

Regeneration

Becoming a Person with a Plan

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Bible Text: John 3:1-15

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Well, my name is Rob Green. I don't get to be in front of you very often, in part, because at 9:30 I am teaching a young couples class. So I thought I would just introduce my family to you for just a second. My wife Stephanie and I have been married for just about 20 years now. And we have three children by God's grace. Our oldest, Joseph, is a freshman in high school. Then the second one, our middle child is named Samuel and he is a fourth grader. And then the girl, the daughter is our youngest and she is in kindergarten.

Well, four weeks ago we began a series called God's plan for redemption. And the first week I encouraged us to think about this series in a similar way to a newly engaged girl thinking about her engagement ring. I mean, she investigates it. She looks at it from all the angles. She purchasing cleaning kits that cost more than the ring did in order to keep it sparkling bright and she intends to engage people in conversations about her ring and the upcoming wedding as much as possible. And why does she do that? Because she is excited, right? She is excited about the fact that she is engaged and about ready to get married.

You know, if a girl can be and should be excited about her upcoming wedding then surely we can be excited about God's plan of redemption. Is that right? You know, we have studied God's plan of redemption from the perspective of grace, from the perspective of faith, from the perspective of adoption and election. And each time we took God's plan and we just rotated it just a touch so we can look at it from a new perspective. And in each case we saw the brilliance of God's plan. In grace that brilliance was seen that God has given us a wonderful gift even though we didn't deserve it. In faith that brilliance is seen by the fact that God gives us the ability to believe and trust in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. In adoption that brilliance is seen that God has made us his child and promises us an inheritance that is incorruptible. And in election that God has set his affections on us, his favor on us. He has loved us as his children before the foundations of the world. In other words, not only did God love me first, he loved me before I was even a sparkle in my dad's eye. I mean, is that totally awesome or what? I mean, I would like to suggest that is like epic. Yeah, it is epic, right?

I hope these comments and these talks about God's amazing plan of redemption have been running through your mind every day. Every day over this past month you have woken up and you have gone to bed thinking, man, I cannot believe how wonderful God has been to me. His grace is awesome. His adoption is wonderful. His love is comforting. And then I am sure you have done this. You have taken a step further. Say, you know, Rob, that is really not good enough just to think about it. I mean, I have wanted to put this into practice each and every day of my life. And so because God's grace has been so awesome to me, I have been seeking to give grace as much as possible to those around me. So my coworkers have been given grace. My family members have been given grace. My friends, I have been giving them grace. Not because they deserve it, but because God's grace has been poured out on me and I didn't deserve that. Or because God has adopted me. And you are so secure in your relationship with him, that you haven't tried to get the praise of anyone. So, guys, I mean, you went home from work this week and you didn't wait for people to serve you. I instead, you thought about this. Because I am God's child I am motivated to serve my family, which means you probably did some of the vacuuming. You probably did some of the laundry, put it away even, too. In fact, you even led in family devotions because, quite frankly, it had been a little while since you had done that and you said, "You know, I need to get back to that like right now." Isn't that right? All of the guys thinking, absolutely. That is exactly what I did.

Or, because God has loved you from the foundation of the world, you are so free to love and give and to serve those around you. And, ladies, I know you worked this week. You just said, "You know what? I want to make sure that the meals that my family is coming home to is just going to be fantastic." And, you know, even when everything is all done there is still going to be enough energy left in the tank to be affectionate with my husband, too. And that is not going to be hard, because my love tank was already filled up by Jesus when I woke up this morning thinking about the amazing grace of his love to me. And so I said, "You know, I am free to give it. I am free to love. I am free to serve." Isn't that right? That is exactly what happened this week, didn't it? Something like that. Let's go with that.

You know, this has been one of my favorite sermon series and I really hope you have been thinking about it, investing in it, putting it into practice. And I am pretty stoked about our topic this morning. We are going to look at God's amazing plan of redemption and we are going to turn it just a touch and look at it from the perspective of regeneration.

With that in mind, I invite you to turn your Bibles to John chapter three. That is on page 72 in the back section of the Bible in the chair in front of you. And as you are turning there let me just make a couple of points. The first one is we are going to be studying an account between Jesus and Nicodemus. And so I am going to be floating back and forth between Jesus and Nicodemus and, really, Jesus and us. I want us to see that this is a story from Scripture that is not just a history lesson. It has a credible meaning for us today. And then, second, we really need to have a working definition of regeneration as we began this subject. And regeneration is the work of God whereby he gives new birth

or new life to a spiritually dead person at conversion. And so we are going to see this teased out as we work our way through John chapter three.

Now I am going to start in verse one and read through the first 15 verses. It says:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus *said to Him, "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?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."¹

Now I like us to think, first of all, as for the need of regeneration. One of the things we initially see right out of the blocks is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a particular thought in mind and Jesus says, "I have something way bigger, way bigger." In other words, sometimes we don't realize how significant the problem is. And so just like Nicodemus the problem is far worse than what we thought.

You know, many of us think that people are ok. We are ok. Others are ok. And in this story Nicodemus thinks of himself as he is ok. In fact, not only does he think he is ok, but notice how the text describes him. Nicodemus was a very religious man. We are told that he is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews. And the Pharisees were a group of very religious

¹ John 3:1-15.

individuals that gained prominence during some very difficult times in the history of Israel. In fact, the Pharisees' beginning is actually quite good. At the time of Jesus things had slipped a little bit in terms of how good they were. But the Pharisees clearly had significant power. Nicodemus is not a drunk off the street who staggers his way to Jesus. There were others in that category. But John picks this guy in this case to describe a very religious and righteous—at least from his perspective—man who was doing all the teaching.

Now we also see that Nicodemus recognizes something that is different about Jesus. He clearly understands that trickery is not an explanation for the works of Jesus. In other words, you just can't explain how Jesus can turn water into wine, which happened just a chapter before. Jesus' miracles were recognized by Nicodemus as authentic. But they refused to accept what authentic miracles indicated. And at least for now, I mean all this sounds ok. Nicodemus seems like a good guy. And if anyone could be saved, surely it is going to be a guy like that. But Nicodemus' significance is actually seen in the very next phrase, because we are told that Nicodemus comes at night.

Now normally when we read our Bibles and a story in particular, we should take the words simply at face value. So if Nicodemus comes at night, then one would normally conclude that John was telling us the time of day of the encounter. But John really likes the word night. He really gets excited about that particular word and so he loads with some extra stuff. And so he not only tells him and us that this occurrence, this meeting takes place in the evening, but he actually tells us something about Nicodemus and that is he is describing his spiritual condition.

Nicodemus, despite all of his religious credentials is actually very far away from God. His spiritual condition is empty. And that is seen, in particular, by the response that Jesus makes in verse three. I mean notice again that in verse two Nicodemus says:

“...for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”²

But he doesn't actually ask Jesus any question. But in verse three Jesus answers him and says:

“I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”³

This is incredibly significant, because in essence what Nicodemus says is, “You know, I am really not sure who you are. I know you have to come from God, because nobody could do these things unless they were from God. And I am still not really sure who you are. I need some more information to help me figure out who you are.”

Jesus' response is actually quite fascinating. He says, “In fact, what you need Nicodemus is to be born again.”

² John 3:2.

³ John 3:3.

What? He says to him, "Look, unless you are born again, you cannot enter, you cannot see the kingdom of God." He says to him, "Nicodemus, your problem is worse than you thought." I mean, we need to push the pause button for just a second and think about how this is really playing out. I mean, Nicodemus is coming to the meeting with Jesus thinking that he is all good. I mean, he is a Pharisee after all, a teacher of the people. And he is on the cusp of a personal discovery about Jesus and all he needs is just one more clue to set all the matter straight. And what Jesus says is, "Dude, you are like way wrong. You are so wrong you don't even understand how wrong you are. You have to be born again. You don't just need a little piece of information. You don't just need a new grid. You need to be born again." He says to Nicodemus, "Look, you think you are right with God? You are not. You think that just because you have seen the miracles you are right with God? That is not sufficient. Or do you think you are right with God because you have been religiously pious? Don't think that way. Don't think that there is a grid to evaluate me and my work. You need to be born again. You have to be given new life." As we were just singing, you make me new. That is what Nicodemus really needed. "Nicodemus, right now you are not even close."

John Calvin made a comment about this particular passage that is helpful. He said, "By the term born again or born from above he, that is Jesus, means not the amendment of a heart, but the renewal of a whole nature. Hence, it follows there is nothing in us that is not defective." This is what we mean in theology by the term total depravity. It doesn't mean we are as bad as we could be. It simply means that every element of our being has been corrupted. It is true for Nicodemus and it is true for us. You see, no one is on the cusp of heaven. No one climbs 99 percent of the way there and all they need is just a little helping hand to get the rest of the way up. Everyone's need is so great, so significant that nothing short of being born again is sufficient.

I think there are a number of very practical implications to this. The first is it concerns me when people equate a relationship with Jesus with religious activity. I learned this week that my great uncle died. He lived a very long life. And in many ways God used him as one of the motivations for me pursuing ministry. But it is not the ministry you might think. You see, this right here is a picture of the library at Baptist Bible College and Seminary. This is where pastor Viars went. This is where Titus and I and Brent have all spent time studying. And 65 years ago my great uncle was there. But it wasn't there at ... he wasn't there during a time when it was Baptist Bible College and Seminary. Instead, he was there when this was a Catholic monastery. And that library was the chapel.

If you saw a closer picture you could actually see above the archway the Latin that is still written there. And I remember 32 years ago having a discussion with him. He talked about life. He talked about ministry. He talked about salvation. And I remember coming away from that conversation deeply grieved. Because what I thought was going on was that my uncle was leading people not to a vibrant relationship with Christ, but, instead, to a set of religious activities. And I don't know the spiritual condition of my great uncle. The Lord know those who are his, not me. But if what I heard that particular day was the normal protocol for ministry, then my evaluation was that he was making people feel

good about the fact that they were on their way to hell. Friends, being a Christian is not about religious activity. It is about being born again.

It also concerns me when I hear people say things like this. “Well, I have been a Christian all my life.” Nicodemus could have said that. Nicodemus had the right religious training. He was a teacher of the people. He was religiously pious. If anybody could say that he had been a Christian all his life, Nicodemus could be that guy. And yet what did Jesus say to him? Dude, you are not even close. You are not even close. You have to be born again.

None of us are Christians all our lives. There is a time when we need to be born again, that is, regenerated. And there is a time that is conversion when we are regenerated. And if there is no line in the sand for you, if there is no time that you know that you know that you put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone, then I want to encourage you to do that today. You need to repent of your sin and trust in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

I am also concerned that sometimes we fail to explain this particular point even when we are sharing the gospel, whether it is with our own kids or with a neighbor. Because you have to be lost before you can be found. You have to be in trouble before you can be saved. And what Jesus tells Nicodemus is, “Look, it is not just another fact you need. You need to be born again. You need to be converted. You are not even close.”

Nicodemus came, as John tells us, at night. Not simply a description of the time of day, but a picture of his spiritual condition and that is the condition in which all of us were in.

Now the text continues, because, after all, you might say, “Well, what does that really mean? What does that really look like?” Because Nicodemus is a little bit confused himself.” And what we find is that the act of regeneration, being born again is actually an act which God does. It is something that God brings about in us.

In verse four Nicodemus responds with unbelief. He says:

“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?”⁴

Like that is ridiculous. He remains confused because he only thinks in terms of the physical. And so he creates this absurd scenario and what Jesus does is reiterate the very point he made in verse three. In verse five he says:

“I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”⁵

⁴ John 3:4.

⁵ John 3:5.

In other words, Jesus explains that this rebirth that he is talking about, this being reborn, this bring born from above, is something that God does. And let's just compare verse three to verse five for a second. These are very similar. If you look at the text, there is two basic changes. The first is from seeing the kingdom in verse three to entering the kingdom in verse five. Probably not a tremendous amount of difference there. But the second one is very significant. Because the first time in verse three he says, "You must be born again, or born from above." And the second time in verse five he explains what that means. And that is to be born of water and the Spirit.

Now this is the hardest part of the passage to understand. So you came to work, right? So put your thinking caps on for a minute, because you have to pay attention to this part. Because, after all, there is like 40 million views on this particular verse. I think the best way to understand it, however, is to look back at our Old Testament. And in Ezekiel chapter 36 notice what we find. God is speaking and he says:

"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."⁶

In other words, what happens here is that in Ezekiel 36 we have water and Spirit coming together to represent cleansing from impurity and the transformation of the heart that enables the people of God to follow him wholly. So Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Look. Nicodemus, go back to your Old Testament, you know, that thing you teach every day? It explains that God had this in mind from the very beginning."

As D. A. Carson explains, "If Nicodemus was like some of the other Pharisees, he was too confident of the quality of his own obedience to think that he needed much repentance, let alone to have his whole life cleansed and his heart transformed to be born again. And this proved that this is, in fact, the accurate description, notice verse six and seven."

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh."⁷

And for John that simply means this. Flesh produces flesh. People produce people. That is what he is saying here. He is not loading this, as Paul does, with sinful nature. Instead he is just simply describing the fact that people produce people. And then he says the Spirit produces spirit. In other words, he says to Nicodemus, "Look, it is not possible for you to just simply be born from your biological mother and to be ready to enter eternal life." That is not possible. There is another birth, a second birth, a rebirth that has to happen for you to be prepared for that. And that is something that is only brought about by God.

⁶ Ezekiel 36:25-27.

⁷ John 3:6.

So when a believer repents of their sin and trusts in Jesus Christ they are given new life. And Nicodemus should have understand that, not only from Ezekiel 36, but also Ezekiel 11 which says:

And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.⁸

This is the very point that Paul makes in Ephesians chapter two when he describes us again. He says, “Look, this is what we were, dead in trespasses and sins.” But then in verse four we are told:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)⁹

So this regeneration is not something that we can do. It is an activity of God. And that is what Nicodemus had to understand. “Look, Nicodemus, it is not just another fact. It is not just another thing that you need to understand. You have to be reborn. You have to have a second birth.”

Now can I encourage you just to think about that every day this week? And if you have been reborn, if you have been regenerated to wake up each morning and go to bed each night thinking, man alive, I cannot believe that God has made me spiritually alive. I was dead in my trespasses. I was going spiritually nowhere and God has reached down and because of his great mercy and his great love has caused me to be born again. He has given me new life. Praise God is right.

Then we also see in verse eight the results of regeneration. And what Jesus tells us is that regeneration is kind of like the wind. You can see when it happens. And on the one hand it is hard to see it by itself, but you see the results.

I know yesterday I was out for a bike ride and there was a period of time when I was riding directly against the wind. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it and it was annoying the fire out of me. And so here we... I mean, I felt its results. And, you know, the truth is that was a minor one. When one of these kinds of winds comes floating along, this is what happens. The results significant, devastating. And here what Jesus says is, “Look. You know how the wind produces its results? So the Spirit produces its results.”

And when it does it is unmistakable.

You know, one of the things I love doing... our church family and I we have baptisms and

⁸ Ezekiel 11:19.

⁹ Ephesians 2:4-5.

occasionally I have the privilege of actually doing the baptisms and so when I walk back and talk to everybody who is going to be baptized that night I usually ask this question. Is anybody nervous? And how many hands do you think go up? All of them. Right, everybody is nervous. Does anybody want to actually get up there and look out in front of the crowd and talk? No, they don't. But here is why they do it. Because they have been given new life. And if they have been given new life, they want everybody else that they are talking to to get new life, too.

Or what about this? You know, people serve because they have been given new life. People give because they have been given new life. People change because they have been given new life. People get off drugs because they have been given new life. People quit cutting because they have been given new life. And then they do this. They invest themselves in the things of God. Praise God for that.

And, you know, even though the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus is not over in this text, it is probably a good time to remind ourselves of the fact that Nicodemus is actually reborn at the end of John three, because the text tells us in chapter seven, just a few verses later it says:

The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, "Why did you not bring Him?"

The officers answered, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks."

The Pharisees then answered them, "You have not also been led astray, have you? No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed."

Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, being one of them) *said to them, "Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?"¹⁰

Boom. A smack down right then and there, isn't it? That is exactly what he does. He puts them all in their place and they know exactly what he is saying, because notice what they say.

"The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, "Why did you not bring Him?"

46 The officers answered, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks."

47 The Pharisees then answered them, "You have not also been led astray, have you?"

48 "No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he?"

49 "But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed."

50 Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, being one of them) *said to them,

¹⁰ John 7:45-51.

“You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee.”¹¹

We are already seeing the new birth, the results of the new birth in Nicodemus’ life. He is now taking on the religious leaders. He is now taking on the rulers of the people and the Pharisees. And some chapters later in chapter 19 it says this.

Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.¹²

Where is Nicodemus? He is at the cross. He is burying Jesus. You know, we often forget that there were two very significant religious leaders at the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. One was Nicodemus and the other was Joseph of Arimathaea. In other words, the result of God rebirthing someone are remarkable and you can see it. And we also have to recognize what happens is not fully understood by those with only one birth. I don’t want to imply, of course, that the differences of a person’s life are not detectable to an unbeliever. However, there remains some confusion about what that actually is all about. That is why some people would consider us followers of Jesus weak, needing a crutch, why we don’t care about science even though half the people in this room have science degrees.

Friends, there is a sense in which this passage reminds us that the others are not going to understand very well because they haven’t experienced new life. But that gives us all the more motivation, doesn’t it? Because Jesus also reminded us that when we do good works, then here is what everybody else is going to do, glorify our Father who is in heaven.

Peter put it this way. “Be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within you.” In other words, there is something exciting here. And when God rebirths us, when he gives us something to have new, a new life, he makes us something new. Then we can have a testimony of what that is all about. So we can share with other individuals just how much they need this exact same thing.

All right, well, for some of us that hasn’t happened yet and so I can almost hear the question. All right, Rob. I get the need. I see that God is the one who does it. I see that the results are unmistakable. So how do I get it? Because that is actually the question that Nicodemus asks. And what we find is regeneration only comes through faith.

Notice in verse nine:

“Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’”¹³

¹¹ John 7:52.

¹² John 19:39-40.

¹³ John 3:9.

In other words, the snarkiness of his tone has changed. It is not so much about whether, you know, can a person really enter into his mother's womb a second time? That is ridiculous. Now his tone changes a bit and says, "Ok, how can this be?" And Jesus explains that knowledge is not enough. We already know that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a ruler of the people. He was a teacher. That was, Nicodemus had talked for many years how to be right with God. And yet the condition of being born again was not exactly on his radar. And so here what Jesus explains to him is, "Look, you don't just need another fact. You don't just need another piece of knowledge." In fact, what Jesus had told him is he said, "You have seen the signs and you know that I have come from God. You know our testimony. You have every piece of knowledge that you need." But here is what you have to do. You have to accept our testimony. You have to believe it."

And, you know, there are sometimes there are people who are happy to agree that Jesus was a good man, that he died on the cross, even that he was raised. But here is what they refuse to do. They refuse to acknowledge their great need to be reborn. Paul put it this way. You have to confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, Master. It is not just gaining a new piece of fact like from a history book. It is actually having one's life changed, accepting Jesus as Lord and when that happens there is rebirth.

That is why in verses 14 and 15 he explains that it is only coming by faith using an Old Testament illustration. Back in the wilderness generation there was a time when God's people weren't always very happy with God. They were grumbling, whining, complaining. And so God sent snakes to discipline them. And here is what God also provided, a bronze serpent. And that bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole. And here was the deal. If you got bit by a snake, you were supposed to look at that bronze serpent and you were supposed to say, "God told us. I am accepting by faith that God said if we will look at the serpent after we have been bitten, then we will be healed." I am going to accept that God's Word is true. So it is not just can I write a paper on whether or not the serpent is there and what happens when you get bit by a snake. It is I have to do something. I have to look. I have to accept by faith that what God was saying was true. And Jesus uses that analogy to say this.

"... even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."¹⁴

In other words, now Jesus is the one who is lifted up on the cross. And the only way a person is reborn, the only way in which God does it is when the person turns and when they accept by faith that is the only way to heaven. That is the only way to see or enter the kingdom of God.

So, you know, friends, if you have been reborn, praise God for that. It is an exciting week to just dwell on that at each day when you get up, each day when you go to bed. But if you have and you say, "You know, I am not sure I have ever done that. I kind of though I had been a Christian all my life." Maybe what you have is religious activity, but not

¹⁴ John 3:14-15.

rebirth. And what you need today is to be reborn, to be made new. And just as Jesus explains, you need to repent and you need to believe in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ as your only hope and only way to see or enter the kingdom of God.

Now there is a couple of takeaways, I think, that we can all have from this. The first one is this, to rejoice in your regeneration if that is what you have to rejoice in your new life, to rejoice in your rebirth, to meditate on it every single day this week. You know, we studied grace and we studied faith and we studied adoption, election and regeneration. So when you are tempted to be sinfully angry, when you are tempted to lust, when you are tempted to be self righteous, when you are tempted to remove specks from other people's eyes with logs in your own, remember grace. Remember faith. Remember adoption. Remember election. Remember regeneration. And then seek to gain skill in gospel witnessing, because our kids, our friends, don't just need another fact. They need to be reborn.