

# John 3:1

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Date: 12 December 1982

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[ 0 : 00 ] We shall turn now to the Gospel according to John, and the third chapter. And we shall read from verse 1, the Gospel of John, chapter 3 and verse 1.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. The same came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, know thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say to thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Now, by every human standard, Nicodemus is one of the most attractive men that we meet in the Gospels.

He was a Pharisee, as John tells us here, and yet he was a most attractive specimen of that generally unattractive class.

[ 1 : 38 ] He was a man in the highest degree respectable. He was a member of the Church. He was indeed a ruler of the Church.

He was a teacher or a theologian in Israel. He was a man who had a very high view of the Lord Jesus Christ, as a teacher sent from God.

A man who was genuinely interested in his Savior. And a man prepared to run some risk in trying to contact this fascinating teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

And I take it tonight that in all these qualities, he represents many of ourselves, respectable to the nth degree, talented, in our own way religious, in our own way interested in Christ, in our own way concerned too, to keep that interest a secret.

We find that this man came to the Savior, and I want to reflect for a moment on the way that Christ dealt with him, and especially on what Christ said to this very respectable and this very religious man.

[ 3 : 31 ] The Lord said to him, first of all, that he had to be born again. And I think we should pause for a moment to reflect upon the sheer devastatingness of that announcement.

Because it comes, Nicodemus, like a bolt from the blue. It hits him like a sledgehammer. You can see how John captures it without marvelous, unconscious art that is so characteristic of him.

In verse 2, Nicodemus is approaching the Lord so politely and so carefully, and everything is so beautifully under control.

Rabbi, we know, thou art a teacher sent from God. For no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with them.

The Lord moves in, moves almost at him. Jesus answered and said to him, Verily, verily, I say to thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

[ 5 : 05 ] There is no build up to it. There is no leading up to it. In a way, the blows unleashed and launched so terribly unexpectedly.

And it must have fit this man on an absolutely devastating force. It was devastating in its assumptions because it assumed that Nicodemus wasn't in the kingdom of heaven.

He was a Jew by birth. He was a Pharisee, a ruler and a teacher. He was a Christian. He was a Christian. And yet for the first time in his life, he is faced with reality by this man come from God.

The reality that he is not in the kingdom of God at all. And furthermore, he is faced with reality that in his present condition, it is impossible for him to enter the kingdom of God.

He is told that he cannot see it. And he is told that he hasn't the ability to enter it. Not only is he not in the kingdom, but he cannot remedy that defect in his own life and his own position.

[ 6 : 51 ] The Lord assumes in the moment of launching this fact at Nicodemus. That is a complete stranger to salvation.

And he assumes that he is totally incapable of doing anything about his own salvation. He is suffering from that most common of human diseases.

He is suffering from total depravity, from the corruption of his whole nature. It is not a localized disease.

It is a pervasive disease. It is a disease of the heart. A disease that permeates the whole of the soul.

It affects his mind, his emotions, his affections, his decisions. It affects even his conscience. And for a Pharisee to be told that, for a man who had always seen himself as a member of God's kingdom, to be told that he had this debilitating, this totally disabling disease that left him quite unfit to see or to enter the kingdom of God.

[ 8 : 28 ] God, he cannot see the truth because he is spiritually blind. He cannot love God because his heart is enmity against God.

He cannot believe in Christ. He cannot repent. He cannot return. He cannot hate his own sin. He can't abandon his own sin.

He can't choose God. He can't move to God because all that Christ says assumes that he is dead in trespasses and in sin.

There is a terrible statement in our own confession of faith that says to us that man is totally disabled from all spiritual good accompanying salvation.

He is totally disabled from all spiritual good. He is absolutely incapable of doing anything that is spiritually good.

[ 9 : 48 ] God now the confession chooses its language carefully. It is not that man is totally incapable of good.

There is a civil good of which man is capable and there is a domestic good of which man is capable and there is a cultural good of which man is capable and there is a moral good of which man is capable.

but he is totally disabled from any spiritual good accompanying salvation. Man as he faces the demands and the imperatives of God is impotent.

Let me go beyond that. Man as he faces the offers of God is impotent. Man as he faces the offer of Christ is impotent.

Man as he is faced with the offer of the love of God is impotent. He's impotent before God's commands and he's impotent before God's offers and he's impotent before God's invitations.

[ 11 : 07 ] God gives him the clearest possible invitations. God says come to me and yet man is impotent. Man is impotent before God's pleadings.

We have the marvelous and glorious and moving reality in the Christian gospel that God pleads with men to be saved. God unbended me.

Not only unimperious sums, not only a matter of fact offer, not only earnest and sincere invitation, but God's almost emotional involvement in the offer of the gospel as man pleads, as God pleads, as God weeps over lost mankind.

And yet man is totally incapable of responding to the offer, of responding to the invitation, of responding even to the pleadings of almighty God.

And all of that was assumed in the Lord's terrible word Nicodemus, you must be born again. He had to be born again because he was dead in trespasses and sins.

[ 12 : 27 ] The Lord's word was devastating also in that it called for a radical transformation. It called for something radical, something that went right down to the root of Nicodemus' personality.

It wasn't a matter of superficial or surface change. It wasn't some adjustment in his appearance or in his external modes of behavior.

it was something that had to go right down into the very depths of his being. He had to be remade.

He had to become a new man and a new creature. He had to be given a new heart, a new mind.

He had to be given new presuppositions, a new perspectives, new priorities, new criteria, a new way of looking at things.

[ 13 : 38 ] He had to be given what I may even call new prejudices. It was to be a new creation.

There had to be the destruction of what he had been.

And there had to be transformation that went right down into the depths of his unconscious. Let me ponder it for a moment.

Let's reflect on the gravity and solemnity of that. That it is no use tempering with the problems which sin creates.

It's no use dealing with the symptoms. it's no use dealing even with particular sins, with particular areas of indiscipline and failure in my own life.

It's the root that's wrong. The soil is wrong. The heart is wrong. Right down in the well springs of personality.

[ 14 : 51 ] Right down in the very depths out of which all life and all character comes. Right down there there has to be transformation.

But there was more than that. It was devastating because what the Lord was saying to Nicodemus was that he had to become a little child again.

We are to receive the kingdom of God as little children. That's what conversion does to people. It may be that when God calls us by his grace we are mature men and women.

We may even when called by the grace of God be important men and women. We may hold responsible positions in secular life as Nicodemus did.

We may be distinguished in industry and commerce and politics in the professions whatever. But conversion turns every man into a little child.

[ 16 : 01 ] It's a case of going into the womb again and coming out a dependent infant. And you have the great paradox that a man may be in the secular sphere so important and so strong and so self reliant.

Yet in the spiritual sphere he has to be nurtured, has to be fed with the sincere milk of the world, has to be guided and taught how to walk, has to be led by the hand, has to become teachable and dependent, has to become, as I said, a little child.

The Lord is saying, Nicodemus, look, you're dead in sins. You need a change that goes right down into the depths of your personality.

You need to become a little child again. And you find that so beautifully in the experience of Saul of Tarshish.

when the Lord erupts in his grace into the life of that man. And you have the great picture of Saul blinded, led by Ananias.

[ 17 : 29 ] He's an infant. He's like a child. He's absolutely clueless. He doesn't understand what's hitting. He doesn't know where he's going or where he's coming from.

He doesn't know where to turn. He's in complete darkness. He's a baby. And it's one of the most terrible demands in the gospel that I tonight should say to mature men and women, to students, to intelligent people, to people who have just struggled out of childhood into adolescence and stand in the full consciousness offering you strength of adulthood and manhood and womanhood.

You must become a child again. You may be so competent in your own sphere. And yet the moment we become converts to Jesus Christ, that moment we are back in the nursery.

we are back in school. We're having to learn it all. We're having to be spoon fed by our fathers and mothers in Christ.

We have to be nurtured by the flock of God. We have to be cared for, taught, provided, for, and protected by those more matured in faith than ourselves.

[ 19 : 02 ] But there was something more devastating still. And that was this. The Lord was insisting on a change that Nicodemus could do nothing about.

You must be born again. And yet there is no way that he can say, Lord, how can I do it?

What's a technique? What's a technology? what are the 70 steps by which I can regenerate myself?

Because the whole thing is out of his hand. We must, he says, be born from above. We must be born again by the Spirit of God.

It is something that we cannot do to ourselves. It is terribly important that we should grasp clearly that the new birth is not an imperative.

[ 20 : 13 ] imperative. Now, let's be clear about it. The new birth is imperative. It is imperative in the sense that it is absolutely necessary.

But it is not unimperative. In other words, it is not a divine command. It is not a human responsibility.

It is not an obligation imposed upon me. It is not a duty. There is no commandment anywhere in God's word to be born again.

There are commandments to love God, commands to repent, and commands to believe, and commands even of a passive kind that tell me to be filled with the Spirit.

But I find nowhere a command that says be born again. And that's why for many, many years I refrain from preaching this doctrine.

[ 21 : 23 ] Because I couldn't get the application, because I can't get the imperative, I don't know where to take you, or I didn't know where to take you. Because I couldn't distill a duty from this great chapter.

And I'm saying still that I cannot distill or deduce a duty from the Lord's teaching on the new birth. I cannot turn it into a duty, because it is not a duty.

It's no duty, because it is God's own act. It is something God does in the sheer sovereignty of His grace.

It is something in which and at which I am totally dependent. All I can do is say, will the wind blow this way? Your friends in Christ can say, will the wind blow His way?

And if I have my way tonight, if I control the wind, or the Spirit of God, I would erect Him into this church, into every pew, into every heart.

[ 22 : 42 ] But I don't control that wind. The church of God is absolutely helpless at this point. The wind blows where it listed.

Nicodemus, is told he's not in the kingdom. He's told that before he can enter the kingdom, he must undergo radical change.

And he's told that there is no way that he by himself can effect that radical change. He's brought to a point where he's dependent totally on the grace of God.

He may pray, Lord, cause thy wind to blow this way. He may pray, come, creator spirit. He may hope, he may long, he may plead, but he's still standing before the vertical sovereignty of God.

And I would urge tonight that if any of us is inclined to take salvation for granted, we pay heed to that. If we thought that respectability was a passport to heaven, then Nicodemus is God's word that says, no, respectability is no such passport.

[ 24 : 24 ] If we thought that a few surface changes in our own lifestyle could secure a passport to heaven, then Christ is saying no to that.

And if we ever thought for a moment that we could manage our own salvation, then Christ is saying to us, no, cannot be arranged, cannot be guaranteed, cannot be manipulated, cannot be promised, I am standing before the sheer vertical sovereignty of Almighty God.

The wind must blow. Until that wind blow my direction, I cannot enter the kingdom, and I cannot see the kingdom.

How curious, it's a grammar of theology, and the grammar of the gospel, that something is imperative, which is not unimperative, that something is obligatory, and yet it's not an obligation, but there is something that I must do, and yet, I cannot do it.

And I do please want you to stand before it, to stand before the mountain, to stand before this cliff, to stand before this terrible teaching, that unless I am changed, in a way that God alone can change me, then I'll never be saved.

[ 26 : 19 ] And I'm going on to ask, are there signs in my life, and signs in you, that there has been such a transformation, one that went right down into the depths, that went below my desires, and below my opinions, below my decisions, into the font, and source, and root, and ground, and substructure, of all my thinking, and all my longing, and all my priorities, days, I am asking, has the wind blown, I'm asking, has the grace of God erupted into my life, has there been dislocation, can you remember the time, when you were a babe in

Christ, can you remember the time, when you were so confused, and you were so ignorant, and you were so unsteady, on your feet, because you had just been born, you hadn't found your spiritual legs, can you remember that, that, that which is born of the spirit, is spirit, have I become a spiritual man, where the obsessions, and the preoccupations, and the prejudices, are those, of the spirit of God, I have said before, that observation and experience, are plying me, with a terrible suggestion, that we are frightened of being religious over much, that there is such a fear, in our denomination, such a fear, among our young people, of being hyper-spiritual, that we are ceasing to be spiritual at all, and I'm saying I want to go back to the radicalness of it, to this wind, to this breath, which leaves nothing the way it found it, which causes great divides between past and present, which creates great fault lines in the structures of our personality, reality, that makes me a new

creation,

I have new prejudices, I have new presuppositions, I have new criteria, I have, if the Freudian analysis is a correct one, I have a new unconscious, and I have a new id, and I have a new ego, new, I have a new driving force, I have new horizons, nothing is what it used to be, there is no way that you can carry the old man across that divide, there is no way you can take the old heart into new life, we are new creations, and I want to face it true, for myself, that that is not something true of some

Christians, it is something definitive of every Christian, Christian, and I want newness, I want freedom, I said before I want freedom, I want an end to humbug, an end to hypocrisy, I want an end to legalism, and an end to the religion of pretend, but I am not prepared to buy any of these at the cost of a lessening of spirituality, and I am saying, no one is born spiritual, I am saying, not even a person with the most marvelous free church pedigree, and the most inestimable free church privileges, is born spiritual, we have to go into the crucible, we have to know the effect of this wind, we have to know transformation, transfiguration, recreation, we have to know destruction, the terrible crush of my old personality, in the ruins of palingenesis, in the ruins of regeneration, it has to end what used to be, there must be a new beginning, and here that comes this nice, quiet, decent, scholarly, respectable man to

Christ, and Christ hits him with a pox, and he says to him, and ceremoniously, you must be born again, and it may be tonight, that I address no one, who is harboring such an illusion, it may be, that I address no one, who thought he was in the kingdom and this part, but I am sure of this, I address some, who are in the kingdom, I address myself in the kingdom, and we and I have not realized the imperativeness of this newness, we have not realized the constraint of being born again, that we have no right to be what we were, we have to live new, we have to live nobly, we have to live in the light of this terrific character listen, in our own minds, another cataclysm, it may have been quiet, there may have been no terribly obvious geophysical accompaniments, no apparent psychiatric precipitates, maybe the wind was very gentle, but that does mean that the change was not radical, radical, and if the change was radical, then let us see the evidence of the change in the radical transformation of the lifestyle, and let us, my friends, be careful, lest our newfound freedom in the church of

[ 34 : 16 ] Christ, lest our newfound discovery of liberty of conscience, beguile us into new bondage to the things seen and tempera, and lest we find ourselves again deriving our greatest pleasure, our recreation, not from the fellowship of Christ and the fellowship of his church, but from those same sources from which the world and the old man and the unregenerate man derives his pleasure.

pleasure, when we relax, where do we relax, when we want to enjoy ourselves, where do we enjoy ourselves?

I would dare to suggest that we are a pleasure, that's where we're tested.

What do I love doing? where do I love be? What is your ideal way of spending an evening? Is it with Christ and his people?

Well, we say we're in love with Christ. Well, being in love means that we have a certain preferred company.

[ 35 : 57 ] being in love with Christ means that he is our preferred company. I bring you back again to Thomas Chalmers' great sermon, the expulsive power of a new affection, the expulsive power of a new love.

if my young friends enjoy reading novels, if they enjoy cinema, if they enjoy theatre, if they enjoy their football as participants or as spectators, then I will defend their freedom and their own right to choose and I shall protect them, so far as I am able, from disciplinary action.

But if my young friends give the impression that there is nothing they love more than they love these, then I will ask them questions.

And I will say to them, what is the expulsive power of a new love? That experience in which we stop doing things not because they are wrong, but because we've lost the taste for them and they've lost the relish.

And it's the absence of that that abolished me. The absence of that expulsive power of the love of God.

[ 38 : 04 ] What peaceful hours I once enjoyed, how sweet their memory still, and they have left an aching void, the world can never fill.

And I'm saying that if the void in our hearts and the emptiness in our lives, the pain in our souls can be assuaged or alleviated by anything which this world can offer us, then I would say we have never tasted the expulsive power of a new love.

That which is born of the spirit is spirit. it. And I want to insist as my church struggles for its survival and looks for its soul, I want to insist that the spiritual man is not to be an object of ridicule or of humor.

The spiritual man is what every young believer endeavors to be. there is a pseudo spirituality and there is a hyper spirituality and I care for none of these.

But I do not want to see the expulsion of religion and the expulsion of spirituality and the expulsion of piety and the expulsion of devotion and the expulsion of prayer.

[ 39 : 54 ] I don't want to see these expelled in the name of freedom. That which is born of the spirit is the spirit.

Well, I must move on. I said before to you that many years have passed since I last ventured to pitch on this theme.

I abstained as I said because I could never see the application. I could not see that I could get from the Lord's teaching on the new birth to some duty with which I could confront my congregation.

But let me tell you this. In class one day through a discussion it became clear to me through one of the students that the Lord didn't say to Nicodemus only you must be born again.

There was another word too said the student and that word is this. Verse 40 as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[ 41 : 29 ] And it seems to me that these two great verses are part of the conversation of Nicodemus as well as the preceding thirteen verses.

And what I'm saying with is this. But the Lord said not only you must be born again that the Lord not only confronted with this terrible reality that he could do nothing about this imperative which was not unimperative but the Lord also confronted with the clearest possible duty and that was faith.

He said to him you must be born again and he said to him you must look on the son of man.

Now you see the glory of the track and only in the briefest possible manner hinted there is still here the great the insistent suggestion that this man needs to be healed.

This Pharisee this bishop in the church this great theologian this outstanding statesman but he needs to be healed his whole soul is wrong my whole soul may be wrong there is a need for healing that is the whole point of the story of the brazen serpents it was a plague the only answer to the plague was to look at the brazen serpent in the same way Nicodemus has a plague for all his respectability he's got a plague the Lord comes beside him again he's not leaving him be he has devastated him by telling him he's blind by telling him he's impotent and he's left that theme alone now for some eight or nine verses then here it is again you are in the same position as those people who had that plague of serpents you have a plague but that wasn't all he said to him you are confronted by the reality of grace you have the reality of your own spiritual disease that's terrible but you have also the reality of grace just as the bracing serpent was lifted up so the son of man is lifted up

[ 44 : 36 ] Christ a savior Christ on the cross Christ in the midst of the throne and he is there he is lifted up he is clearly visible he is utterly familiar he is totally accessible he is there as the great embodiment and the great message of the love of God because we're still in this whole discourse in verse 16 for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son God so loved God so loved well Nicodemus you have the reality of your plague but you have also the reality of the love of God that love which has dealt with sin that love which offers you salvation that love which invites you to come to salvation that love that pleads with you and begs you and ventures and beseeches you to come to salvation it is lifted up

Christ is near you you stand before the reality of your plague you stand before the reality of grace and you must look look look you you who must be born again and can do nothing about it you are commanded and invited and pled with by God to look look at the uplifted and exalted Christ and I'm saying that we have to look and you have to look let me give you a big word jargon word the bible's doctrine of faith is voluntaristic that is it is decisional you have to choose you have to decide look maybe maybe some of you are frightened to look you are frightened to look because it's going to be an awful nuisance if you become

Christians it's going to cause terrible disruption if you become Christians it's going to cause terrible embarrassment how are you going to explain to your friends how can you cancel this appointment and that other appointment and so you're frightened to look in case that look bewitches you in case that look beguiles you in case that look proves riveting and irrevocable and all I say is think of the plague it's the plague of sin over against the inconveniences of discipleship look and I say again it's voluntaristic it's a decision you have it in psalm 34 they look to him undelighted where not shamed were their faces this poor man cried

God heard and saved him from all his distresses it's that kind of look let me put it this way there is a journey you must make from where you are to where Christ is what the Bible calls a coming no one ever reached that destination without deciding to go and I'm saying you make the decision to make that journey from where you are to where Christ is and I'll tell you something marvelous about the journey it can be done in a look you can move from where you are in the plague to where Christ is on the cross and the throne on the throne having been crucified you can make that journey in a look let me be more precise

Psalms 34 God saved them from all their distresses and I am saying to you you can convey all your distresses to Christ in a look you can transport all your care to Christ in a look you can transfer them to Christ in a look this poor man cried God heard and saved from all his distresses Nicodemus he said you must be born again and only God can do it for you Nicodemus he said to you must look to [ 51 : 00 ] Christ you must do it you must decide to do it I don't know tonight what your distresses are some of us conscious of sin some of us conscious of care some of us conscious of our own personality problems some of us frightened of tomorrow some of us feeling guilty about yesterday let us convey them to Christ in a look I to the hills lift mine eyes from whence doth come my need pondered the psalmist but he said no my safety cometh from the

Lord and I am saying to you well whatever the inconvenience whatever the parties you must cancel the trips you cannot go on the friends you must abandon even the hobbies and careers you must give up all that's possible I still plead look look up I want you to dare to look at Christ and in that look let your soul speak let your heart confess let every care be transferred let us pray oh

Lord we ask thy blessing that thy word may have some relevance that it may have some power that it may in some way speak to needs that we cannot understand and cannot describe or define keep us Lord and bless us till we meet again and bless all who minister here in the weeks to come that their ministry may be complimentary that it may be powerful that it may cover areas which the recent past and the remote past may have left uncovered that it may grow into proportionate manhood and womanhood in Christ our Lord for thy glory sake amen our closing praises in psalm 34 we shall sing verses 5 to 10 to the tune jackson's psalm 34 verses 5 to 10 they looked to him and lightened were not shamed were their faces we shall sing four stanzas to God's praise he looked to him and find them were not children in their places mean each and take where goes car here Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 56 : 07 ] Thank you.

Thank you.