

From Bios to Zoe  
John 3:1-16  
The Space in Which He Calls Us to Follow  
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Text: John 3:1-16  
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The Space in Which He Calls Us to Follow

As I was planning this series of sermons on the space in which Jesus now calls us to follow I kept being drawn to the text we just read – to the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. I felt we were supposed to work through John 14-16, the so-called “Upper Room Discourse” as we have been doing and will continue doing. But as I planned this series I kept feeling constrained to also work with this text. I regularly feel lead to the text. Only once in a while do I feel constrained. For some reason the Lord wants us t give our attention to His words to Nicodemus. Someone recently said, to me: “if one has been a Christian for more time five years, they have likely forgotten the wonder if it all.” Whenever Jesus begins a sentence “truly I say to you” we ought to listen very carefully or we will be very sorry. Whenever Jesus begins a sentence double “truly, truly I say to you” we ought to listen very , very carefully or we will be very, very sorry. Whenever Jesus re-states something three times we ought to listen very, very, very carefully or we will be very, very, very sorry.

Listen again:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he (or she) cannot see the Kingdom of God” (3:3) “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he (or she) cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (3:5) “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘you must be born anew’” (3:7)

Must. Must. Jesus uses the word “must” in reference to Himself many times.

Luke 2:49 – “I must be about my Father’s business.”

Luke 4:43 – “I must preach the Kingdom of God to other cities, for I was sent for this purpose.” Mark 8:31 – “The Son of Man must go to Jerusalem, suffer many thins, be rejected, be killed, and after three days be raised up again.”

Luke 24:44 – “all things which were written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms must be fulfilled.” And in the Nicodemus story in Jon 3;14, “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up”.

But only twice in the Gospel record as we find Jesus using the word must in reference to other. In John 4, there He tells the woman at the well “God is Spirit and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth.” And here in john 3, when Jesus tells Nicodemus “you” and the ‘you’ is plural referring not only t Nicodemus but to every human being, “you must be born anew.”

“Born anew” or “born again” as it is usually rendered. A phrase used in both religious and secular circles – triggering all sorts of different ideas and reactions. What does it mean? the word used in John 3 is the Greek word ‘another’. (For those of you taking notes a –n-a-t-h-e-n). The primary meaning of another is “from above”. Matthew uses the word in his telling of the crucifixion: as Jesus dies on the cross, the veil of the temple is torn another, from above, from top to bottom (27:51).

John uses the word when reporting Jesus’ words to Pontius Pilate; Jesus says to Pilate, “you would have no authority over Me, unless it has been given you another, from above”. (19:11) “You must be born again from above”. Why then the traditional translation “born anew” or “born again”? Because anyone born “from above” will consequently be “born anew”, “born again” “Do not marvel that I say to you, “You must be born another”.

John tells us that Nicodemus comes to Jesus “by night” (3:12). Was it because Nicodemus did not want to be seen by the other Pharisees or was it because the night afforded more leisurely time for conversation or is Jesus making a theological observation on what was happening to Nicodemus? Is John saying that in visiting Jesus, Nicodemus is coming out of the night of spiritual darkness into the light of new life?

What is amazing is that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came at all. The Pharisees were the “elite” folk; the “separate ones”. Jesus came from the “ordinary” folk; from Galilee of all places. He had not studied at any of the prestigious synagogues schools. He had no impressive academic credentials. Yet, Nicodemus sought out the Galilean carpenter. Something about the way Jesus spoke and acted tugged at the centre of Nicodemus’ being. So impressed was he that he “saluted” (F.F. Bruce, John, pg 82) Jesus with the title “Rabbi”; thus treating the Galilean as an equal.

Jesus then caught that Pharisee by surprise saying: Nicodemus: you cannot see the Kingdom of God for which you have longed; you cannot enter into the Kingdom of God which is breaking into the world; unless you are born another, from above, anew”.

It is important to appreciate what kind of person Nicodemus is. He is what most of us would call a good man. He was faithful to his wife. He loved his children. He paid his taxes. He is, furthermore, a religious man. Nicodemus is perhaps one of the most religious men of his time. He was born into a Jewish home. He believed in God, no doubt about it. He grew up in the synagogue; went to Sabbath School and Youth Group, sang the hymns (and choruses), recited the creeds. He faithfully served on the committees and boards of his community. He was committed to obeying all of God’s laws.

He is furthermore, a spiritually perceptive man. Although he did not fully grasp everything about Jesus’ words and deeds, who does? He did realize that no-one

could do what Jesus was doing or say what Jesus was saying, unless the Living God was present in Him. He realized that Jesus, untrained though He be, was no ordinary teacher. Many of Jesus' contemporaries dismissed Jesus as a sincere, but seriously misguided preacher. Some even said Jesus was under the influence of the devil. "You have come from God" said Nicodemus. Spiritually perceptive.

He is, furthermore, a leader within the religious community. John calls him "a ruler of the Jews" (3:1), a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Israel. Jesus calls him "the teacher of Israel" (3:10). The teacher. The Rabbi. In our order of things, a tenured professor at a ranking theological seminary. An expert in doctrine. A Master of the scrolls. The leading theologian of the day! "Reverend Doctor Professor" (D.A. Carson, pg 200)

And it is to that good, religious, spiritually perceptive, leading theologian of the day that Jesus first speaks His "must". "Truly, truly, I say to you: if you want to see and enter the Kingdom of God, you must be born anothen".

"The Kingdom of God". The major theme of Jesus' teaching according to the other Gospels. In Jesus' Gospel Kingdom of God is synonymous with eternal life. And it is synonymous with being a child of God.

To say the least Nicodemus was not prepared for Jesus' words that night. If you want to witness and then participate in the glorious Kingdom of God; if you want to experience the full blessings of being a child of God; if you want to enjoy eternal life, now and on the other side of the grave, you must be born anothen, generated again from above.

Nicodemus understandably asks "how?". "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (3:4).

Note carefully the content of his question. Not why? But how? Nicodemus realizes that Jesus is right: that there is a need for a new beginning, a radical new beginning, a new genesis. Many people argue with Jesus about the necessity for a new birth. Many good, religious. Spiritually sensitive people. Many religious leaders! Listen, for example to the words of a former President of a Theological Seminary in the US: "the doctrine of divine imminence which is now generally accepted ascribes the divinity to man, since it is supposed that man's nature is one with God and he needs simply to awake to that fact. This means, of course, a revolution in the old conception of salvation. What a man requires is not regeneration in the old sense, to what he or she really is" (quoted D.G Barnhouse, Love life p 31)

That theologian must have stopped and locked himself in the ivory tower and far from life in the city.

Nicodemus was in touch with life as it really is, and in touch with human nature as it really is. And when Jesus told him that he and every other human being must be

regenerated, re—born from above, he did not ask why?. He asked how? “How can a man be born when he is old?” Good question. I hear in Nicodemus’s question deep frustration. The frustration I hear in many of us and in out contemporaries. William Barclay paraphrases Nicodemus’ words this way:

“you talk about being born anew; you talk about this radical, fundamental change which is so necessary but in my experience it is impossible. There is nothing I would like more , but you might as well tell me, a full grown man, to enter into my mother’s womb and be born over again” (John, pg 125)

Or, come at it the way Leon Marcus of Austria does (John, pg 215)

“We are the sum of our yesterdays”, he imagines Nicodemus saying. “I am what I am today because of all the things that have happened to me throughout my years. I am the product of my fears, hopes, joys, doubts, good and bad habits. It would be wonderful to make a completely fresh start. Believe such a new genesis is necessary. But how? O Lord, how can a man be born when he is old?”

So Jesus re-states the matter. “truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he or she cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (3:5) Water and the Spirit. Being born another ( a new, from above) means being born of water and the Spirit.

Water and the Spirit. Water and the Spirit. Jesus put it that way because it echoes words and concepts from the Old Testament which would “ring a bell” (FF.Bruce) in Nicodemus.

The phrase “of water and the Spirit” would draw Nicodemus to the opening sentence of the Bible, to Genesis 1:1 where we read of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, bringing the world into being.

And the phrase would also draw Nicodemus to the great promise of God recorded by the prophet Ezekiel. Through Ezekiel God promised that one day He would renew the covenant people. One day God would act to re-create humanity!

Listen: Ezekiel 36:25 “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean, a new spirit I will put within you. The new spirit was to be none other than the Spirit of God: “I will put My Spirit within you” (36:27), says the Lord.

God then gave Ezekiel a vivid illustration of what those words mean. In a vision, which Ezekiel records in chapter 37 of his prophesy, God took him out into the middle of a valley. The valley was full of dry bones of dead human beings. Everywhere he looked, decay, dryness, death. Then God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy over the dry bones, to speak God’s word over the dry bones. “Prophesy to the breath (or wind, or spirit), prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, “Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, o breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live”(37:9) Ezekiel did as commanded. And the wind blew and

the Spirit breathed and the dry bones took on flesh and muscles and came to life! The wind blew! Is that why Jesus says to Nicodemus “the wind blows wherever it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from or where it is going; so it is with anyone born of the Spirit”?

By the first century, the cleansing of water came to be symbolic in the rite of water baptism. Wherever Gentiles, non-Jews, wanted to become part of the Covenant people of God they had to be baptized, symbolizing their turning from and being cleansed of their sinful ways. What startled the first century Jew was that John the Baptist called true-born Israelites to also be baptized in water, to prepare for the coming of the Lord (Luke 3:16) But John the Baptist was clear that his baptism in water was only a sign of the real thing. He points to One who comes after him who baptizes in and with the Holy Spirit of God (Luke 3:16, John 1:33) “Water and the Spirit”.

We can, therefore, paraphrase Jesus’ words to Nicodemus this way:” Nicodemus, you want to be changed to have a new life, to live the Kingdom life. But you cannot change yourself. I did not say ‘you must change yourself to see and to enter the Kingdom! Being born from above means being born by the Spirit of God. The radical change is the work of the Spirit – just as in Ezekiel’s’ vision of the dry bones”.

Then Jesus explains why the new Genesis can only happen through the Spirit of God. John 3:6 – a crucial saying to grasp – “That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”. Here ‘flesh’ simply means “human nature”: whether good or bad is not at issue. And the point is “like generates like” (D.A. Carson , pg 196): Human nature can only give birth to human nature. As creative as our flesh is it can only generate more flesh.

Much of the frustration of the Christian life lies right here. We are trying to produce the life of the Kingdom, the life of the children of God, eternal life, intimacy with God and each other. Flesh only begets flesh. Kingdom life, spiritual life does not evolve from the flesh; it does not evolve from human nature no matter how much effort we exert. Which is why the only hope – and I am using this word ‘only’ deliberately – the only hope for our churches, our city, our Provinces and States, our world is a spiritual revolution. A radical change in human nature from above, effected by the Spirit of God. Flesh, be it, East or West, Oriental or Occidental, First or Third World, NDP or Liberal or Conservative can never pull off the peace and justice, the freedom and healing of the Kingdom of God. But the spirit of God can! And when the wind of the Holy One blows, dry bones come to life! That is the wonder of grace Jesus was opening up to Nicodemus. C.S. Lewis, the brilliant British scholar, experienced the new Genesis in mid-life and was uniquely able to appreciate and articulate the wonder of it. Listen to how he expressed it on a BBC broadcast later printed in his book *Mere Christianity*. He is explaining why the new birth is necessary. He is working with images of statues.

“A statue has the shape of a man but it is not alive. In the same way, man has (in a sense I am going to explain) the ‘shape’ or likeness of God, but he has not got the kind of life God has. Let us take that first point (man’s resemblance to God) first. Everything God has made has some likeness to Himself. Space is like Him in its hugeness; not that the greatness of space is the same kind of greatness as God’s but it is a sort of symbol of it, or a translation of it into non-spiritual terms. Matter is like God in having energy: though again, of course, physical energy is a different kind of thing from the power of God. The vegetable world is like Him because it is alive and He is the “Living god’. But life, in this biological sense, is not the same as the life there is in God: it is only a kind of symbol or shadow of it. When we come onto the animals, we find other kinds of resemblance in addition to biological life. The intense activity and fertility of the insects, for example, is a first dim resemblance to the unceasing activity and the creativeness of God. In the higher mammals we get the beginnings of instinctive affection. That is not the same thing as the love that exists in God: but it is like it – rather in the way that a picture drawn on a flat piece of paper can nevertheless be ‘like’ a landscape. When we come to man, the highest of the animals, we get the complete resemblance to God, which we know of. (There may be creatures in other words who are more like God than man is, but we do not know about them.) Man not only lives, but loves and reasons: biological life reaches its highest known level in him.

But what man, in his natural condition, has not got is Spiritual life – the higher and different sort of life that exists in God. We use the same word *life* for both: but if you thought that both must therefore be the same sort of thing, that would be like thinking that the ‘greatness’ of space and the “greatness’ of God were the same sort of greatness. In reality, the difference between Biological life and spiritual life is so important that I am going to give them two distinctive names. The Biological sort which comes to us through Nature, and which (like everything else in Nature) is always tending to run down and decay so that it can only be kept up but incessant subsidies from Nature in the form of air, water, food etc. is *Bios*. The Spiritual life which is in God from all eternity, and which made the whole natural universe, is *Zoe*. *Bios*, has, to be sure, a certain shadowy or symbolic resemblance to *Zoe*: but only the sort of resemblance there is between a photo and a place, or a statue and a man. A man who changed from having *Bios* to having *Zoe* would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real man.”

That is what being born anothen is all about. A new Genesis. Literally. From carved statues to real persons. From *Bios* to *Zoe*. When we were born of human parents, we were initiated into the only kind of life our parents can give us. We are born into *Bios*, into life that ultimately perishes. When we are re-born, by water and the Spirit, we are initiated into the kind of life which only the Spirit can give us, we are born into *Zoe*, life that never perishes. Flesh gives birth to flesh, to life that ends. *Bios*. The Spirit gives birth to spirit, to the life that God gives. *Zoe*. The life God gives is the life that cannot end, the eternal life. “Do not marvel that I said to you ‘You must be born anothen, a new, from above’”

Now I can imagine that at this point in the conversation Nicodemus' mind was whirling, and his heart was pounding. So far a second time he asks "how can these things be?" (3:9). Jesus then responds with what Leslie Newbigin calls "a very full exposition of the central themes of the gospel" (Light has come, p 40)

The reason this wonderful new Genesis is possible is that the "Son of Man" has come! "Son of Man" was Jesus' favourite way of referring to Himself. He says to Nicodemus, vs 13, "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man"(3;13)

That is the Gospel: the Son of Man has descended from heaven. And has descended from heaven with *Zoe*, with life. He claims to "have Zoe in Himself" (John 5;26) Indeed, he claims to be Zoe. (John 14:6) "I am the Way, the Truth and the Zoe."

"I have come", he says, "that you might have Zoe and have it abundantly" (John 10:10)

And what must Nicodemus – and you and I – do to be born into Zoe? Jesus uses another Old Testament story to clarify things.

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must (I) the Son of Man be lifted up: that whoever believes may in (Me) Him have eternal life" (3:14-15)

To what is Jesus referring? To that time in the wilderness when the people of Israel were plagued by 'fiery serpents'. Many people died because of the serpents' poisonous bite. Those who had not yet been bitten pleaded with Moses to intercede for them before God. God told Moses to make a bronzed serpent and sit it on a pole. If anyone was bitten, he or she would live by simply looking up at the up lifted serpent (see Numbers 21:5-9)

F.F Bruce expresses the point of the story best" if any of these bitten Israelites, who looked and lived when they were at death's door, had been asked how they felt, they might well have said that they felt as if they had been born all over again and received a new lease on life" (pg 88)

But that new lease on life was only renewal of the flesh, a renewal of the Bios. What Jesus is telling Nicodemus is that when any of us looks up at the up-lifted Son of Man and believes. A re-generation takes place. The very Spirit of God who dwells in the up-lifted Jesus enters our lives, Zoe comes, and we are re-born into the Kingdom and Family of God. That is wonder of race.

John then offers his own theological commentary On Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world". Amazing! World... human society turning its back on God. God so loved the world which left to itself decays and dies. "God so

loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish” Which is what happens to all forms of Bios. “but have eternal life”! Zoe. That is the space in which we now follow. Zoe, the Spirit of God moving us from Bios to Zoe. Now, having been born anothen is not the end all of the Christian life. It is after all the beginning; there is a whole new life yet to be explored and loved. And being born anothen does not solve all of life’s problems. The fact is the new birth brings us challenges we never had before. But being born anothen does mean we have entered into a qualitatively different order of life; the life which cannot decay , the life which only improves with age. How it all happens is beyond us. Jesus says “the wind blows where it will”. But when He does, dry bones come to life! In some cases the Spirit blows gently, quietly working the miracle of regeneration. In other cases the Spirit comes rushing in, dramatically turning everything upside-down. However He comes, when he does, we are changed.

And the change is measurable. There are real, objective manifestations of this movement from bios to Zoe. Which is what the rest of the New Testament is describing. Vital signs if you will. Vital signs that the “from above” has happened. There is, primarily, a new hunger and a new thirst. A new hunger and new thirst for the Word of God (1Peter 1;23, James 1;18). We find ourselves wanting to study the Scriptures and seeking out opportunities to do so.

There is a longing for fellowship with other “twice-born” people (1 John 5;1, 1 Thessalonians 4:9). We find ourselves wanting and needing to be with others who are being made alive in the Spirit. There is a desire to be with the One Jesus called “Abba, Father”, prayer and worship. There is a yearning for the things of the Kingdom of God; for mercy, for justice, for reconciliation, for peace, for healing, for holiness (Matthew 6;33) we find ourselves wanting to invest all we have and are, all our resources, in the mission of Jesus in the world. And there is a passion for Jesus, a passion for Jesus Himself. A passion to know Him in all His fullness. And a passion to make Him known to the people of our city.

Did it happen to Nicodemus? Was he born anothen, from above by water and the Spirit? I think so. Two ‘vital signs’. First, as the opposition against Jesus was mounting Nicodemus dared to begin to raise concerns. In one of the heated debates among the Pharisees, he spoke up, reminding them “Our law does not judge a man, unless it first hears form him, and knows what he is doing. Does it? (John 7:51)

Second, Nicodemus joined Joseph of Arimathea in taking Jesus’ body down off the cross, carrying it to the garden tomb. A big risk. Risking his place as the Reverend Doctor Professor. All that mattered now was Jesus.

So, where are you with this “truly, truly ... you must?” Do you know yourself to be born anothen? Do you know yourself to have received Zoe, life from above? Are you alive in the Spirit? Do you want more? Look up to the up-lifted Jesus!



When I read the paragraph from C.S. Lewis I stopped before the punch line. I ended the reading with the sentence "A man who changed from having Bios to Zoe would have gone through as big a change as the statue which changed from being a carved stone to a real man."

Here is the punch line. "And that is precisely what Christianity is about. This world is a great sculptor's shop. We are the statues and there is a rumour going around the shop that some of us are someday going to come to life".