

2018—New Year's Message

A New Beginning for a New Year

John 3:1-21

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Scripture

As we look forward to a New Year in just a few days, I would like to preach a message that I am calling, “A New Beginning for a New Year.” My text for this message today is John 3:1-21, and it contains the most beloved and well-known verse in the entire Bible—John 3:16.

Jesus wants all people to know how to enter the kingdom of heaven. If you have ever wondered about how you can enter heaven, then today's message is for you.

Let's learn about a new beginning for a New Year in John 3:1-21:

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” (John 3:1-21)

Introduction

George Whitefield is one of my favorite characters in all of Christian history. At the age of 16 became deeply convicted of his sin. He tried everything possible to erase his guilt through religious activity. He wrote, “I fasted for 36 hours twice a week. I prayed formal prayers several times a day and

almost starved myself to death during Lent, but only felt more miserable. Then by God's grace I met Charles Wesley who put a book in my hand which showed me from the Scriptures that I must be 'born again' or be eternally lost."

Finally, by the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart, Whitefield came to understand Jesus' words in John 3. He believed and was gloriously saved. After he became a preacher, he spoke at least a thousand times on the subject, "You must be born again." He fervently desired that all who heard him might experience the transforming power of God's grace.¹

Romans 3:23 says, "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Therefore, since all have sinned, we must be born again if we are to enter the kingdom of God.

Lesson

In John 3:1-21 we learn about the new birth.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Seeking of Nicodemus (3:1-2)
2. The Statement of Jesus (3:3-8)
3. The Slowness of Nicodemus (3:9-12)
4. The Certainty of Jesus (3:13-21)

I. The Seeking of Nicodemus (3:1-2)

First, notice the seeking of Nicodemus.

The Scripture tells us that **there was a man...named Nicodemus** (3:1). What kind of man was **Nicodemus**?

The Scripture shows us several truths about **Nicodemus**.

¹ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 1199.

A. *Nicodemus' Character (3:1)*

First, let's look at Nicodemus' character.

First, Nicodemus was religious and moral. He was a **Pharisee** (3:1). That's like saying he was very conservative. Pharisees get a bad rap, and no one wants to be called a "Pharisee." But, for the most part, in Jesus' day Pharisees believed the Scriptures (of the Old Testament) to be the Word of God. They were extremely conscientious about obeying every jot and tittle about the Law of God. Their mistake was to believe that their every effort to obey the Law of God would make them acceptable to God and grant them access to God's kingdom.

And second, Nicodemus was a leader. He was a **ruler of the Jews** (3:1). That is, Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council. That's like saying he was an Elder. And he was a **ruler** not just of a small congregation of people, but he was a religious leader over the entire Jewish nation.

B. *Nicodemus' Concern (3:2a)*

Second, let's look at Nicodemus' concern.

Nicodemus **came to Jesus by night** (3:2a). Apparently, he was very conscious of public opinion. The reason for his concern is that Jesus was rapidly gaining popularity, and Nicodemus did not want to be identified with an unpopular cause or a controversial itinerant preacher. But there was a greater, pressing restlessness in his soul that made him seek out Jesus.

C. *Nicodemus' Question (3:2b)*

And third, let's look at Nicodemus' question.

Although Nicodemus was thoroughly committed to his religion, there was an emptiness in his soul. He came searching for answers, and so he said to Jesus, **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him”** (3:2b).

It seems clear from Nicodemus' statement that he believed that Jesus had the answer to the emptiness he felt in his own soul. Why? Because Nicodemus recognized that Jesus was from God. Now at this point he did not know the relationship of Jesus to his Father, but he at least recognized that the Father was signally blessing the ministry of Jesus.

Who does Nicodemus remind you of? Nicodemus, it seems to me, is a reminder of the person who is spiritually hungry and seeking for answers. The average church-goer is religious, moral, and perhaps even a leader in his or her sphere. But there is an emptiness in that person's soul.

II. The Statement of Jesus (3:3-8)

Second, look at the statement of Jesus.

How does Jesus respond to Nicodemus? Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand two truths.

A. The Necessity of the New Birth (3:3)

First, Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand the necessity of the new birth.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** (3:3). What did Jesus mean? Two things.

First, Jesus reminds Nicodemus of another world. The Scripture teaches that God is king and reigns sovereignly over all and

everything. But the prophets also foresaw a future kingdom at the end of history presided over by the Lord himself (Isaiah 9:1-7; 33:2). To a Jew with the background and experience of Nicodemus, to **see the kingdom of God** was to participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, to experience eternal, resurrection life, and to be with God forever.

And second, Jesus tells Nicodemus that there is only one entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus makes it clear that the condition for entrance into the **kingdom of God** is the new birth. Notice it is not how religious, how moral, or how good one has been to gain entrance. A person needs the new birth.

B. The Nature of the New Birth (3:4-6)

And second, Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand the nature of the new birth.

Nicodemus is understandably puzzled at what Jesus said to him. So, **Nicodemus said to Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”** (3:4). Jesus then teaches three truths about the new birth.

First, the new birth is spiritual. **Jesus answered** Nicodemus’s question and said, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”** (3:5-6). Jesus is talking about something that Nicodemus should have known. That is why Jesus said to Nicodemus, **“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’ ”** (3:7). The English word **“again”** comes from a Greek word (*anothen*) which can also mean “from above.” Jesus is saying, “Nicodemus, you must be born from above.” This ties in with Jesus’ comment that he

must be **born of water and the Spirit** (3:5). Several Old Testament passages link the terms **“water”** and **“Spirit”** to express the pouring out of God’s Spirit in the end times (cf. Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:25-27). In other words, the Spirit brings about the new birth in a supernatural, spiritual way.

Second, the new birth is sovereign. Jesus continued and said to Nicodemus, **“The wind blows where it wishes”** (3:8a). No person directs the wind; God does. In the same way, the Holy Spirit is sovereign in bringing about the new birth.

And third, the new birth is secret. Jesus carried on with his reference to the wind, **“...and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”** (3:8b). The Holy Spirit’s operation in the new birth is *incomprehensible* in some respects, although its effects are *discernible*. That is, how the new birth comes about is part of the mystery of God’s providential work in us, but we are able to know that we are born again.

III. The Slowness of Nicodemus (3:9-12)

Third, observe the slowness of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus responds by asking Jesus, **“How can these things be?”** (3:9). Nicodemus continues to be puzzled about what Jesus is telling him. So, Jesus points out Nicodemus’ slowness in understanding and believing.

Nicodemus was a teacher of the Scripture (that is, the Old Testament) and should have understood what Jesus was saying. Therefore, **Jesus** said to Nicodemus, **“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things**

and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (3:10-12).

Jesus was thinking of passages in the Old Testament that Nicodemus should have known, such as Ezekiel 36:25–27, which is where God says, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” Jesus upbraids Nicodemus for his slowness in the face of the clear biblical teaching in the Old Testament.

IV. The Certainty of Jesus (3:13-21)

And fourth, look at the certainty of Jesus.

Jesus continues what is now a monologue and states his certainty about three truths.

A. About His Teaching (3:11)

First, Jesus states his certainty about his teaching.

Earlier, Jesus said to Nicodemus, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know...”** (3:11). Jesus wants Nicodemus to know that there can be no doubt with respect to his teaching of the new birth (also known as regeneration). Jesus would not have agreed with the modern liberal approach of not being dogmatic. Where Scripture speaks clearly and plainly, Jesus speaks clearly and plainly, and he expects us to do the same.

B. *About His Origin (3:13)*

Second, Jesus states his certainty about his origin.

Jesus makes it quite clear that he came from heaven, **“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man”** (3:13). Jesus proved this truth by the way in which he lived his life, and ultimately by his resurrection from the dead and ascension back to heaven.

C. *About His Assignment (3:14-21)*

And third, Jesus states his certainty about his assignment.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, **“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”** (3:14). Jesus was referring here to his future death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Continuing, he said, **“...that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”** (3:15). Jesus knew that **eternal life** is given to those who believe in him. Then Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus what has become the best-known statement in the entire Bible, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”** (3:16).

Jesus concluded his teaching by distinguishing between condemnation and judgment on the one hand, and salvation and eternal life on the other hand, **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the**

darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God” (3:17-21).

In this section, Jesus moves from talking about the new birth to talking about faith, or belief. How does this work?

The new birth is the act of God alone, in which he renews our hearts, making us spiritually alive when we were spiritually dead. The new birth is the gift of God’s grace.

However, what must a person do to be born again? Humanly, there is nothing a person can do to bring about the new birth. All that he can do is cry to God for mercy and grace. However, the Scripture calls all men to faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus is an *evidence* of the new birth. Trusting in Jesus is an *evidence* that God has given a person a new heart. And so that is why Scripture calls us to faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is what we are enabled to do by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Conclusion

I started off by saying that since all have sinned, we must be born again if we are to enter the kingdom of God. How do we know if we are born again? We know that we have the new birth when we are trusting in Jesus alone for the gift of eternal life.

Anyone may have a new beginning for a New Year by believing in Jesus. I pray that you will do so today. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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