

John 3:1-17: Born Again

A Pharisee- Nicodemus pays a special visit to Jesus at night. We don't know for sure why he waited until darkness to meet, but we've got guesses. The likeliest of them all- he was afraid of being seen with Jesus. This is the guy who had just cleansed the Temple- probably not the most popular person in Pharisee circles. And a respected religious leader- seeking out wisdom from a guy from Nazareth. His buddies would never let him live that one down. For whatever reason, under the cover of darkness Nicodemus comes to Jesus.

Jesus opens the door and Nicodemus jumps right to it. "It's clear because of what you're doing that you're from God." Jesus responds, "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above."

Wait- what? What is this kingdom and what in the world is this reborn stuff? Nicodemus clarifies, "You mean there's supposed to be some way for a grown man to reenter his mother's womb? To which, Jesus jumps into a discourse on being born of the Spirit.

He compares new birth by the Spirit to the blowing wind. You don't know where it comes from or where it's going, but you can see its effects all around. You don't control it- but you can make yourself ready for it when it starts to rumble! You can roll down the windows and open the doors- feel the wind- you can humble your heart and name your longing- experience the Spirit. Those born of the Spirit don't tend to know how it happened- but they know it happened. Something at some point in time changed them from the inside out- gave them a new life, new heart, new belief, and new perspective.

And in verses 16-17, Jesus says just what this new life and new perspective is- just what the born again have come to know.

John 3:16, the most famous verse in all of Scripture, begins "*For God so loved the world.*" Those who are born again know God first and foremost by his love. The world tends to see God as angry, indifferent, moody- or even cut off from humankind. But when the Spirit blows through our lives- perspectives change- we become consumed by a God who is Love.

I can remember distinct times this Spirit of love breathed new life in me- even after my initial salvation. **4 months at home** after mission experience- silent prayer asking God what to do now. In listening just heard- Jamie, I love you. And I was changed,

Processing call to youth- told friend I could see how God could use me there, though I didn't want to leave where I was. But had to go where needed. Friend wisely said, one day, I hope you'll see God doesn't just want to use you, he loves you as much as he loves the ones he's sending you to. He wants to care for your heart- even as you go. And a part of me that had been unaware of God's deep love for me came to life.

One of my favorite preachers, Fred Craddock, tells this powerful story of his father who spent the majority of his life running from a God who longed for him to be born again. "When the pastor used to come from my mother's church to call on him, my father would say, 'You don't care about me. I know how churches are. You want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn't that the whole point of church?'

"I guess I heard it a thousand times. One time he didn't say it. He was at the Veteran's Hospital. He was down to 74 pounds. I went in to see him. In every window—potted plants and flowers. Everywhere there was a place to set them. There was by his bed a stack of cards 10 or 15 inches deep. I looked at the cards sprinkled in the flowers. I read the cards beside his bed. And I want to tell you, every card, every blossom, every potted plant from groups, Sunday School classes, women's groups, men's bible class, of my mother's church—every one of them. My father saw me reading them. He could not speak, but he took a Kleenex box and wrote something on the side from Shakespeare's Hamlet. . . . He wrote, 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.' I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?' And he wrote, 'I was

wrong.' It is not until you know God is seeking you in love, not in condemnation; it is not until that moment that the gospel becomes Good News for you- not until that moment that you're reborn."

My friends who are here today because a spouse drug you here. My friends who just barely have a toe in with God these days- living your own life, doing your own thing because you're convinced God couldn't want you. You're certain he's put out with the path you've taken, the opportunities you've missed. My friends who tiptoe around Jesus in the dark- never getting too close because to do so you fear would make you have to see the disappointment in his eyes.

If you hear nothing else- please, I beg you, hear this today. God is crazy about you. Of all the thoughts and feelings he has about you, the one that outshines them all is love. Only love. He loves you so much he sent his own Son, not to point a finger in your face and tell you how you've let him down- but to stretch out his arms on the cross and say, "My life for yours- I love you so much I'd do it all over again if I had to."

When we beg you to come and fully engage in our life together- we do so not primarily because we're trying to get into your pocket book- or trying to sneak attack you into signing up for VBS. We're begging you to be fully here, because we are being changed from the inside out by the extravagant love of God, and we long for you to know it too. God is not mad at you. He loves you! I care so much more about you knowing the God who loves you than I do about filling up pews and meeting a budget any day. That's the honest truth.

Please don't rush out of these doors today, if you've never sat with God long enough for the truth of his deep love for you to change you completely from the inside out. Please- just hang out a while and see if that wild Spirit that loves you like crazy doesn't start blowing in this place- in your heart- consuming you with the truth that you are God's beloved. Consuming you until you're born again.

John 3:16 continues, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him may not perish... God did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it."* Those who have been born again, know not of a God who loves us from a distance- but who is with us, who has come into our world and acted on our behalf. Those born of the Spirit, no longer try to save themselves by being good enough or trusting in some cosmic scale where their good deeds outweigh the bad. They know that apart from a God who has moved toward us in love and grace we'd have no chance of being with him at all. Without a Savior- we would perish- die- be destroyed.

A young adult in our church asked me this week- but how do we know? How do we know Jesus is really for us and with us- and the question got me thinking. I told her its all fleshed out in relationship. But how? I had to think on that a moment, and responded- I know God is with me each week when it comes time to put a sermon together. Never fails, I read the text for the sermon early in the week, and I've got nothing much to say about it. Then I start listening for whispers from God's voice, looking for signs of God's presence throughout the week. And so far, every time, He's put a word on my heart that wasn't my word to share. Week after week, God showing up in these moments of discerning His word for his people- it assures me He is with me- and he is still passionate about drawing his children to himself.

Her question kept me thinking. I thought of the many times in this past year, he has put one of you on my heart- nudged me to call or check in- and every time I did, we both knew God had pulled us together. And you've done the same for me. He's still in the work of caring for his people through his people.

How do I know that God is really with me and for me? I know because as I've grown in my relationship with him, I've learned more and more how he speaks- where he tends to show up! And as I spend more time with him, I see him more- I experience him more. I looked this young friend in the eyes, and testified with all my heart- as much as I know you are real, as I see you and hear you, and share a meal with you today- I know He's real just the same. Because I see him, hear him, and share life with him too-

and he with me. I know this is real- because I really commune with my God. The gift of being born again!

John 3:16 concludes, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but *may have eternal life*.” And so the born again live with the hope of heaven- and that’s no small news! I believe in heaven with all my heart- so much that I’ll stake my life on it. I believe in heaven because I believe in the Christ who said he was preparing a place for us. I believe in heaven because I’ve caught a glimpse or two of it myself.

Mimi/ Buechner/ Dan

I believe in heaven with all my heart. I believe its closer than we can possibly imagine.

The born again, know they’ll see Jesus face to face and will live with him forever in heaven one day, But that’s not it! This talk of life in John 3:16 is in the present tense. It’s not talking about just something to look forward to, but its referring to a life that starts right here and now- just as soon as the Spirit breathes new life into his people.

Just as much as I believe in heaven, I believe that my eternal life with God has already begun. So, I need not fear death- because I know to be absent from my body on this earth is to be present with my Lord- I know my last breath here is but a comma, the next breath to be taken but an instant later in the presence of my God. And knowing that, I have no need to wait until heaven to live- because my eternal life has already begun! I’ve got absolutely nothing to lose!

When the reborn children of God glimpse just how close we are to heaven, everything changes- our passions and priorities, our fears and hopes. How we spend our time and our money, what we lose sleep over- a whole new kingdom perspective takes root. We stop grasping for temporary things that don’t satisfy, and instead invest fully in what’s eternal- that is people, relationships, worship, and love. These become the things that get my full attention and energy everyday. These are the new priorities for those whose eternal life with Jesus has already begun.

We don’t hear anything from Nicodemus after verse 9. We don’t know if the winds of the Spirit were given full reign to blow in his heart that day. But in John 7 when the temple police want to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus, the guy who was once tiptoeing in the dark, speaks out above the crowd and says, “he’s at least due a trial?” Gutsy. Where did that come from? Something had changed in him from the inside out. Then in John 19- he brings a hundred pounds of aloe and myrrh to wrap the body of the lifeless Jesus in broad daylight. A Pharisee, seeing to it that this self-proclaimed King of the Jews is given an honorable burial. No longer caring what its going to cost or what others are going to think. What happened between John 3 and John 19? The Spirit of new life must have encountered a heart willing to receive. For Nicodemus started seeing everything in a whole new way. And his new way of seeing, led to a whole new way of being.

The marks of one who’s been born again. Assured of God’s love. Saved by his grace. Growing in intimacy with Him. And really alive- one day in heaven, but even here today. Do these describe you today? The Spirit of life is blowing freely in this place, I have no doubt. Will you let him rest on you until you are born from above? For God so loved *you*- that he sent his only son. If you believe in him, you will not perish but have eternal life with him. God did not send Jesus into your world to condemn you. But to save you. Beloved, child of God. Let him love you. Let him save you- let him show you how to live. What do you have to lose? Please don’t leave this place until you are born again- for the first time, or the thousandth- with the Spirit moving, be born again.