

## Born Again into life

### John 3

SLIDE – sports fan

There's two types of sports fan. As far as I can see. There's the regular kind. Like this lady here. Who's at the tennis. You turn up. You pay your ten dollars for a drink. You wear responsible clothing. You clap on the big points. You have a nice day out.

There's the regular fan. Then there's the FANATIC.

SLIDE - fanatic

There's one example. But you know what I'm talking about. We're talking about. Painted faces and costumes. We're talking about crazy hair and crazy noisy instruments and chants. It's a show. There's a bunch of aussies who proudly call themselves the fanatics.

Well you might have heard of a bunch of religious people. A particularly fanatical bunch who call themselves BORN AGAIN CHRISTIANS. And in some ways it seems like there's two types of christians. The regular kind. And those BORN AGAIN.

And I don't know what you think of the fanatics at the tennis. But people tend not to think too highly of the born again fanatics.

I remember being on the train one day. I think I was in my twenties. I was with some people I'd gone to school with. They were talking about a guy John who used to go to our school. He was one of those rough guys. Tough guys. Always in trouble. Fighting. Detention. He might have even been expelled I can't remember. At the very least John dropped out of school as soon as he could. And these guys were talking about John and one of them said. Did you hear about John? No, what happened? He turned into one of those BORN AGAIN CHRISTIANS!

And they way they were talking. It was worse than turning hari Krishna. It was worse than being what he was. As if.. it was so much better when he was a thug!

But that's not an unusual response. Give me a choice between a guy who'll rob me and leave me in the gutter. And a born a again Christian. And I'll take the former.

The born again Christian's gonna TALK TO ME ABOUT JESUS! The born again christians going to wear those socks and sandals and not work and go all hippie. And talk about peace and flowers 'n stuff. Fanatics.....

So, as a Christian if someone asks me if I'm one of those BORNAGAINS. I think I know what they're thinking...and I want to say no...I'm not. I'm not that picture you have in your head. And even if I do....try to leave the house wearing sandals and jeans.... Cathy stops me.

But if I'm a Christian at all...the truth is....I'm born again. The truth is. A Christian's someone who's born into a new family. Or they're not a Christian at all. The truth is.... That's what Jesus has come for.

Which you might find a bit shocking or offensive or just plain confusing. Like Nicodemus.

But if you want to grab hold of life. This is critical.

Your presumptions about what it is to be a Christian...may just be keeping you from the fullness of life that Jesus brings.

Now, before we get into this conversation. It's worth just clearing up one thing. And that is. When Jesus talks about being born again. The greek word he uses can mean above as well as again. It can mean both. So it can read born again, or born from above. And down in verse 31 we've got the same greek word there, and that's how it reads.

**John 3:31** <sup>31</sup> "The one who comes from above is above all;

Wouldn't make sense to say. He who comes from again is above all.

So the word has a sort of ambiguity. Which language sometimes does. But it's helpful to keep it in mind. Because you might think when Jesus talks about being born again it's something like reincarnation. You need to be born again....in that sense. And if you thought that you'd be wrong.

And that's part of the tension in the dialogue I think. Nicodemus just isn't getting it.

He's thinking about literal birth. And Jesus has got another kind of rebirth in mind. A rebirth from above. Into a new family.

Let me take you back to chapter one. Because that's John's point as well. See in verse 12 there John talks about this un-natural birth.

He was in the world. Talking about Jesus. The world was made through him. But didn't know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Verse 12

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

There's no labour ward involved. Because John says. They're born NOT OF BLOOD. In other words. Not a natural birth. Not born of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

So over the next two weeks. Nicodemus this week, and the woman at the well next week. We'll see a huge contrast.

On one hand you can be a teacher of religion. From a family of teachers of religion. A high ranked church official. You can tick a bunch of religious boxes off....and find you're not part of the family of God. Walking around in the darkness....

On the other hand. It can look like you'll never make the grade but somehow you find you're right there at the centre. Calling God dad. Living life as one of his kids.

And it's all to do with whether or not you RECEIVE JESUS. Whether or not you BELIEVE IN HIS NAME. That's the critical thing.

There's two preconceptions that are wrong. And we're looking at the first one this week.

So, as Nicodemus makes his way to see Jesus. It's night time. And here's a leader one of Jesus' own people. One of their teachers. Slinking under cover of darkness to see Jesus.

This is what he says.

Verse 2.

**John 3:2** "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Now, they're the most coherent words Nicodemus gets to say in the whole bible. The rest of the time he's just basically saying HUH?

I don't understand. I don't understand.

And you might get why when you see Jesus response there.

See Nicodemus is a conflicted guy. His team are the good guys. Or are they the bad guys? They say they're from God. But Jesus is awesome. His teaching. His miracles. The signs. John says. We know you're from God. But we're from God. Look at my robe. Look at my beard. I'm a card carrying Pharisee for crying out loud.

And Jesus you come along with credentials that are screaming out.

So poor Nicodemus is conflicted.

I guess Jesus is just cutting right to the chase. Which is probably pretty kind of him when you think about it.

Jesus says.

**John 3:3** "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

And those words. They're not the answer to a question. Nicodemus didn't even ask a question. But they're the key to the tension.

And if Nicodemus the TEACHER OF ISRAEL wants any hope of being part of the Kingdom, it's not just a matter of being part of the JEWISH RULING COUNCIL. Or even less, being a PRESBYTERIAN or a BAPTIST. The thing he'll need MOST OF ALL is to be BORN FROM ABOVE HIMSELF.

See, you can even be what others might think is fanatically RELIGIOUS. And not be part of the KINGDOM OF GOD. Not be IN THE FAMILY. Which is a scary thought, isn't it?

You can be baptised. You can take communion. You can KEEP THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. And still not see the Kingdom of God. Because you're not BORN FROM ABOVE.

If that's PERPLEXING FOR YOU, keep reading. Because it's PERPLEXING FOR NICODEMUS AS WELL.

**John 3:4** <sup>4</sup> "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

But see, that's not at all what Jesus is talking about, is it.

He's not talking about PHYSICAL BIRTH of NATURAL DESCENT by HUMAN DECISION OR A FATHERS WILL from a MOTHER'S WOMB. He's talking about being BORN from above. Born OF GOD.

Jesus puts him right. Verse 5. He says, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he's born of WATER... AND THE SPIRIT. Flesh gives birth to flesh. But THE SPIRIT gives birth to Spirit.

SLIDE - Ezekiel

Now it's possible Jesus has in mind the prophet Ezekiel's words in chapter 36. You can see them there. He's talking about what God's going to do for his people in the future.

**Ezekiel 36:25-27** <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> 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.

Slide

<sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

So here's John the Baptist in chapter 1 sprinkling water on people. A symbol of repentant hearts. And he's pointing to Jesus saying. I BAPTISE WITH WATER... ONE IS COMING AFTER ME who'll BAPTISE WITH GOD'S SPIRIT.

It's not enough to be BORN JEWISH, and it's not enough even to be BORN OF YOUR MOTHER a second time. What he needs is to be BORN OF GOD. Born of THE SPIRIT. BORN FROM ABOVE. Start over.

Now. That's a massive challenge for Nicodemus. Jesus is shredding his image of what it's like with God. If you like. This is a diagnosis. And Jesus has just diagnosed the problem not just of so many Jews. But anyone who thinks the same. That if you're looking for life from God, it's about doing religious stuff. Or about birthright. Or superior knowledge. Or even those religious rites, like baptism.

Every now and then I get a phone call. "Can you baptise my child." That'd be great. I'm not a churchy person, but I'll just pop down one Sunday and you can sprinkle the old water, ok? As if the water's going to do the trick. Now, in light of what Jesus has just said to Nicodemus....what's the worst thing in the world I could do...in that situation? The worst thing I could do as far as I can see. Would be to say yeah no problem. It'd be easier. I wouldn't be that horrible guy at the Presbyterian church who's denying my child a place in heaven.

It'd be easier. But I'd be sending the opposite message to what Jesus is saying here.

John's told us already. It's about BELIEVING... IN THE ONE WHO HE SENT. That the SON OF GOD... has been SENT FROM GOD... to GATHER THE FAMILY OF GOD. And separate out those who REALLY ARE from those who THINK THEY ARE.

SLIDE – 1:12

“To all who RECEIVED HIM... to those who believed in his name... he gave the right to become CHILDREN OF GOD.”

And anything else is a false and empty hope. Like water sprinkled on your head.

Now, it's one of the few things that make grown men cry isn't it. The birth of your little baby. Especially as the first baby comes along. I didn't cry, I was too busy fainting for that. But it was pretty good.

And Jesus says. As people turn to him. There's something exciting going on.

Some people are brought up with it. Never NOT KNOWING IT. Some people come to it at age 63.

I'm told at the Billy Graham crusades in Australia fifty years or so ago. Huge numbers of people were coming forward.

Either way. Whether is a slow process or not.

People are being BORN INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD. Just by PUTTING THEIR FAITH IN JESUS. And they're finding life.

Jesus says to Nicodemus in verse 7, “You shouldn't be surprised at me saying, “YOU MUST BE BORN FROM ABOVE.” You must be born AGAIN. By the SPIRIT. Born of God.

But somehow Nicodemus IS SURPRISED. HOW CAN THIS BE? Verse 9. What are you TALKING ABOUT?

Especially because I guess he's a TEACHER OF ISRAEL who's used to saying "EVERYTHING'S OKAY FOR US because WE'RE THE PEOPLE OF GOD ALREADY."

Verse 10, Jesus says to him, "You are Israel's teacher, and you don't UNDERSTAND THESE THINGS?" You're an EXPERT... and you DON'T KNOW THIS STUFF? You're Israel's TEACHER... and you undecided whether or not to BELIEVE... in the ONE WHO'S COME FROM ABOVE?

Jesus isn't really stroking this envoy from the Jewish leaders is he?

Surely he'd win more friends by telling them what they want to hear?

Pat Nicodemus on the back and tell him what a great job the boys are doing. Bury the hatchet.

But that'd be cruel. If there's a real problem here. And it's not just Nicodemus who needs to hear this. It's not just the nation of Israel. It's anyone who wants to presume things are good with God.

There's an unspoken confidence in a lot of Aussies who reckon she'll be right mate. I don't really think God judges people. The average idea that you can IGNORE GOD and you can TAKE NO NOTICE OF JESUS and it'll still ALL PAN OUT OKAY IN THE END if you're a DECENT PERSON and you haven't HURT ANYBODY and you've given everyone a FAIR GO. And that's the Australian DEFAULT POSITION.

When you think about it. Israel at least had a bunch of prophets and the law and some sort of basis for thinking they'd be right. We don't even have any of that.

And if Jesus is saying. That even if his own people. Even if Israel doesn't believe in his name, then they don't have the right to call themselves children of God. Why should the rest of us?

The trouble is, says Jesus, this is an Israel that's already **STANDING UNDER GOD'S JUDGMENT**. This is an Israel that all through history has **PRESUMED ON GOD**. In a **WORLD THAT'S DONE THE SAME**.

This is a world described down in verse 19.

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but **MEN LOVED DARKNESS INSTEAD OF LIGHT** because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear his deeds will be exposed.”

Now you might find that offensive.

I suspect Nicodemus did.

But the fact is, Jesus says to him, **EVERYTHING IS NOT OKAY**.

When it comes to Israel, says Jesus, it's just like that **TIME IN THE PAST**. When Moses was leading the people out of slavery and the **PEOPLE COMPLAINED** and God sent **JUDGMENT AMONG THEM**. Poisonous **SNAKES**.

It's one of those stories that'll give you nightmares. I remember a few months ago I had one of those nightmares where I physically jumped in my bed. I woke myself up. Because I was being chased by a snake. And I hadn't even seen a snake. No idea where it came from.

Jesus says, REMEMBER THE TIME GOD SENT SNAKES. In judgment. God was ANGRY. Israel was UNDER JUDGMENT. The whole nation was CONDEMNED.

Except that GOD GAVE A WAY OUT.

Here's what happened. God judged them. But he GAVE A SOLUTION AS WELL. But back in Numbers chapter 11, God says to Moses make a BRASS SNAKE. And put it on a pole. And when the people LOOK UP TO IT, they'll be healed.

LOOK UP AND LIVE.

Jesus says, it's LIKE THAT.

Nicodemus, you might be RELIGIOUS. But like Israel in the past, you're under God's judgment. But here's the thing.

Verse 14.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who BELIEVES IN HIM may have eternal life.

*And then the most famous verse in the bible.*

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.

The way out of judgment. The way out of PERISHING under the anger of God. The way to have LIFE. The way to be BORN FROM ABOVE.

Is to look up at the sign of JUDGMENT. Look up at the SON OF MAN LIFTED UP on the cross. And watch him TAKE YOUR JUDGMENT FOR YOU. And TAKE IT AWAY. Believe. And have life.

Now that's not about being religious. That's not about being BORN IN THE RIGHT FAMILY. It's not about being JEWISH.

### **SLIDE 21 – FIND LIFE**

See, it's possible to be a fully signed up religious person, it's possible to be a fully signed up Presbyterian, and STILL NOT GET IT. To be trusting in your own goodness. In your own basic decency. And not be LOOKING TO THE SON OF MAN LIFTED UP. And taking God's judgment away. And then WASHING US, then remaking us, BY THE SPIRIT. Into what we were always MEANT TO BE.

John doesn't give away anything more about Nicodemus here. Whether he got it. What he did. There's some hints later on that he took what Jesus said to heart. But again. The point is. What about you? That's why John's writing.

The reason Jesus CAME FROM THE FATHER... the reason Jesus was BORN FROM ABOVE... was to make it possible for people like US to be BORN FROM ABOVE AS WELL. Children of God. At the cost of the cross.

Read it again. John 1 verse 12. Who is it who's born of God? It's the one who receives the Lord Jesus; who believes in his name. "To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, HE GAVE THE RIGHT TO BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD. Born not of natural descent. BORN OF GOD."

If you've done that, and I don't care if you want to call it BORN AGAIN or BORN FROM ABOVE. You might not even REMEMBER the point in time. In fact, not many people DO remember being born, do they? But if you've done that and you find yourself BELIEVING IN THE LORD JESUS, then BE ASSURED. It might seem simple. But there it is.

It's NOT FANATICAL. It's just that through NOTHING THAT YOU'VE DONE to deserve it, you've been BORN INTO A NEW FAMILY with an incredible inheritance. And you've been given LIFE. And life eternal. It's not that you're a PRESBYTERIAN or a CATHOLIC or anything else. But that you're a genuine BORN OF THE SPIRIT Christian. And it's either that, or it's nothing at all.