducing religion! Nicodemus knew everything about religion - lifeless form without substance - but he knew nothing about true spiritual life. So Jesus put it as plainly as he could.

He effectively said:

"Nick, you guys haven't got a clue. For generations you have been teaching and modelling religion to my Father's children and in so doing you have just given them rules and laws and requirements to meet to please their God. I'm here to tell you that all of that is a waste of time and a stench in the nostrils of the God you supposedly serve. I'm telling you as clearly as I can, unless you are born again into a whole new life, you will never embrace the wonder, the glory, the freedom and the life within the Kingdom of God."

If you understand anything about the Pharisees – their dedication, their tireless effort to do what was right in God's eyes and make sure others did too - you would know that this comment from Jesus was like a punch in the face to Nicodemus. It would have been very unsettling to him and if we really understand what Jesus meant, John chapter 3 should be confronting and unsettling to us. Why is that? I'm so glad you asked. :-)

There are three main reasons why this passage will destroy any religious comfort zone we may find ourselves in today and so let me give you three unsettling truths which this passage forces us to confront, if we are truly wanting to embrace God's Word to us today.

1. We are born spiritually dead

Jesus' teaching about the new birth confronts us with our hopeless spiritual and moral and condition apart from God's regenerating grace. Before this new birth happens to us, we are *spiritually* dead. We are *morally* selfish and rebellious. And we are *legally* guilty before God's law and under His wrath. When Jesus says we must be born again He's telling us that our present condition, from birth, is hopelessly unresponsive, corrupt, and guilty. Now most human beings I know don't like to hear that about themselves, but it's essential they do or they will not ever see their need for Christ. We are born spiritually dead and therefore ...

2. We are born powerless to effect new birth

This is something that is done to us, not something we do. John 1:13 emphasizes this. It refers to the children of God as those: *“who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”* Peter stresses the same thing: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again”* (1 Peter 1:3).

We do not cause this new birth. Only God can make it happen. Any good thing that we do is a result of the new birth, not a cause of the new birth. This means that being born again is taken out of our hands. It is not in our control. And so it confronts us with our helplessness and our absolute dependence on Someone outside ourselves. We can't make ourselves to be born again.

3. God is absolutely Free

Therefore, the third reason Jesus' teaching about the new birth is unsettling, is because it confronts us with the absolute freedom of God. Apart from God, we can do nothing. We are spiritually dead and bereft of power. We are by nature children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). Our rebellion is so deep that we cannot even detect or desire the glory of Christ in the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4).

If we are going to be born again, it will depend decisively and ultimately on God. His decision to make us alive will not be a response to what we as spiritual corpses do, but what we do will be a response to his making us alive.

So what does it mean to be born again? Let me attempt to describe this supernatural mystery in the simplest possible terms. Nicodemus had all the religion anyone could handle. He had all the knowledge of God any good Pharisee would have, but he didn't have a relationship with God.

I have an enormous amount of knowledge of Billy Graham. I have read most of his books and many of his sermons. I have followed his life closely from his birth almost 99 years ago on a farm in Charlotte, North Carolina, and through hundreds of crusades, including the ones in Australia. There's not a lot I don't know about Billy Graham. But I have never met him. He has no idea that I even exist. We don't have a relationship at all. I feel like I know him, he is very familiar, but I don't.

Nicodemus had spent thousands of hours learning about God. He was a member of a revered and respected religious elite. He had everything ... except the one thing he really needed: spiritual life – and that only comes in and through a personal, intimate relationship with God. That's why Jesus told him that he, and all of us, must be born again. In this new birth, a life comes into being that was not there before. A new relationship is established. This is not a religious activity or a discipline or a decision we make intellectually. We are actually born into a whole new reality and relationship with God.

Let me ask you something, how would you go about becoming German? If you wanted to live in Germany and do all things German and be German like those around you, how would you do it? You couldn't. I am sure, like us, they have a citizenship process and they might make you a German 'citizen' – but you will never be a German. The only way you could be German is to be born into that reality, that race, that kingdom. You would need to be born again in Germany to be German. Anything else you attempt to do other than that, would be a meaningless façade.

In the same way we can act like a Christian; hang around other Christians; attend services all our life; serve the Church and the world in Jesus' name until we breath our last breath; we can fulfill all the varied religious requirements of certain groups and yet unless we are born into Christ's kingdom we are not Christ's disciple. You and I and every human being born since Adam and Eve, were born into the kingdom of this world, this fallen, rebellious, sinful, dysfunctional world. We were born broken.

Religion has provided us with millions of ways to reach out to God through our external behaviour and futile attempts to please Him, then Jesus came and told us to stop this nonsense, because we will never encounter God's kingdom until we embrace Christ's death and resurrection. We must be born again.

So in this new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith. Or, to say it another way, the Spirit unites us with Christ where there is cleansing for our sins, and He replaces our hard, unresponsive heart with a soft heart that treasures Jesus above all things; a heart that is being transformed by the presence of the Spirit into a heart that delights in the will of God.

How can you know if you are born again? You know you are born again when your entire mindset and heart-direction and deepest desires are resident in the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God rather than in this temporal, earthly kingdom which will one day pass away. You know you are born again when your understanding of God and your personal relationship with God has been continually growing over time and you are not in the same place you were a year or a decade ago. You will know you are born again because your spirit will be regenerated so the Holy Spirit of God can speak to you and lead you into the presence of God and reveal spiritual truths to you which you had no way of understanding before.

What Jesus said to Nicodemus that night, He continues to say to us all and to all the world, *"Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God."* Unless God supernaturally brings you out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light, you will only know about Him and His kingdom - you will not truly know Him. Satan himself knows all about God's kingdom, more than any of us, in fact, but he is certainly not born again!

Now the reason why they call this the gospel, the 'good news' is because we don't have to make this happen. God has done everything for us! Being born again is not dependent upon the quality of our confession, the depth of our repentance or the wording of our prayers. **All God asks of us is that we believe and receive!**