

Introduction:

- A. [Story by Shirley Terris, illustrating the way God's Spirit moves, often unpredictably, to bring the gospel and to save.] How does that happen?!
- B. One of the most familiar stories of Jesus begins this way: "Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night." Don't miss this man's spiritual pedigree. He was, first, a **Pharisee**—a professional theologian, who knew the entire Old Testament virtually by heart. He made it his daily work to observe the Law of Moses minutely. Later Jesus says to him, "You are Israel's teacher." He and the 69 other men on the **Sanhedrin** had jurisdiction over all the religious affairs of Israel. And on top of all that, I think this man was **genuine**. Often Pharisees came to test and trick Jesus, but this man didn't. He came at night when there were no crowds to impress. Later John tells us he defended Jesus to the other leaders, and when Jesus died on the cross, Nicodemus was there along with Joseph of Arimathea to bury his body. And, of course, he was Jewish—born among God's chosen people, heirs of God's promises. **Surely, if anyone anywhere was ever a citizen of the kingdom of God it was Nicodemus.**

John makes note that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night.

The writer is telling us more than the time. He's giving us a literary hint of Nicodemus's need. **Turn to John 3.**

- C. Nicodemus is a salvation case study of someone who was as good, devout, well-born, and sincere as you can be. Here was a man who fully expected to enter the kingdom of God. We know lots of people like that who have far less impressive credentials than Nicodemus. People who assume that in due time they will enter God's kingdom.
- D. Nicodemus says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." Not all the Pharisees were hard-hearted and opposed to Jesus. Nicodemus and *some* of his colleagues had concluded from

listening and watching that Jesus was “*a teacher come from God.*” A **prophet**, in other words. They realized that the miracles Jesus did proved he was God’s messenger. Not all the Pharisees thought that. Some attributed Jesus’ miracles to Satan. But not Nicodemus. So that dark night, he came to Jesus to learn. He came to listen.

- E. Jesus begins his reply in **v.3** with a kind of alert: “**Very truly I tell you.**” *Take what I’m going to say very seriously. It comes straight from God...*

I. “NO ONE CAN SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD UNLESS THEY ARE BORN... AGAIN.” (3:3-4)

- A. This language came out of the blue to Nicodemus. As a man thoroughly acquainted with the Old Testament who was talking to a rabbi, I’m sure his mind was scrambling to find a cross-reference somewhere in the Scriptures. *Born again? Born again??* Nothing! The Old Testament never used a phrase like that.

In fact, if this had been a ‘finish-the-sentence’ exercise: *No one can see the kingdom of God unless _____,*” Nicodemus’s answer would have surely been, “*unless he is circumcised (i.e., Jewish) and obeys the Law of Moses.*” But “*unless they are born again*”?? **Where did that come from?** If you are a Jew who obeys God’s Law, what other birthright do you need? **“Born again” was a completely foreign expression.**

- B. I think Nicodemus was actually listening very carefully and openly to Jesus because he *doesn’t* ask the obvious defensive question: “*Why would I need to be born another time? I was born right the first time*”. What he *does* ask is actually a much deeper question in **v.4**, “*How can someone be born when they are old?*” *Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”* Nicodemus was not being silly. He wasn’t a silly man. What he *thought* he heard Jesus say was that the only hope of entering God’s kingdom was a biological redo and that, of course, is impossible.

- C. Our whole culture is used to this phrase, *born again*. We use it to indicate any fresh start, new beginning, remake, or second chance. “*It’s like the Cubs have been born again this year!*” So if he had been talking to us, Jesus might have laid the emphasis carefully to be sure we understood: “*No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born... a second time.*” Not metaphorically. Literally. *Born. A second time.*
- D. A person needs to be born again in order to “see the kingdom of God.” The Jews believed that the reward of a righteous life would be to enter God’s kingdom at the end of the age. A lot of people we know believe some variation of that as well. But if you must be *born* into it, then you’re in the kingdom of God the moment you’re born. So it could happen *before* the end of time, even *before* you die? Could someone see and enter the kingdom of God here and now?!
- E. The shock here is that the only way anyone sees God’s kingdom now or ever is to be born into it, yet no one who has been born once qualifies. John has prepared us for this in the opening verses of this gospel. **John 1:12-13** says, “*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*” Born again.
- To put it one other way. No one gets a passport to God’s kingdom. Everyone needs a birth certificate.

Back to **John 3:5-7**: *Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’”* That gives us new information:

II. TO BE BORN AGAIN IS TO BE BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT (3:5-7)

- A. This is even more strange than hearing we must be born a second time. The phrase, “*born of water and spirit,*” sounds kind of like the way we would describe our parentage. *I’m Lee Eclov, born of Lyle and Grace Eclov.*

When water and spirited met in me I was born of them. I have the DNA of water and spirit. They made a newborn citizen of God’s kingdom. That’s where I get my identity. But that really is confusing!

- B. This “water and spirit” language is pretty foreign-sounding to us but it shouldn’t have been to Nicodemus. In fact, in **v.10** Jesus said, *“You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things?!”* *How is this not clear to someone with your training and responsibility??* Here’s why.

Turn to **Ezek. 36**. More than 500 years before Christ, God is telling Israel, through the prophet Ezekiel, that after the terrible exile caused by their sin, God would eventually restore them. God tells them that the day will come when he will show the holiness of his great name not only to Israel but to all the nations. How? **He’s going to do two things to show how great and holy his name is:**

1. **Ezek. 36:25:** God says, *“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.”* **There’s the water Jesus is speaking of.** God will cleanse sinful people. Which means, we cannot cleanse ourselves. God sprinkles the water.

Nicodemus was well aware of John the Baptist who *“was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”* And everyone had been going out to be baptized by him. God’s cleansing was all over the news! What’s more **Jn 1:29** says that when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to be baptized he said, *“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*

So one ‘parent’ in our second birth is water—the washing away of our sins, through the blood of the Lamb of God, leaving us clean—forgiven, reckoned righteous *despite* how sinful we’ve been.

2. **Ezek. 36:26-27:** *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be*

careful to keep my laws.” A new heart to replace the heart that constantly rebels against God and a new spirit—new breath to give life to what was dead. This is what makes a person *baby-new*. A goodness—a Godwardness and godliness—that comes naturally to us because we now have a new heart.

The other ‘parent’ of new birth is the new heart and the breath/spirit of God. This isn’t a matter of turning over a new leaf, of a fresh start. This is a re-creation of a person. Paul said, *“If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation.”* It takes us back to the creation of the world, and of Adam in particular. **Gen 2** says, *“Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and **breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.**”* **For a person to be born again, God has to do that again.** To be born again from our mother’s womb would do us no good at all.

So Jesus is saying to Israel’s teacher, *You should certainly recognize what I’m talking about here when I say you must be born of water and spirit! You’ve studied Ezekiel.* To be born again is to be born of water and spirit. God washes us clean of sin past, present and future, and then God gives us a new heart and breath. And that born-a-second-time person is then and forever in God’s kingdom.

- C. In **John 3:8** Jesus says, *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”* It’s not the womb that births you into God’s kingdom, it’s the wind. To the over-achiever Nicodemus Jesus says, *You can no more bring about your own new birth than you can summon the wind.*

Jesus isn’t say that God is random in bringing the breath of life. His point is that God’s life-giving breath is divine and unseen but unmistakable. *“The wind blows wherever it pleases,”* and it pleases the wind/the Spirit of God to breathe life into all who repent and want to be clean

and who believe in Jesus. Here is the very best news you will ever hear, in **v.16**, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.***”

- D. You can't be born by yourself. And you have no more to do with being born *again* than you did with being born the first time. What you *can* do—the *only* thing you *can* do—is **believe the good news.**

That's the whole point of this book of John. He writes at the beginning, in **1:12**: “*to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*” And John tells us at the end of this book why it was written: “*But these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*”
[20:30-31]

Conclusion

Christians, thank God for such wonderful salvation, free, transforming, and everlasting. Tell others this good news. Tell them the story of Nicodemus and what it means to be born again—a phrase they know but do not understand any more than he did.

You who are seeking, who come to Jesus at night, Jesus says to you, “*You must be born... again. You **can** be born again!*” Right here and now.

[Congregational sharing: What changed when you were born again?]