

Nicodemus Part 1 – Marveling, And The Wind
John 3:1-15

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Have you ever wondered how some people can be so close to Jesus, but walk away? As of this weekend, if you go on Instagram and search the hashtag #deconstruction, you will find over 357,400 posts about people who are deconstructing their faith, many of whom are walking away from Jesus. For my generation of those who came to Christ in 1990's, everyone knows the name of Joshua Harris who wrote "I Kissed Dating Goodbye." Selling over 1.2 million copies, an entire generation of Christians were influenced by his views on pursuing purity and commitment in relationships rather than dating to gratify self-centered pleasures. Twenty years later in 2019 when he divorced his wife and publicly denounced being a Christian, the evangelical world was stunned.¹ How can this be?

If you're of an earlier generation, you would know the name Charles Templeton. Templeton was a Canadian, who at the age of twenty-one professed faith in Christ and soon became an evangelist, later founding Youth For Christ. In 1945 he met and hired a new up-and-coming evangelist named Billy Graham, the two of them conducting numerous crusades imploring the masses to turn to Jesus. Just three years later, while preparing to head off to an ivy-league seminary doubts about the Christian faith were surfacing. Less than a decade later, he would publicly declare that he had become an agnostic and eventually write a best-selling memoir, *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*.² How could a man with so much zeal for Christ, who preached on the stage with Billy Graham, walk away? If someone displays a passion for Christ, shouldn't we assume their faith is real and they've been born again? What does it really mean to be born again? Many people perceive it as simply a label for -right-wing, Bible-thumping, fanatics. Modern contemporaries don't want to even believe that spiritual deadness can be a thing and instead hold to the belief that we're all basically good and just need a little fixing up. The self-help sections of bookstores are teeming with efforts to help one become a new and better man by reinventing yourself with "5 steps to more confidence" or "10 daily routines to live the healthier you." There aren't too many self-help titles saying, "You must be, what you are not; therefore, start over and birth yourself again."

And as Christians who hold to the Biblical teaching of new birth, it's hard to discern how to minister wisely and sensitively. When is the last time you prayed for your child that they would be born again? Simply thinking that thought unnerves us to wonder if someone we love might not be born again. How do you know if they are? And isn't God the only one who sees the spiritual state of a man's heart. If this is so, are we foolish for wanting to enter into someone's spiritual birth story?

¹ Parke, Caleb (July 29, 2019). "Well-known Christian author, purity advocate, renounces his faith: 'I hope you can forgive me'". *Fox News*. Retrieved August 29, 2019.

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/charles-templeton-missing-jesus>

Today we are going to look at a man who was immersed in religious activity as a leader of the Jewish community and yet walked away from Jesus after having one of the most profound conversations with the Lord ever recorded. We are going to see that we must rightly behold the mysterious and supernatural nature of being born again. For when we do, we will marvel with thanksgiving that new birth is real, we will beseech the wind of the Spirit to blow new birth into others, and we will see that supernatural belief is required to be born again. This will require wisdom in how to help loved ones in the birthing process.

First, our text shows us that when we rightly behold the supernatural nature of being born again, we will marvel with thanksgiving that new birth is real and actually possible. The scene begins with Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night saying, "No one can do these signs." We are told that he is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. I wondered if those two descriptions were one of the same or telling us two different things. The Pharisees were a sect of learned Jewish scholars who rigorously pursued adherence to the Torah in order to preserve the purity and piety of the nation of Israel.

Yet even though they were the top echelon of Jewish society, the Pharisees routinely served as the antagonists to Jesus' ministry. Jesus denounces them as: cherishers of the traditions of man, rather than the commandments of God. (Mark 7:4); clamoring for seats of honor and claiming titles, rather than inner piety. (Matt 23:5-28); and summarizes them as "lovers of money" and a "brood of vipers." (Luke 16:14; Matt 12:34)

That was the nature of the Pharisees as a whole, but Nicodemus' was unique. He comes to Jesus at night, possibly to avoid the gaze and chastisement of his peers, but possibly because at night he would be able to have a conversation of length with Jesus. He addresses Jesus as Rabbi, which means he at least acknowledges Jesus as a fellow teacher. And most uniquely, he says, "we know that you are a teacher from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." He says, "signs;" he doesn't say, "No one can do these miracles." He isn't coming as someone marveling at a performer with fascination over how the tricks are done, like asking a magician how did you pull that rabbit out of your hat? Nicodemus' address to Jesus indicates that his heart's posture is one of genuine searching.

In response to Nicodemus' bold searching, Jesus tells him you must be born again. He says it twice so that Nicodemus won't miss it, "truly, truly." Pay rapt attention mighty ruler of the Jews, because if you are not born again, will not enter, you will not see, you cannot be a part of, the kingdom of God. Nicodemus did not like Jesus' words, for rather than crying out in joy over the possibility of becoming something new, he cries out in disappointment, "How can a man be born again?" He could've said, "Jesus, I am so burdened inside over keeping up appearances. I see that I constantly reject the things of God more than uphold them. I am undone over my inability to be a righteous man and rejoice that in you I might have the possibility of being something that I am not." But instead his pride rises up, he relishes in all of his religious accomplishments, and rejectingly says, "How can this be?"

Jesus is telling Nicodemus there is a kingdom that you cannot truly experience unless you're born a new. I'm dating myself, but do you remember Chevy Chase in National Lampoon's

Vacation? All this family man wants is to bring his beloved wife and children across the country to the pinnacle of amusement parks - the adorable moose-themed Wally World. Unfortunately, there's this classic scene of disappointment when the Griswolds finally make it to the gates, only to find that the park is closed and they're stuck outside. The Griswolds could tell you that in a sense you can still experience an amusement park from the outside, You can still hear the roar of roller coasters. I've been to Disney, you can even hear the lions roaring inside Animal Kingdom from outside the enclosure. You can stand outside the gates and know all about the animated characters inside and even wear fun mouse ears as a fan. However, Jesus is saying it is radically different being on the inside of the park. Religious activity does not mean you have been born again if the Spirit hasn't moved. If the Spirit hasn't moved, being baptized as infant or repeating a sinner's prayer doesn't make one born again.

We must look to God's word and personally trust Jesus to be supernaturally born again. Jesus says, "I will do it...by new birth of the Spirit you will enter the kingdom." Now you might be listening and thinking, "I haven't had a radical discussion with Jesus at night where I've walked away with a radical conversion. I've always felt like I've known Jesus and loved him from an early age." This is good, in fact, I hope it what is what my children are able to say. If you're wondering if the lack of drama indicates you haven't been born again, consider another ridiculous movie from my teenage years. In *Weekend at Bernie's*, two low-level accountants are invited by their boss, Bernie, for a weekend partying at his mansion. The trouble is, Bernie has been embezzling money and a hit-man kills him, and in order for the accountants to escape they have to convince the hit-man that he missed and Bernie is still alive. What unfolds is two hours of ridiculous slap-stick comedy with dead Bernie. They tell Bernie jokes and move his hands to slap his knee. They prepare him a steak dinner and proceed to dispose of the steak in Bernie's lap. Why do they have to slap his hands on his knee and cut Bernie's steak for him? Because he's dead. Dead men don't laugh at jokes, dead men don't eat steaks. How do you know if you're spiritually alive? Alive men have a hunger for good food. Does your heart yearn to feast on the life-giving manna of God's word? Does your heart rejoice and delight over the things that God rejoices and delights over? These are good signs that you're alive; you can rightly marvel that you've been supernaturally born again.

I recently saw a friend that I made when I first joined the staff of the church. Our first meal together he said, "I don't know why, but I feel like everything at the church is always passing me by. I sit in small group after small group, my wife gets so much out of it, but I leave feeling isolated, confused, and discouraged." We looked at scripture and talked through a very clear presentation of the gospel, to which he said, "This is exactly what I've been missing!" Now when I see him around the church, time and time again there is joy in his face. My friend delights in the things of God with joy, he is born again. New birth is real!

When I first moved to Baton Rouge, I was raising support as a missionary when I met with a doctor to invite him to financially contribute to what God was doing on campus. We talked about God moving on campus, but the conversation eventually turned to discussing his son. This son was adrift in his faith over at LSU, dabbling in substances he shouldn't be, his father's was breaking. Sitting in his office, we both started to tear up while telling each other of how gracious God had been to turn our hearts toward Jesus. He wept over how much he loved

God, longed for his sovereign reign over his life, and desired for his son to know God's love in a genuine way. That father's heart longed for the life-giving manna of Jesus; he is born again. Incidentally, his son got involved in the ministry I led on campus, began to follow Christ, and I bumped into him the other day. He has a beautiful wife, adorable children, and went on an on about his love for his church. His heart loves the things that God loves. Why? Because his heart isn't dead to the things of God. The supernatural happened; he was born again. New birth is real!

The second thing our text teaches us today is that where the Spirit blows, he will cause an effect. When we rightly behold this reality, we can confidently beseech the Spirit to blow new birth into the hearts of others. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes."

Jesus wants Nicodemus to consider the nature of wind - it blows where it wishes, but note, it has effect. Jesus tells Nicodemus, you can hear it. You can see branches swaying and leaves rustling as its effect in the trees. Jesus wants Nicodemus to know - so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit; the Spirit is mysterious in how he moves in people's hearts, but He will be effective.

You might have a loved one that is far from the Lord right now. Earlier in their life they showed hunger for the Lord, but now you see very little signs of spiritual life in their heart or actions. You wonder if they'll ever turn around. Take heart, God's spirit is effective. In Romans 8:29-30 we find what theologians call the *Ordo Salutis*. It's Latin for the Order of Salvation. It's not a list of steps we do to obtain salvation, but rather tells from God's perspective what happens for God to birth someone to have spiritual life. It shows that being born again is God's responsibility and the lengths he has gone to make it effective. Romans 8 states, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." What I want you to see from these verses is the sovereignty of God. Before time began, God had his beloved in mind and out of his abundant mercy and grace, chose to powerfully grab them out of the hands of the enemy. The enemy is too anemic to withstand the powerful hand of God nor thwart his plans. He will effectually call and regenerate, working in their hearts so that they can and will respond to his initiative by faith and repentance, thus causing conversion. At that moment we are justified, adopted as God's children and sanctification begins.

If your loved one has known the Lord, but is now in wandering, realize that God is good and is working out his sovereign plan from before time. The intensity of the wind can vary, it might take longer than we think, but it will be effective. Those whom God blows His spirit of life upon will be regenerated to new life. If there is someone for whom your heart is burdened, pray that God will move. Pray with confidence knowing that His spirit is effective and the gates of hell will not prevail against his will.

The last thing to see from Jesus' discourse is that supernatural belief is required to be born again, and as a result, we should seek supernatural wisdom in helping loved ones as spiritual midwives. In verse fifteen, Jesus explains the type of belief that gives new birth to eternal life. He says to believe in the Son of Man, like the serpent lifted up, for eternal life. To understand what he means, we have to turn to Numbers 21 to read the context of what Moses was doing in the wilderness with a serpent of bronze.

God's people had rebelled against the Lord, causing fiery serpents to be in their midst that are now killing them. Their sin has literally brought death into the camp of Israel. The people cry out and Moses is told to make an object that looks like that which is causing death and raise it on a pole. This object isn't evil itself, it's simply a cast of bronze, but it looks like the evil that has been brought by Israel's rebellion. When it's raised on a stick, and people look to it, they will live. Clearly this is supernatural intervention on God's behalf to heal, for what does lifting a bronze representation of evil on a stick actually accomplish? But consider the supernatural intervention that is required for the people to look up. If I am a father that hears a snake has bitten a child three tents down, you'd better believe that I'd be doing everything possible to close every opening in my tent to keep the snakes away from my family. You hear of another family being bit and you would naturally be looking down checking every clump of tall grass for fear of death. You would want to constantly be looking down to do everything in your power to protect against the snakes; it's counterintuitive to look up.

In the same way, Jesus is saying this is the kind of faith that is required to be born again. You must abandon your natural inclination to fix things yourself, you must look up. Nicodemus had believed in the system; he had excelled in every man-centered way to experience the kingdom. But he is left dumbfounded and rejected in the middle of the night because belief leading to new birth is different; it's supernatural. Jesus, who had no sin within himself, took on the representation of sin as a criminal and was lifted high on a Roman pole of execution, that everyone who looks in faith to him alone for salvation will be saved from the penalties of their sin.

To help someone who is struggling from trusting in their own efforts for salvation to look up to Jesus requires supernatural power. We need to ask the Lord for supernatural wisdom to be effective spiritual midwives and spiritual obstetricians. A doctor who cares for a woman whose baby is at 20 weeks gestation has to do very different things from when the woman is dilated at 8 centimeters about to give birth. Likewise caring for a 3-day old baby is very different than caring for a 13 year old teenager. Ask the Lord for wisdom in how to talk to your coworker who is struggling over a breakup and is beginning to come to church. Is their language more like, "Yeah, I felt like I needed something, so I thought I'd come this Sunday." Or is their language more like, "I've been reading the Scriptures that my mother encouraged me to read. I sense God wants me to turn to him instead of the next boyfriend in the line, but I'm scared to death to surrender my life to Jesus because I know he's going to want control." Where those two friends are in the spiritual birth process requires a skilled midwife to aid them in the journey. Remember that the Lord is faithful to do the supernatural and bring about new birth; if we're sensitive to his leading as a spiritual midwife, we'll be used of God to usher in the celebration.

In closing, people are still coming to Jesus in the middle of the night inquiring about the kingdom. Some will walk away dejected. In his book *A Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel recounts his conversation with Charles Templeton, now in his 80's after over 50 years of denying Christ. Strobel asked him, "And how do you assess Jesus now?" "He was," Templeton began, "the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was a moral genius. His ethical sense was unique. He was the intrinsically wisest person that I've ever encountered in my life or in my readings. His commitment was total and led to his own death, much to the detriment of the world. What could one say about him except that this was a form of greatness? . . . Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. Yes . . . yes. And tough! Just look at Jesus. He castigated people. He was angry. People don't think of him that way, but they don't read the Bible. He had a righteous anger. He cared for the oppressed and exploited. There's no question that he had the highest moral standard, the least duplicity, the greatest compassion, of any human being in history. There have been many other wonderful people, but Jesus is Jesus...'

Then Templeton uttered the words Strobel never expected to hear from him. "And if I may put it this way," he said as his voice began to crack, 'I . . . miss . . . him!" With that tears flooded his eyes. He turned his head and looked downward, raising his left hand to shield his face from Strobel. His shoulders bobbed as he wept. Templeton fought to compose himself, sighed deeply and wiped away a tear. After a few more awkward moments, he waved his hand dismissively. Finally, quietly but adamantly, he insisted: "Enough of that."³

Templeton walked away because one must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven, not just be a fan of Jesus.

That late night in Jerusalem Nicodemus walked away from Jesus too. But his story wasn't done, God was calling him. In fact, we see in John 19 that Nicodemus was the one who boldly identified with Jesus in broad daylight by carrying away his crucified body. Your loved one who is wandering from Christ might be walking away today, but God still regenerates the dead to find new life in Him. Their story isn't done, use supernatural wisdom in how to assist in the process as a spiritual midwife. And for us in this sanctuary who love Jesus and are called by his name, let us marvel with thanksgiving that new life in Christ is true. Rejoice that being born again is real!

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/charles-templeton-missing-jesus/>