

INTRO:

A frequent conversation in my household involves, you could say, “evaluating the severity of injuries.” Because I have kids there’s, of course, lots of bumps and bruises. Because I have daughters, we have to TALK about those bumps and bruises. Those of you with boys know it’s totally different. The severity of an injury with a boy is on a scale of basically: life or death, and it’s pretty much pass-fail. But with girls, we talk about it...all of it. *“Daddy, I scraped my toe. Do you think I’ll be ok?” “Daddy, I bumped my knee, is it gonna heal?”* And when I’m actually filled with the Spirit and NOT saying things like, *“you’re probably gonna die,”* I’ve realized... that the reason I “get” to have these conversations is cuz my daughters don’t yet understand: irreducible minimums; meaning they don’t understand that, in this case, there’s some body parts that if you injure em/REDUCE them, you cease to be able to live. While, of course, other body parts - it’s not to say we wanna hurt or remove em - but if you do, you can still live. So ya remove an appendix or kidney, ok. Ya remove a brain or a heart - not ok... There are certain irreducible minimums in our lives... The same is true in our Christian lives. There’s certain things that if you remove em necessarily reduce Christianity to NON-Christianity!

As we continue our *“That You Believe”* series, you see we’ve come to a conversation between Jesus and a guy named Nicodemus, which in a really profound way, highlights THE main, irreducible minimum of Christianity - what Jesus calls *“being born again!”* THE thing that is not a perk of the Christian life, but rather is so essential TO the Christian life, that without it there IS no Christian life... So there’s REALLY no way to overstate just how seminal this passage is, BECAUSE it really does answer all the big/fundamental questions like: **Who Being Born Again Is For; What It Is; How It’s Received/even How Ya Know You’re Born Again.** Just a ton of practical and theological freight here. SO, before we pray and study this passage under the heading OF those questions, let me commend to you a resource for further study AFTER today. A message, preached by our very own Matt King, this past July, in which he did a really great job of ALSO unpacking this passage. So if ya didn’t get a chance to hear that OR wanna listen to it again, it’s on our website and will be posted to our @HubChurchBoston social media accounts this week... ***Would ya Pray with me?:*** *“Father, we’re grateful for your word! For without it, how would we know what to think, what to believe, how to live. And today we’re grateful that you’ve given us the chance to eavesdrop, as it were, on such a seminal conversation that reveals truly radical and wonderful things about life with you. Help us now to see and appropriate those things by faith. We pray this in Jesus’ name...Amen!*

TEXT:¹

So start with me in **vv.1-3**, because THERE you see **Who Being Born Again Is For.** Ya notice we’re told that this guy Nicodemus is a bunch of things right: He’s *“a Pharisee,”* it says, meaning part of an influential religious sect that GAINED their influence from being utterly meticulous with God’s Law. They believed that God accepted and was happy with you on the basis of your adherence to His law and so they attempted to follow that law to a T - actually

¹ Insights from: “You Must Be Born Again”-Clint Patronella-11/17/19-<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/sermons-from-seven-mile-waltham/id1253500100?i=1000457055062>

added 613 additional laws² to sorta fence-off the original law, so that in not breaking those additional laws, you wouldn't get close to breaking God's law. So to say that Nicodemus is "*a Pharisee*" is to say, he's varsity-level religious...BUT to say, as it says, that he's also "*a ruler of the Jews,*" is to say that he's uber-powerful too. Part of a group of influential political leaders known as the Sanhedrin, who almost like Senators, governed Israel under the watchful eye of the Roman empire. So Nick here is uber-religious AND uber-powerful. Which is WHY, he "*comes to Jesus by night,*" - wanted to avoid public scrutiny, given his high status AND because at this point in John's gospel, Jesus has become a very public figure...So here's this guy who's totally winning at life, coming to Jesus and saying, "*Rabbi, we - meaning my fellow leaders and I - know you're a teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs you do unless God is with him.*" Notice, he comes to Jesus, doesn't ask Jesus a question, but rather just gives Jesus his opinion of Him - that he thinks he's a good teacher - a "*rabbi*" - probably not the messiah, but nevertheless has some kind of higher connection to God, given the "*signs*" He's doing!

THAT'S the picture we get of Nicodemus - Honestly, a guy who, in many respects, is representative of all of us. Cuz think about it: In being of the cultural elite, he shows us that it's not just the poor and downtrodden - who as it's always assumed - are the only ones attracted to Jesus. It could be any of us...In being a Pharisee, He represents those who are maybe more spiritually/religiously inclined, or even just ritualistic, since a lot of people, who don't necessarily identify as religious nevertheless live "religiousLY;" ya know, in the way they go about things like creating a reputation, maintaining an image, advancing a career, eating, even parenting...In coming to Jesus in the first place, Nicodemus obviously represents those of us with questions and who might be searching for something more to life...And in coming to Him by night, he represents those who might genuinely wanna learn from Jesus, but for whom there just isn't a safe space in which to do that - maybe cuz your family is of a different religion, or your peers'll look down on you, or even your career'll be impacted...Not to mention, in simply having opinions ABOUT Jesus, Nicodemus represents ALL of us, since everyone has opinions about God. I've never met a person who doesn't have an opinion about God. It's just a matter of WHAT opinion you have. Nicodemus represents all of us!

Which is WHY, you see in **v.3**, Jesus responds to him by cutting through the fat and speaking to his heart, as if He's speaking to ANY of our hearts. Says, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" Notice, Jesus doesn't qualify anything there or give any disclaimers. Because what He's telling Nicodemus/and YOU is that: it doesn't matter your level of influence, your accomplishments, background. It doesn't matter if you're religiously or morally impressive. It doesn't matter if you have well-thought-out opinions about God. The only thing that matters for, as Jesus says, "*seeing the kingdom of God,*" which is to say being connected-to and participating in the rule and reign of God both now and for eternity - is being "*born again.*"...He's saying, "*there's only one way to God.*" Which I know, might sound intolerant, cuz if there's anything our culture won't tolerate, it's intolerance. But you gotta see that in telling this to someone like Nicodemus, who not only represents all of us, but the

² J. D. Greear, "[Unexpected Answer: John 3:1-13](#)," in *J. D. Greear Sermon Archive* (Durham, NC: The Summit Church, 2017), Jn 3:1-13.

BEST of all of us, Jesus is making it clear that being “*born again*,” is NOT - as is often assumed - just this emotional, cathartic experience for, ya know, broken-down people who kinda need it, but **for everyone!** You, me, everyone! ***That’s who it’s for!***

So **Second, What Is It Then?** And the short answer is: being “born again” is about the “*implantation of new life*.”³ The \$10 theological term for it is “regeneration.” And you see this throughout **vv.4-8** there. Cuz on the one hand, Jesus has just told Nicodemus that he needs to be “*born again*” to which Nicodemus basically says, “*Jesus that’s crazy. No one can go back in their mother’s womb AND,*” given who Nicodemus is, he’s no doubt thinking, “*even if someone COULD to be ‘born again,’ I wouldn’t need to. I’m a Jew and a really good Jew at that.*” In other words, what Nicodemus is saying and thinking, is really what we all naturally think with respect to being “*born again*,” which is that Jesus is just talking about some spiritualized version of...“turning over a new leaf” - ya know, adopting a new moral structure or set of best practices that can help ya with your anxiety, impatience, or eating habits. In other words, because most of us aren’t arrogant enough to think that we’re perfect, we assume being “*born again*” is simply about helping us improve...if we need it!...But understand, Jesus is totally rebutting that idea here. Cuz when He says, “*Truly, truly, which is like the Hebrew way of saying, ‘Listen/this is non-negotiable’ ...unless you’re born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. (Because) that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit;*” what He’s saying is, “*you don’t need a little improvement*” - that’s something the flesh/your will/your effort can do - “*what you need/what we ALL need, cuz it’s for everyone...is new life. And only the Spirit can produce that!*” It’s like an apple tree. Apple trees produce apples **right?** They don’t produce oranges. If you want an apple, you’ve got to have an apple tree implanted in the ground...Likewise, if you want spiritual life, you gotta have...the Spirit!... implanted in you!...And see Nicodemus knew this! WE know this! Cuz if we're honest, we know that, more often than not, when we try to change things/make things better/make our world better - more often than not, we end up making things worse/making a mess of things **right?** We’re like kids when they spill something on a carpet. We WANNA help clean it up, but usually, we just move the spill around and drive it deeper into the carpet. We get this!/Nicodemus got it even more, because when Jesus tells him he has to be “*born of water and the Spirit*” He’s not talking about two different things there. Rather He’s expounding on **v.3** by referring to all the places in the OT - that Nicodemus would’ve certainly known - where, because Israel was a dry, arid place, water was considered life-giving and cleansing. Specifically in **Ezekiel 36** where God tells Israel that He’s gonna pour forth water to cleanse them of sin and bring about new life. So to have “*water and the Spirit*” is to have...spiritual...life...Literally, God implanting His very life/His Holy Spirit, in you! **THAT’S what “being born again” is.** As Theologian Wayne Grudem says, “*it’s the secret act of God - So something uncontrollable and yet perceptible, just like “the wind,” as Jesus says in v.8 - in which God imparts new spiritual life to you.*” ***That’s what it is!***

Tim Keller tells the story of a lady who was a part of his church. And she had a powerful if unremarkable testimony because she describes how prior to being “*born again*” her life, like

³ “The Gospel & the Insider - The Gospel & the World” - Sep 26, 2010 - John 3:1-16 - [The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive](#) (NYC: Redeemer Pres, 2013).

many, was really just a series of stages. For example, she says that as a little girl she grew up in church and basically came to believe that God loved her because she was a good/moral person. But THEN as she grew, that shifted. She actually cites an old song entitled, “You’re Nobody Til Somebody Loves You.” She says that song somehow got into her heart and soul and she began to believe that if somebody loved her/if she just found the right guy, then everything was gonna be ok. But of course - in her words - “*that was a mess,*” because not only was she always up & down depending on if guys noticed her, but she stayed in dating relationships that she should’ve broken off, because she was afraid to be single. So seeing this, some friends came to her and said, “*Look don’t worry about guys. You don’t need to take your identity from them*” - good advice - “*What you need to do, they said, is see how special, valuable and successful you are. You have a career. You make good money. You’re accomplished.*” - Bad advice - Because this woman, when she heeded that advice and shifted her identity again, says this time whenever she experienced a career obstacle, it wasn’t just a bump to get over; it destroyed her like the way the romantic obstacles used to destroy her. So that stage didn’t work... So then someone else comes along and tells her, “*Look, you’re a kind, decent person. And you just need to know that.*” So, taking that advice, she threw herself into BEING that kind, decent person by helping others, and volunteering, and basically being willing to listen to anybody with a problem... The problem with THAT though was that as she threw herself into helping emotionally needy people get better, she herself got exhausted, and even started to hate herself BECAUSE she felt guilty for not liking these people she was supposed to be helping. So just one stage after another UNTIL she finally realized, that in every case, what she was trying to do was essentially save herself through IMPROVING herself. And she says this, “*I realized THEN that what I really needed... was to know that God loves me BECAUSE He loves me and BECAUSE of what Jesus has done. THAT, she says, is what really changed everything.*”⁴ She was “*born again.*” ***That’s what being “born again” is!*** It’s NOT pursuing an agenda and then having God to help you WITH that agenda, but rather getting a whole new agenda!... It’s NOT getting help with a fledgling self-esteem, but getting a whole new identity!... ***Listen:*** It’s NOT going from bad to good or good to better, but going from dead to alive!... ***That’s what being “born again” is! Have you experienced that?***

Third, How It’s Received: Look in ***vv.9-16*** cuz there you see numerous references to the work of God ***right?*** For example, when Nicodemus says in ***v.9***, “*how can all this be Jesus*” - cuz of course He’s still of the mindset that to be connected to God is not only for CERTAIN people rather than everyone, BUT involves something of our effort rather than being dependent upon God to implant His life in our hearts - JESUS says to him, “*Are you the teacher of Israel and you don’t understand these things?*”, meaning, “*Bro this is Christianity 101. Cuz without it there IS NO Christianity. Irreducible minimum!*” After which He goes on to affirm - you see it in ***vv.11-13*** - His divine authority for telling Nicodemus all this stuff ***right?*** Says “*we speak of what we know,*” which is an obvious reference to the Trinity, and “*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended...the Son of Man,*” meaning “*Nicodemus, no human has ever been in heaven EXCEPT the human being standing right in front of you, who also happens to be God.*” In other words, He’s telling Nicodemus, you still don’t get it because you think life with God is

⁴ Illustration adapted: “The Gospel & the Insider - The Gospel & the World” - Sep 26, 2010 - John 3:1-16 - [The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive](#) (NYC: Redeemer Pres, 2013).

about a philosophy rather than a PERSON. You think it's about ascending to a set of teachings rather than a PERSON who's descended. And therefore that it's earned or achieved rather than - here's the key - **believed and received!** As Jesus says in **vv.14-15**, "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever BELIEVES in him may have eternal life*" / be "born again." And what Jesus is referencing is a story in **Numbers 21** in which as the people of Israel are heading into the Promised Land, they start getting impatient/start doubting the goodness and even existence of God, and as a result start to wander FROM God. SO GOD - because He's committed to our trusting Him - sends these fiery serpents/literally, 1000's of em, that begin to bite and inflict pain so that the people of Israel cry out to God for help. So God tells Moses to make a bronze sculpture of one of the serpents, and put it on top of a pole, up on a hill, so that it's visible to all, such that if ANYONE looks at it in faith, believing that God can heal them, they'll be healed.⁵...Jesus says, "*just like that serpent was lifted up to save people from the poison of snakes, I'm gonna be lifted up - on a cross - in order to save people from the poison of sin!*" **And why?** Because, as He says in **v.16**, "*God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son.*" So NOT God sending Jesus because we're generally lovely, even if needing a little improvement. BUT God loving you enough, to send Jesus, in order to keep you from "*perishing*" and thereby MAKE you lovely, "*as you believe in Him and are born again.*" Friends, THAT'S Christianity! This GIFT of life, RECEIVED simply through faith.

A great picture of this in history is John Wesley, who ya might know was actually a Pastor BEFORE he was born again/pray for me! And he recounts how he spent 13 years of focused effort trying to change himself/become a better person, a better Pastor, and generally attain a pure heart before God. But none of it, he says, ever worked. I mean sure, through effort, you can definitely improve yourself in a number of ways. But let's be honest, we know we can't save ourselves. Cuz as C.S. Lewis said, "*no one really knows how bad they are until they try really hard to be good.*" That was Wesley...UNTIL, at the recommendation of a friend he reluctantly attended a religious meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, where someone simply read - didn't preach - simply read from Martin Luther's *Preface...to Romans*. And Wesley says that at about 8:45 that night, IN that meeting, while this random gentleman was reading Luther's words about the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, he says, "*I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death*"...It's received, as a gift, through faith! **Have you received it? Are ya born again?**

Finally, Here's How Ya Know/Ya Gotta Know, cuz as Billy Graham used to say "*many people...will miss heaven by only 18 inches*"...18" of course being the distance between your head and your heart."⁶ Between simply knowing things about God, being a successful, even doing a lot of things FOR God - like Nicodemus - and actually being "*born again.*" **Ya gotta know!** And if you look in **vv.18-21** you see the distinguishing mark Jesus gives between the person who believes and is "*born again,*" and one who's not, is what He calls "*darkness*" /

⁵ Explanation of Num. 21 adapted from "[Finding the Assurance of Salvation: John 2:23-3:16](#)," in *J. D. Greear Sermon Archive* (NC: The Summit Church, 2017), Jn 2:23-3:16.

⁶ Cited in "How Not to Die" // 1 Samuel 28, 31 // The Life of David #10" - J.D. Greear

“condemnation”⁷ VS walking in the “light.” **You see that?** What Jesus is saying, is that **the way to know** if you’re “born again” is if your life is characterized by SELF or SURRENDER. Self or Surrender. I love the way one scholar puts it: “*The difference between the believer and the unbeliever doesn’t lie in the guilt or innocence of either - cuz you see very clearly in v.18, Jesus says, we’re ALL guilty/all “already condemned” for having chosen to live for ourselves rather than the God - “The difference lies in the different attitudes (we) take toward the ‘light’*”⁸ - toward Jesus!...In other words, do you have an attitude of Surrender, which Jesus calls “*believing in Him as the only Son of God, coming to the light,*” allowing your life to be “*carried out in God*” - SURRENDERED - OR do you have an attitude of Self, which Jesus calls “*hating the light and loving the darkness so that your works aren’t exposed.*” Literally telling Jesus/“the light”, “*you’re not in charge. I’m in charge.*” OR “*you can be in charge of SOME things, but I’m gonna keep control of these other things - my finances, relationships, entertainment, my sexuality, desires - not let em be ‘exposed.’*” That’s a person who, regardless of if they profess to believe in Jesus or not, is living for self...Surrender or Self! **THAT’S how you know!** And again, ya gotta know. Because **On The One Hand**, all this talk here about “*already being condemned/ this being judgment,*” as Jesus says - that shows you: that if there EVER was a Jesus; if He ever lived the life He did, and said these kinds of things, then Friends, that means the shutters are ultimately gonna come down on the kingdom of living for yourself! And that’s because **On The Other Hand**, you gotta see that when Jesus is talking about judgment and condemnation/when the Bible talks about it, which I know, to our modern sensibilities sounds super regressive, NEVERTHELESS means that God is a God of standards. He’s a lover of truth/justice. And more importantly...YOU! Because, as I’ve told you before, the opposite of love is not anger, but indifference. If you truly love someone and you see em being destroyed by evil/sin, ya get angry. If WE find ourselves getting angry when we see evil or injustice destroying someone, how much more must a holy God NOT overlook your sin? It has to be destroyed/has to be “*condemned.*”

But here’s the thing/and I’ll close with this: the God of the Bible isn’t like the gods of mythology or even the “gods” of cancel-culture today, in which ya gotta suck-up cuz they’re hostile and need to have their wrath turned aside. No! The God of the Bible is a God who, HIMSELF, voluntarily turned His wrath aside by lovingly, graciously, sacrificially emptying Himself of His greatest treasure - His Son - SO THAT that justice could be done, and YOU could be “*born again!*”⁹ “*For God so loved the world...*” That means Friend, the ONLY keeping you/keeping anyone from being “*born again,*” free from “*condemnation*” and enjoying the life of God IN you...is simply an unwillingness to surrender to Jesus...If you will: it’s simply 18 inches...**Let’s Pray:** “*Lord Jesus, in a moment, as we take up the offering, and reflect together, we pray that you’d give us a spirit of surrender. That we would lay down living for ourselves. And in turn, you’d implant your very life into those of us who’ve never been “born again.” And for those of us who have, that you’d give us hearts, both, full of gratitude and fearful of, in anyway, living for ourselves. We pray this in your name...!*”

⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 207.

⁸ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 185.

⁹ Explanation on condemnation adapted from “Faith Rising - Jonah 2:1-10 - Aug 12, 1990” - *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (NYC: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).