

August 17, 2008

## “You Can’t Get There From Here”

John 3:1-15

FCF: Self-dependence, self-assurance, self-delusion in approaching God

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Because of the nature of our need,  
(magnet) our only hope is to be born again.

### **SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

What does it take to live a truly spiritual life? To live for God, with an awareness of Him, to be right with Him? Suppose someone came to your house at 3:00 am, put a ladder up to a second-floor window, and began to climb in. What would you do? Likely shoot them. But what right would you have? Can’t a man come into your house any way he wants? No? Why not? What if he insists on that right? Does that change anything?

We have certain ways we’ve laid out that a person can come into our house – through the door, by an invitation. There’s a parallel here to how we can come to God. Only by the way He has laid out. No matter how many other ways we might create. No matter how many other doors or windows we might try. Jesus spoke quite plainly of this.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [John 3:1-15](#)

### **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

### **SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

“You can’t get there from here.” Such is a feeling we can have trying to get from one place to another. I remember when we lived in Clover, SC (outside of Charlotte, NC) and the trips to meet my parents on the Outer Banks. Because of how the interstates ran, what should have been a six-hour trip often stretched well past eight. Especially with little ones in tow, you just had the feeling that “you can’t get there from here.”

Now in that case, the expression was a bit figurative. But in other cases, it can be more literal. Think with me. Where are we trying to get to? Justice, compassion, mercy lived out. Wholeness and integrity to our relationships. Meaning, impact, answers, significance. Inner peace, outer peace, peace with God. That’s what we’re trying to get to. Okay, with that in mind, where then are we? Well, in the immortal words of C3-PO to R2-D2 in Star Wars Episode V, “*I’m standing here in pieces while you’re having delusions of grandeur.*” That’s where we are – in pieces. What maps, routes, paths are we prone to take? Trying new things – seminars, podcasts, Oprah’s booklist. Trying old things – working harder. Doing more and more sincerely. And what does Jesus say to us about all that? Simply this. “You can’t get there – where you long to be – from here.”

Which brings us to John 3. ([READ John 2:23-25](#)) This leads then straight into a series of encounters that bear out this very thing starting with this dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. These longings in our hearts for “there” are longings God has put there for Himself. We’re hard-wired to hunger for Him. The stirring, the struggling, the striving for something more, the exertion of all our energy and the exhausting ourselves in the process all points to this. But “You can’t get there – where you were made to be – from here.” What we need is to be reborn, regenerated, “born again” – a term that has been crassly misused so much in recent years and thus so sadly misunderstood.

But the nature of our need is so profound, so deep and so complete, that’s what we need – to be born again. Three questions, three responses – let’s look at them.

### **I. ASSUMPTIONS CHALLENGED**

The first of these involves a challenge to our assumptions ([READ John 3:1-3](#)).

#### *A) Nicodemus’ Question*

What is Nicodemus asking? At this point, it’s an implied question.

1. How he sees himself

He is “a man of the Pharisees” and “a ruler of the Jews.” He is highly trained and greatly dedicated to the Old Testament law and the pursuit of pure religion. He comes with high credentials, highly regarded among the people and his peers. So he thinks he’s qualified.

2. How he approaches Jesus

Qualified to investigate, interview. He comes wondering if the waiting for the “kingdom of God” is over – understood as the long anticipated era when God would clearly show His sovereign rule and reign. Nicodemus is concerned for its timing. So he comes “at night” – possibly not to be seen or just to have uninterrupted time with this teacher.

*B) Jesus’ Response*

All with so many assumptions. And Jesus sets all his assumptions on their head.

1. Declaring his need

For Jesus is intent on Nicodemus seeing his need. Nicodemus began this conversation respectfully, addressing Jesus in terms true but not going nearly far enough. Jesus, knowing what’s on his mind, cuts to the chase. It’s not the timing of the kingdom at issue. It’s the terms. All titles, status, race, and accomplishments go out the window. Jesus levels the ground and insists on the need to be “born again” or “born from above.”

2. Seeing his state

Jesus sees Nicodemus’ state and declares his need. Why? For this man cannot see the kingdom. As John has noted, Nicodemus has come “at night” – likely not just a historical footnote but also a term John uses repeatedly to describe a moral and spiritual darkness.

His assumptions are then challenged. He cannot see and needs a new birth.

*Illustration:*

Think about it this way. How would you go about hiding a twenty-thousand ton battleship on the open sea? Interesting question ([READ Chapell, “Journey” quote](#)):

*The first really successful attempt to camouflage a ship in the twentieth century came about through a method that was exactly the opposite of what one would imagine. Those were the days before radar technology and it seemed that the easiest way to make a ship disappear into its surroundings would be to paint it the color of the sea or sky. But at that point in history, military strategists simply could not find paint that was good enough to hide a ship on the open sea. So in 1917, an artist named Norman Wilkinson invented what was then known as “dazzle” camouflage. Wilkinson convinced the English military to paint ships in outlandish colors and cubist designs that were so unexpected for the eye, so out of place on the sea, that the eye simply did not know how to register what it was seeing. A person either overlooked the ship entirely – or, in seeing the ship, was so disoriented that he could not tell from where it was coming or to where it was going.*

That’s Nicodemus and his inability to see. He needed to be “born again.”

*Application:*

Such is the status of any non-Christian. Let me say this with as much care as I can. You can’t get there from here. The things you think will help you “see the kingdom of God” are getting in the way. Like Nicodemus, you need to come to the end of yourself before you can come to even the beginning of the spiritual life. To be “born again.”

And, Christian, this is also true of you – your story ([READ “Amazing Grace”](#)):

*Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*

*I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see.*

All praise, honor, and glory and wonder to the Spirit of God who brings this new birth!

## **II. POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE**

That’s the first thing – the need for our assumptions to be challenged. But along with that, we see also the possibility of change held forth ([READ John 3:4-8](#)).

### A) Nicodemus' Question

Nicodemus asks a follow up question – this time more explicit.

#### 1. Not crass

Now he was an astute man. He knew what Jesus wasn't talking about – a literal birth.

#### 2. But incredulous

That said, he still couldn't see then what Jesus was talking about. Nicodemus simply had no categories here. "How can this be? How can a man change?" Patterns are too set.

### B) Jesus' Response

Jesus responds by appealing to some images Nicodemus would have been familiar with – both of which stress the fact that this new birth comes from above.

#### 1. Like leads to like

Like leads to like. A physical birth requires a physical source. A spiritual rebirth requires a spiritual source. This is what's behind the imagery of one needing to be "born of water and the Spirit" – calling back to the Old Testament (**READ Ezekiel 36:25-27**).

#### 2. The sovereignty of the wind

Nicodemus would have been familiar with such texts. As he would the ways of weather. Now, in the ancient world, people did not understand the physics of wind and could not predict it. And they certainly couldn't control it. But they could see its effects.

The possibility of change – how can this be? The sovereign ways of the Spirit.

#### *Illustration:*

Our family is not a democracy. It's a benevolent dictatorship. I have to remind our kids of that from time to time. They don't really get a vote in things today anymore than they had a vote in coming into this family to begin with. Which is the way it is with all families – no one asks to be born. The parents are the only ones who have any say in the matter. We arrive completely passive and powerless. Such is what we see here.

#### *Application:*

Change is possible. Rebirth is possible – even for us. But it's not a 50/50, 60/40, 70/30 proposition. It's all of grace. Regeneration, being "born again," is a birth, a birth from God the Father, a birth in which the Spirit is sovereign. And that's pretty humbling.

Again, if you're not a Christian, let me say with as much care as I can, this is what you need. This is how you get from here, where you are, to there, where you long to be.

And to the Christian, this is how you got where you are. And this is how you can pray for others. This is what you have to be thankful for – sight recovered, life anew. Our only hope, the only hope that holds forth any promise of change, is to be born again.

### **III. HUMBLING HOPE**

Which brings us to the third exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. Our only hope is a humbling one as well (**READ John 3:9-15**). What's going on here?

### A) Nicodemus' Question

By this point, Nicodemus has hit the wall of exasperation.

#### 1. He's never heard this before

He's never heard this before. "The teacher of Israel" had heard of conditions – steadfast obedience, fervent devotion – but this idea of being reborn was different. In fact, it was insulting. This was the sort of language used to describe a Gentile converting to Judaism.

#### 2. He'd never taught this before

So he'd never heard of this before. And even more tragically, he'd never taught it before.

### B) Jesus' Response

Jesus' responds to Nicodemus' exasperation with some of His own. This should have been elementary, "earthly things." And to that He adds His own qualifications. How is that He's able to speak of such things? His heavenly origin and divine status.

#### 1. Historical lesson

Then comes a historical lesson from Israel's history – the account of Moses and the deliverance from the serpents (**READ Numbers 21:4-9**). Critical point – anyone who looked to the bronze serpent lived. Jesus draws a parallel to Himself saying that anyone who looks to Him will live as well for He too will be "lifted up" – words of double significance in John's Gospel referring both to Jesus' exaltation and His crucifixion.

#### 2. Humbling necessity

But with this historical lesson comes the pressing of a humbling necessity. Note that in the account from Numbers, the serpent lifted up looked like the affliction of the people, the thing destroying them. It was the symbol of their sin. Jesus says that's what He will become. He takes on our sin so completely we read elsewhere He became our sin.

To look to Him is to be humbly reminded of what it took to save us. And why.

#### *Application:*

It was hard for the Israelites to look at that serpent lifted up. Why? It reminded them of what they'd done. Now it is the Son of God and it's hard for us as well to look.

And it's hard for others too. We need to remember that. It requires sight to see it is for our sin and rebellion that He had to die. And so if we would long to see others "see the kingdom," "enter the kingdom," "have eternal life," we need to commit that to prayer. Their only hope is the same as our only hope – to be born again. And that is a supernatural work of the Spirit which He delights to bring about through prayer.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

We need to hear this – every one of us whether a believer in Jesus or not. We all need the gospel. And we need it all the time. How do I know I need it all the time? Let me take you to this statement from C. S. Lewis (**READ [Weight of Glory](#) quote**):

*We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.*

That's me. I am so desperately half-hearted. That's how I know I need the gospel all the time. And so do you. When you're impatient, lashing out at those around you when you don't get your way, what's going on? You don't trust Him. When you're selfish, clutching and clinging to all this stuff you say you don't need, what's going on? You're not really convinced He's as good as He says He is, His promises your treasure. When you're harsh in your thoughts towards others, what's going on? You're proud. You're far more tolerant of your own faults than anyone else's. In those moments, you are not believing the gospel. And so we need to hear it again. And again. And again.

How do I know I need this new birth? How do I know I need it once for all and keep laying hold of it everyday? Because I'm a mess. And so are you. And nothing or no one else can make things right but Jesus. You have these longings in your heart, longings God has put there for Himself. And a stirring. You're struggling, striving, for something more, exerting all kinds of energy and exhausting yourself in the process.

To put it another way, you can't get there, where you want to be, from here, from where you are now. Let Jesus' words to Nicodemus sink in. They're His words to us as well. Listen to them. Hear and heed them. And ask Him to help you take them to heart.

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