

## Changed Lives – Nicodemus

John 3:1-17

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Have you ever received a word from God about your life? Nicodemus did. He received that message from Jesus.

Most of us remember this story. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night because it would look bad for a member of the Jewish ruling council to seek out an itinerant preacher from Galilee.

While Nicodemus was a Pharisee, he was also an earnest man. So he comes to Jesus and says, “Rabbi, we know you’re a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” This is quite an admission for a man of his stature, and I suspect he has more to say.

But it appears to me that Jesus cut Nicodemus off. In answer to Nicodemus’ praise, Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

The thought, “what does it mean to be born again?” must have rolled through his mind, for Nicodemus voices his bewilderment: “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he can’t enter his mother’s womb a second time!”

It’s interesting that Nicodemus is confused. As a member of the rabbinical class, Nicodemus was surely familiar with Scripture like Ezekiel 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 Holy Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

Jesus, too, appears to be quite surprised at Nicodemus’ confusion. Everything Jesus taught can be found in the Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament. Jesus did not come to destroy that Bible, but to fulfill it. But Nicodemus was confused; then again, many people have been baffled by Jesus’ words: “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

Let’s take a few minutes this morning to look at this lesson in a new way, and apply it to our lives. **What did Christ mean when he said, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again”?**

Did he mean that you can’t get into heaven without some kind of specific conversion experience? For many Christians, this is what being “born again” is all about. On a certain date, I had a specific experience of God and I was “saved.” That is a valid interpretation of this text. But it’s not the only one.

We’ve talked in the past about the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ teachings. Jesus came teaching and preaching the Kingdom of God. This was central to his ministry.

He was following in the footsteps of John the Baptist. In Matthew 3:1-2 we read “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

In Mark 1:15 we read Jesus using almost the same language to describe the beginning of his ministry. “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.”

Many of Jesus’ parables were about the Kingdom. He described the kingdom as a mustard seed which is planted in the ground and which grows into an enormous tree. He described the kingdom as leaven which a woman puts into a

loaf of bread; or as a pearl of great price for which a person will sell everything he owns, as treasure hidden in a field.

The main task of the church, He said, is to tell the world about the Kingdom. "Let the dead bury their own," he said, "but you go and preach the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:60) Even after his resurrection, says Luke in his introduction to Acts of the Apostles, "He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God." (Acts 1:3)

And it's clear that he wasn't speaking of an event that would some day come to pass. Of the 27 times he spoke of the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven (the two terms are interchangeable), 17 of them refer to a Kingdom that already existed. The Kingdom of God is where God reigns.

"The Kingdom is within you" Jesus said on one occasion (Luke 17:21). On another he said, "You are not far from the Kingdom." (Mark 12:34) He even taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven . . ." The kingdom is here. The kingdom is now.

Now let's consider his words to the Pharisee Nicodemus: "I tell you the truth, no one can see *the kingdom of God* unless he is born again." He is saying to Nicodemus, there is this kingdom, my kingdom, a kingdom of the heart, a kingdom of the spirit.

In order to enter that kingdom you need to experience some profound changes in the way you think and the way you feel. You need to open yourself to a new level of devotion, a new capacity for love, a new set of eyes through which you see the world --eyes filled with compassion and acceptance and forgiveness. He's saying to Nicodemus what God said through Ezekiel: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you . . ."

There is no evidence that Jesus is prescribing a certain emotional experience or any timetable for this experience. It may happen at once, as it did to Paul, or it may happen over many years, as it did to Simon Peter, or it may take a lifetime as it has with many saints over the centuries.

**Here's the critical point: entrance into this kingdom is very desirable.** It's the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field. As Paul would later say, "...the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit . . ."

That is, Christ brought a kingdom into this world. It is an invisible Kingdom, a spiritual Kingdom. It is available to all who make Christ Lord of their lives. Once that Kingdom is established in your heart, you stand righteous before God and you know a peace and a joy that the world cannot know.

Yes, there is heaven to look forward to, but we experience a foretaste of it here and now. It's the most incredible promise we can imagine, and it's astounding how few people understand it and claim it for themselves.

So, let's ask the question again: **what does it mean to be born again?** It means to open yourself to Christ's Spirit. It means to allow him to make you righteous before God and give you his peace and his joy. This could happen in an instant, or it could be a lifetime journey. But it will be the most important decision, the most rewarding journey you will ever make.

The kingdom is a gift that we seek, but one which God alone grants according to God's timetable.

We don't know if Nicodemus answered Jesus' call to a new life. The story ends with him puzzling over Jesus' instructions. But if he didn't answer the call, here's

what he have missed: new eyes with which see the beauty of this world, a new appreciation of the joy of being alive, the peace of trusting a loving heavenly Father for all his needs. All of this is what those of us who have opened ourselves to God's Spirit find in life.

The world tells us that happiness is found in a fat bank account, a position of prominence in the community, a perfect family. They're all nice, but they don't keep us warm at night; they don't meet our deepest needs. "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."