

Introducing Jesus

“Jesus & A Confused Minister”
John 3:1-21

Let's get into John, Chapter 3 this morning. As you are turning to this chapter, I want to tell you what I have come to appreciate so much about the Gospel of John. John, the aged and seasoned follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, as he reflected back upon the life of Christ twenty to thirty years later, wrote a lot about how Jesus interacted with individual people.

In the Gospel of John we see over and over again conversations Jesus had with a whole array of different types of people. John teaches us a lot by the Jesus interacted with those people. This is called discourse and that's what we are looking at in this series called, "Introducing Jesus." The series is about how Jesus interacted with several different people.

It's really uplifting to look through the opening chapters of John. At the very beginning passage, John's introduction or his theological prologue and what he wanted to get across to all of his readers was that Jesus was God in a human body. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The Son of God created everything that has been made. John sets up two categories in the opening verses of this great book. The two categories are: things made, things not made. Jesus was there with the Father and the Spirit in the not made category. Everything else was in the made category. How do you like these props that we have up here this morning? What's that? Saturn! Who made that? Jesus, Son of God made the big Saturn and He used our brother Jim to make that little Saturn. What about that over there? What's that planet? Earth! There is the depiction of earth. The Son of God made that, too. The Son of God put Himself into a human body. He added humanity to His deity. He walked in His humanity upon the earth. He interacted with people upon the planet earth.

We have the Gospel of John and the other Gospels as well that kept a record of what He did, what He said, and here we find Him interacting at a personal level, one on one, with people that He had created. It's awesome! That's what John wants us to understand. Read John, Chapter 1, that's where John emphasized that this was God. Now we see God interacting with different people.

This morning we are going to enter into the story of a conversation that Jesus had with a very, very religious man by the name of Nicodemus. I think as we get into this story we are going to be reminded of the very sad fact that this world is filled with religious people who do not know God. The world is filled with people who practice rituals; filled with people who say prayers; filled with people who read sacred texts including the Bible, but

they don't know God. That is a biblical truth. Somebody might say, "Jeff, who do you think you are to say something like that. Maybe you are the confused minister." But I don't think that's the case because I'm following the authoritative Word of Jesus where it takes us.

We will see that as Jesus interacted with Nicodemus He was interacting with a man who needed to be born of the Spirit. Nicodemus needed to be made knew and come into a true, living, genuine relationship with God so that He could be a part of God's Kingdom. Nicodemus was a very religious man. This passage tells us three things about Nicodemus. We find these three things in John, Chapter 3.

First, he was a Pharisee meaning that he was among the elite of Israel as far the commitment to the law was concerned, memorization of Scripture; study of Scripture; practicing the feasts; practicing all of the different Sabbaths and tithes. He was a Pharisee.

Secondly, he was a ruler of the Jews. He was a part of the Sanhedrin so, not only was he a Pharisee, but he was one of the seventy most developed. This man had descended so high within Judaism that he was one of the rulers of Israel – kind of like a member of the senate or the supreme court combined into one as the Sanhedrin were.

The third thing John tells us is that Nicodemus was the teacher of Israel. He was the teacher of teachers. He was among the elite of the elite. This was a man who was recognized as one of the key primary teachers in the whole nation of Israel. Yet Jesus interacted with this man as somebody who needed to come into the Kingdom of God; as somebody who was outside the Kingdom of God; as somebody who needed to enter in through the God ordained way of entering in.

I was reading through this passage and thought about how some of you have told me about visiting other churches where the pastor entered the pulpit in all of his sanctimonious appearance. They did their token Scripture reading but then talked about whatever they wanted to talk about and it had no connection to the Scripture they just read. You sat there and listened and then gave me feedback that it didn't seem like they were in tune with the Word of God. They didn't talk about Jesus. Where was the praise in their hearts for the King?

There are liberal denominations that call themselves churches and there are lots of people in those churches who very well may not know God. Now bringing it a little bit closer to home, it is very much a reality that evangelical churches have people within them who are attending their services and do not know the Lord. Where is the ability to recognize Jesus as Savior? Where is the hunger for the Word? Where is the desire to worship? Where are the signs of life? One of the realities that the Bible points us to in this world is that there are a lot of religious people who do not know the Lord. How would Jesus interact with such people?

We see how Jesus interacted with the very religious man, Nicodemus. I think this passage comes to us in three waves – there are three parts of this. We are going to see that Nicodemus first came with a humble inquiry and Jesus responded. Then Nicodemus talked again with a biting reaction to what Jesus had just said. Then Nicodemus responded a third time with an exasperated question. Each time Nicodemus asked a question, Jesus answered with an expansion of the doctrine of regeneration. The dead sinner needs to be brought into new life if they are going to come into the Kingdom of God. They need to be born again. They need to have the life of God beating inside of them. Jesus is going to talk about these things.

So as we get into this passage of Scripture, first we see a humble inquiry. Let me note this as well. In each of the three responses Jesus said “Truly, truly...” Jesus is responding with solemnity in this occasion. We are living in a world filled with lies, and Jesus wanted us to know that what he was about to say was the truth and so He spoke solemnly to you and me.

Let us read John, Chapter 3, verse 1:

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 are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. ³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Jesus took Nicodemus straight to the doctrine of regeneration; being recreated; being made new with new life from above. That language of being born again could also be translated being born from above. Heaven needs to be ignited into the soul of sinful man so that they have new life and can come into the eternal Kingdom of God. The teaching of the Bible is this, every person who is born into this world, though they are born naturally and they are alive physically, they are dead spiritually. They are born into a condition of spiritual death.

Paul makes this clear in his writings as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit. We can read about it in Ephesians 2 as well as other places in the Bible. We were dead in our transgressions and our sins in which we used to walk when we followed the prince of the power of the air. Paul was another religious man like Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, too. He was a rising star in Judaism. But Paul said we were dead, even religious people are dead, in our transgression and sin.

So Nicodemus came talking about miracles and signs and Jesus said, yes, you’ve seen some signs and miracles but those are just indicators of what is to cover this earth when I come in my power and glory. You are seeing just the slightest little breakthroughs now, authenticating Jesus as the Messiah, but if you want to enter into the fullness of the Kingdom of Jesus when the glorious Lord of all is ruling visibly upon this earth, you must be born again. You must be made alive spiritually, and you must be living in Christ.

I remember that I was at an event years and years ago. I must have been about twenty. A friend of mine was having a Saturday or Sunday afternoon barbeque at his house. There were about fifteen people scattered around hanging out in the living room. I don't know how they got on the topic of religion, but they did. The people began talking about the Christian faith. One young man blurted out something along these lines, "You know, I'm OK with Christians. Christians are good. Christians are cool. I'm a Christian. It's just those born agains that just drive me nuts. I can't stand them."

The implication coming from this young man's observation was that there were two kinds of Christians. First, there are the normal Christians. Then there are the born again Christians. The normal Christians are the ones that are easy going, forbearing, gentle. They don't say too much. They don't bug you too much. But then there are those born agains. You know that nasty lot of people who are zealous, and might tell you that you are a sinner. They might tell you you're going to go to hell. They might tell you that things like sexual immorality, drunkenness and homosexuality are outside of God's will. They are transgressions, and because of these things the wrath of God is coming. There are Christians who will actually talk about sin and say that it is wrong and that judgment is coming for sin. You have to be made new. Oh, these born agains, I don't like them.

I was young and didn't know much but I knew enough to know that guy had it all confused. He was wrong. He was setting up a false dichotomy. Normal Christians – born again Christians. If you are not a born again Christian, you're not a Christian at all. That's how it works. Anybody who is going to live in the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ must be born again – born of the Spirit; born anew; living in Christ. That is what Jesus was trying to get across to Nicodemus.

We have a very religious man. I would venture to say that Nicodemus had more of the Old Testament memorized than all 220 or so of us here in this church. But Jesus tells him, unless somebody has a conversion experience where they are born again, they are not coming into the Kingdom of God. Just because you were born an American does not mean you are a Christian. You need to be born again. Just because you were born in a Christian family does not mean that you are a Christian. You need to be born again. Just because you have been going to church for decades does not necessarily mean you are a Christian. If you have not been born again, you need to be born again. This is Jesus' words to religious people who very well may be outside of His Kingdom.

Nicodemus had a biting reaction. Verse 4:

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

What? Yikes! Do I have to enter back into my mother's womb and be born a second time? My mother would hate that. The first experience of labor was difficult enough not to have to go through it again. That response has all kinds of emotional implications.

Nicodemus asked Jesus if a man had to enter back twice into his mother's womb and be born the second time. A lot of people, as they listen to Nicodemus' reaction say, how stupid can you get? Is this man dense? Jesus was talking spiritually and Nicodemus was taking it naturally. What was wrong with him? I don't think that Nicodemus was as stupid as some people think he was. Nicodemus was the teacher of Israel. He was like the research professor of divinity in a local seminary. This was a man who had his position because he was wise and he probably had some discernment, too. I think that Nicodemus was able to spot a metaphor when he heard one – being born a second time.

There are some people who have tendencies toward sarcasm. Does anybody here know someone who has that biting tendency? Somebody told me that they have a shirt that says, "Sarcasm is my native language." Some people who have that tendency toward sarcasm can relate with Nicodemus. He's hearing something that he hasn't heard before. I truly think that Nicodemus came with respect as I read the opening account of how he approached Jesus. He called him, Rabbi. He wasn't fully sold yet; he wasn't convinced either. We have the equivalent of a U.S. Senator going and asking some questions to a thirty year old preacher from the Ozarks of Arkansas. Jesus was from the north country of Galilee where it smelled like fish and people spoke with a dialect.

So Nicodemus came to Jesus and asked about the signs and wonders, if this was the coming of the Kingdom, and Jesus said if you want to enter into the fullness of the Kingdom you have to be born again. Nicodemus was mystified and said, "What are you talking about? What are you trying to say? I have to enter back into my mother?" That's just the tone that I detect as I studied this about Nicodemus. So we observed his biting response.

But Jesus continued on and held His ground. It says this in Verse 5:

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, [Jesus was not rattled in the least even with this man with all of his greatness of appearance] unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter 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 marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

So Jesus said in this passage that being born again is like being born of water and the Spirit. The question is how do we interpret and understand this. I've read through a lot of different writings and people say different things. Some people, including the cult that is antagonizing the local city colleges – the L.A. Church of Christ – indicates that this means water baptism. Matt Slick dealt with this issue very well. The recordings are available to us on our church website. Water baptism is not what this meant. What Jesus said here preceded the entire issue of Christian baptism.

Other people will say that it means being born of the Word of God. They get this from the Ephesians passage that says to wash your wife in the water of the Word. That's a fair interpretation. It's an interesting way of looking at this. Some people say Jesus held Nicodemus accountable for knowing this later on; it's probably speaking of washing of

the new covenant era of the Christian faith that was predicted in Ezekiel, Chapter 3 when the Lord said, “I will sprinkle clean water on you.” By that He was speaking about putting His Spirit within people. That’s another fair interpretation.

But I’ll tell you what; I just keep going back to the interpretation that says that Jesus was talking about natural birth and spiritual birth. That just makes sense to me. Born of water refers to natural birth. The amniotic fluid flows out when a child is born. I’ve been there for the delivery of three boys. I understand these things now. Born of water, they would have been aware of these things, too. Being born of water speaks of natural birth; being born of the Spirit speaks of spiritual birth. I think there is parallelism here. I think that Jesus explained Verse 5 in Verse 6. Look again, Verse 5:

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. [Now here is the explanation] ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

We are born into this world physically alive but spiritually dead. By the act of God’s wonderful grace we need to be made alive in Jesus. We put our faith in Him and that corresponds to being made alive in Jesus. As Jesus explains as we get further into this passage.

So Jesus used this picture. We need to be born twice. We need to have a spiritual rebirth to enter into the Kingdom. Now Jesus is going to use a second metaphor to explain what this looks like across the landscape of the people. So Jesus said this going into Verse 8 as He continues to clarify. In Verse 8 He says:

⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. I love that Jesus compared the Spirit to the rushing of the wind. The Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity. It is not an “it”, it is a “He” with personality and divinity and power. We don’t refer to the Spirit as “it” but as ‘He.’ But here He is pictured as the rushing of the wind. In the Greek “pneuma” could be translated wind or spirit so this was a really good picture that Jesus was painting for us. Jesus described this experience among the landscape of the people as the rushing of the wind. I just love that. I have a love hate relationship with the wind. I hate the wind when I’m going surfing, because, unless the wind is offshore which only about 5% of the time here in Southern California, the waves are going to be blown to pieces with whitecaps everywhere. It’s not fun. I don’t like wind then, but isn’t there something wonderful about a nice blustery, cool windy day when you feel the wind blowing in your hair? The other day we were at the Los Alamitos Costco where they have an outdoor pavilion where they sell hot dogs and pizza and chicken wraps. The pavilion is shady and kind of works like a wind tunnel. We were there and this cool wind was just rushing through. I was standing there and it was blowing my hair but I couldn’t see where it was coming from but it was coming. I got the sense of the rushing of the wind.

This is the imagery that Jesus brought. You can't predict or control where it's coming from or where it's going next. But we can see the effects. We see the leaves rustling; we see the tumbleweeds dancing; we feel the wind blowing and see its effect, so it is with the entire experience of regeneration. Among the people of God we see people coming alive in the Lord. We see its affect on people where there was no evident hunger for the living, nourishing truth of God's Word. Then, suddenly, we see that these people are now interested in Scripture. They are able to talk about it, and they are delighting in it. We have people who were not having that heart-felt praising of Jesus escaping from their lips and then we notice these people praising the Lord. They have finally understood all that Jesus has done for them, and they desired to praise Him. The Spirit was working on them. We see the affects.

Jesus said that this is how it is with regeneration. We begin to see the affects of the life of God coming up in people. Jesus said that this is just like the wind. There is an element of the teaching of the sovereignty of God in this. The wind blows wherever it pleases according to God's divine plan of salvation that involves election, predestination and all of those things. So we have the Spirit blowing where He pleases bringing people to new life in Christ.

I have spoken to people about their testimonies. We all should be doing that – talking about new life in Christ. So often I've heard people say, "I can't explain what happened to me. Suddenly life just started coming." I have heard many of you say that. That's the kind of imagery that Jesus is giving here – the wind blows wherever it pleases. You don't know where it comes from, and you don't know where it's going next but you see it when it happens. That's His description of new life in the Kingdom of God.

I also like in this section how Jesus narrowed it down to Nicodemus and those that Nicodemus represented in Verse 7. Prior to Verse 7 Jesus is speaking in general terms; one must be born again. Then in Verse 7:

⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Speaking to a man who had religion coming out of his ears, more literally, coming out of his hat. He had phylacteries with Scripture and bulbs hanging down. Nicodemus was uber religious, and Jesus spoke to him as one outside of the Kingdom who needed to be birthed into the Kingdom.

We've seen Nicodemus' reaction and now we have the exasperated question from Nicodemus. Verse 9:

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

First of all, I'm the research professor of divinity in the entire nation of Israel, why haven't I detected this yet? Perhaps there was a tone like that. Or maybe there was just a tone of "how does this work?" This was just an exasperated question. "How can these

things be?” And Jesus responded in a threefold way; first, with blunt amazement that the teacher of Israel didn’t get it. Secondly, Jesus provided His credentials for being the One who could define these things to the research professor of divinity for the nation of Israel. And then I think as we get into Verse 17 and beyond, from the human side of things, Jesus is going to articulate how these things come to pass. How these things are on the visible side of things.

So in Verse 10, Jesus answered him:

¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? [Nicodemus was able to be blunt, wasn’t he? Now Jesus showed that He could be pretty straight forward Himself.]¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

There might have been a sense that Nicodemus was pretty impressed with his credentials, pedigree and his background as he approached Jesus. He might have been a little condescending to the Son of God in the midst of this conversation. Then Jesus said, “I know a thing or two as well. I’m the One who comes from heaven, and if you can’t understand how God interacts with the human soul here on earth, how can I tell you about the interactions within the Triune God whose enthroned in heaven. How can I tell you about heavenly things, if you can’t understand these things?” So Jesus said that there were deeper things.

Did you notice that in the second two waves of this conversation, Nicodemus used the word “how?” It’s in Verse 4 and 9. In Verse 4 Nicodemus asked how a man could be born when he is old. Then in Verse 9 he asked how can these things be. Now Jesus, after stressing the spiritual side of these things with the Holy Spirit producing life, He began speaking about the human side of things; how we can help people who are wrestling with the issue of regeneration. So Jesus said this as we continue on into Verse 14:

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

So Nicodemus asked, “How, how, how, how,” and Jesus responded, “Believe, believe, believe, believe. Faith! You want to talk about regeneration on the human side of things; it’s connected to our faith in Jesus.” Jesus said all of these things to Nicodemus who was very confused about what the new birth was and how it happened. These are the type of

things you say to a person who is not born again. Believe in the Son of God. You paint a compelling picture for them of the Son of God lifted up on the cross because they are dead in their sins and they need that sin forgiven and they need new life in Him. You paint a picture of Jesus on the cross and in that whole interaction; the Spirit produces life through His preached Word. People have faith and then regeneration occurs.

In this passage Jesus is presenting for Nicodemus a compelling picture of the Son of Man being lifted up. He took him back to Old Testament literature to that time back in Israel's history in Numbers 20 or 21 where the Israelites kept complaining and rebelling. Their complaining got so intense that God sent in poisonous vipers that began biting the Israelites and they were dying. Then the Israelites began crying out for mercy. The Lord told Moses to create a bronze snake, raise the snake high, and those who just looked to the snake would be cleansed and forgiven. The venom would not take its effect on them.

So Jesus was providing another picture on the basis of the picture of the bronze snake; the Son of Man is going to be lifted up. We look to the Son of Man lifted up on the cross for forgiveness of sin. Here we have the gateway into the Kingdom of God. On the human side of things, we present Jesus crucified. We say believe in the One who is crucified for you. I was listening to D.A. Carson preach on John 3:16. He provided a little story that helps us to understand how John 3:16 fits into this whole discussion of new birth and entrance into the Kingdom of God. He helps us to understand what the love of God for the world is like and why believing in Jesus on the cross is necessary for entering into the Kingdom of God.

So come to the beach with me. I like going to the beach. Maybe you do too. Picture in your mind's eye Paula and Bob walking upon the beach one summer afternoon; the sun is setting casting a stream of glorious colors all across the summer sky. Bob looks at Paula and says, "I love you so much that my heart is going to beat right out of my chest. I love you so much." What does Bob mean when he said that to Paula? He probably meant something like, "Paula, you're everything to me. Your eyes just draw me in. I love the smell of your hair so much, it pulls me in. I love your laugh. I love listening to you laugh. I do the stupidest things just so I can get you to giggle and laugh. I love it. Paula, you're everything to me."

That's probably something along the lines of what Bob meant when he said he loved Paula. Certainly, I don't think that Bob meant something like this: "Paula, you have the personality of Genghis Khan. Paula, your knees remind me of those of a crippled camel. Paula, your hair is so greasy I think it could lubricate an eighteen wheeler. Paula, your breath is like a vapor that could wilt a bouquet of flowers. But in the midst of all of these things, I love you. I love you so much."

The text says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son." What did that mean? Does that mean that God is looking at the world and saying, "World, world, world, you are so sparkling and you are so wonderful in my eyes. Heaven is incomplete without your charm and the wit of your personality. I need you here. You're so radiant and sparkling. I love you, because of the affect you have on me?"

Many preach it that way. However, in John's Gospels and in his writings the overwhelming percentage of the ninety some odd uses of that word, "world" speaks of an anarchic order of humanity under the influence of Satan totally opposed and indifferent the rule of God. This world is a place to draw upon the illustration of a place of crippled camel knees; greasy hair; blazer breath. Yet it says in this passage of Scripture, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The only way that I can make sense of this is to think about the relationship that I have with my boys. That relationship provides a lot of insight into how I think God views people in the world. What if parents had child who ended up being that person who had the personality of Genghis Khan; the person who shot poison as viper venom out of their lips; a person who hurt people; a person who was sinful to the core? How is that parent going to respond? I would submit to you that there would be a certain tension within that relationship. Because on the one hand, if they are good and fair parents, they are going to know that what their child is doing is wicked, and they need to be brought to account. But at the same time there is love, isn't there?

So God looks upon sinful humanity. He looks upon the world in the language of this text and it's sinful. Do you want to know how bad our breath is in the sight of God? It tells us in Romans 3:13, "Our throats are like open graves." What's in a grave? What happens when you open it? A foul odor is emitted. Why are our throats like open graves? Romans goes on to describe it in the rest of that passage. We lie and deceive each other; because the poison of vipers is on our lips; we say things that are mean and cruel and designed to hurt.

Then Paul went on and talked about how ruin and misery marked their ways. Their path is the path of violence. This is what God sees in the human race. But He also sees that which He has created, and there is affection and a love within the heart of God for His creation. So how is the tension resolved? He sees people that must be punished for their sin. The solution that satisfies the justice and the wrath of God and provides forgiveness for sinners is for Jesus to come into the world to die on a cross, to be lifted up, and to take the sin upon Himself that we deserve. We need to believe and to understand that we are sinful and that the punishment Jesus took should be ours. We should have hung on that cross. Understanding these things is how we enter in on the human side into regeneration and into new life.

I don't read much Alfred Lord Tennyson but I read a quote from him this week in the midst of my reading:

"Oh for a man to arise in me, that the man I am might cease to be."

God needs to make us fit for His Kingdom, and so He sent His son into the world to forgive us. Then He provided the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit to give us new life, new affections, and new inclinations. He makes people know by the power of the

Holy Spirit. If you want to enter into that Kingdom of which Jesus reigns, you must be born again. Look to the Son and believe in Him.

Let's close in a word of prayer.