

John 3:1–21 (CEB)

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. ²He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.”

³Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.”

⁴Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?”

⁵Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. ⁶Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ ⁸God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus said, “How are these things possible?”

¹⁰Jesus answered, “You are a teacher of Israel and you don’t know these things? ¹¹I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don’t receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. ¹⁶God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. ¹⁷God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him isn’t judged; whoever doesn’t believe in him is already judged, because they don’t believe in the name of God’s only Son.

¹⁹“This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. ²⁰All who do wicked things hate the light and don’t come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. ²¹Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.”

We just celebrated another Christmas. The incarnation marks the arrival of God’s great rescue project. But rescue from what? For what?

“Saved”

This sermon series is titled “Saved.” But what does that really mean? Since we are in church, your mind probably goes to something about getting into heaven – taking the up escalator rather than the down. Sadly, for too many Christians that is about as far as it goes. But there is much depth and richness in this simple word that underlies all our kingdom work. So, let’s dig in a bit.

There is an odd word used in English translations of the New Testament, Paul’s letters in particular, that clouds our understanding. It is the word “justified,” as in Romans 3:24, “all are justified freely his grace” (NIV). We normally use “justify” to speak of proving or demonstrating that something is reasonable or just . . . even when it isn’t. That may get us in the ballpark when it comes to understanding Paul’s meaning, but no closer. In the Greek, Paul actually writes “all are *righteoused* freely by his grace.” In the Greek, Paul uses the verb form of “righteous.” The problem is that in English we have lost the verb forms of “righteous.” No one says, “Hey, I was righteoused yesterday,” but Greek-speaking Paul would have. Because we’ve lost those verb forms, we substitute “justify” though it obscures Paul’s meaning for most English readers today.

Ok . . . so what does Paul mean? With respect to God, to be “righteoused” is to be put into a right relationship with God. It is like a father and son who have been estranged. When they reconcile, their relationship has been put right. Further, all creation groans awaiting the day when it too will be put right with God (Romans 8:18-22).

It's pretty simple really. Human rebellion against God wrecked our relationship with God and even distorted God's good creation. Remember how Adam hides from God after he eats the forbidden fruit – that says it all. To be “saved” in this sense is to be put back into the right relationship with God, the sort of relationship Adam and Eve had with God before their sin, when God would come and walk with them in the cool breezes of the evening (Genesis 3:8-9).

There are other ways to talk about the theological meaning of salvation, but, to my mind, this way gets the closest to Paul and the other New Testament writers. The consequence of our sin being forgiven by God is that our relationship with God is put right.¹ Yes, Paul uses law court imagery to describe our being found “in the right” by the judge. But it is that verdict that enables us to be “righteoused/put right” with God.

Because it is a relationship that is put right, “salvation” has many dimensions as it plays out in our lives. Think again of estranged relationships in families. The nature of each estrangement is unique and, thus, the reconciliations will be lived out differently. To put it another way, the specifics of our wrecked relationship with God vary from person to person. Thus, the consequences of the “righteousing” will be lived out differently as well.

In this series, we are going to take a look at five different stories of salvation. All are about a relationship with God being put right, but each “salvation” or “righteousing” is experienced and lived differently.

In the night

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a villager from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus' world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry for a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. “Who is he?” the crowds asked. Nicodemus wondered himself. Feeling his heart warmed and his mind perplexed, Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn't just walk up to him. He had a reputation to protect. Already, some of the Pharisees were talking about the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night -- so no one would know.²

There, Nicodemus sat in front of Jesus looking only ever more confused. Born a second time? Born from above? Blowing wind and the kingdom of God? What is Jesus talking about? Crazy talk. I know the Scriptures inside and out, Nicodemus thought to himself. None of this is making any sense! Jesus had even taken him to task, wondering how Nicodemus could possibly be a teacher of the people if he didn't understand what Jesus was saying. Bewilderment and insults – that pretty much summed it up. Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived.

Still, he wondered, what did Jesus really mean by, “You must be born from above”? How was Nicodemus to make sense of what Jesus told him? Should he even try?

Born of water and Spirit

The problem is that Jesus tried to lead Nicodemus into a facet of God's truth that has been perplexing to people for these last two thousand years. Few topics will raise as many

¹ Yes, it is insane to try to talk about this in a few paragraphs, but this is a start.

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³ Obviously, I'm using a little informed imagination to flesh out the portrait of Nicodemus. Also, every time John refers to “night” in his gospel, it is a reference to spiritual darkness. Nicodemus is living in the darkness as he comes to confront the light that is Jesus.

eyebrows and create as much as confusion as discussions of the Holy Spirit, and his work in each of us and in this world. It is a story that is grounded in the Old Testament; nonetheless, most of us need a guide to help our understanding. Nicodemus ought to be such a guide, for he is a Pharisee, a supposed expert in Hebrew Scripture. But no, he is as confused as anyone.

So, Jesus pushed hard on the man, for not understanding when he should (v. 10). Nicodemus should understand that when Jesus speaks of being “born of water and Spirit” he is calling on common Old Testament imagery of cleansing repentance and God’s life-giving spirit being poured out on the people of God (see esp. Ezekiel 36:25-27). He should grasp that God’s promises of a day when God would dwell in his people’s hearts are happening in and through Jesus.

Jesus wants Nicodemus to perceive that being part of God’s people and their entry into God’s kingdom, had never been about what Nicodemus had most valued: the Law, circumcision, the temple, the land. Instead, it had always been and still was about faith, faith that was possible only after the radical transformation, the rebirth, brought by the Spirit of God.

When we are “born of water and the Spirit,” when we are cleansed and given new life, the transformation is total, reaching into every part of our being. This is not about adding something to us that was lacking. It is not about fixing something that was broken. It is not about any incremental approach. Rather, it is about our complete and utter rebirth, regeneration, re-creation.

Granted, we often don’t act like the born-from-above people of God, a bit like a child who isn’t acting his age. But the Spirit works with each of us so that as we mature in Christ, our thoughts, words, and actions increasingly conform to the new person God has created. All this, because God loves us so much that he gave his only Son on that cross, so we might be offered the new birth of water and the Spirit.

So . . . is Nicodemus “saved”? Is he back in a right relationship with God? Nothing in the story from John 3 seems to point to Nicodemus being born anew (born a new person who has been put right with God). But later in John’s gospel, Nicodemus steps up to defend Jesus from his accusers (7:45-52) and after Jesus’ death, Nicodemus honors him with a burial fit for a king (19:38-42). So, you tell me, was Nicodemus “saved”?

“Born from above” or “Born again”

Verse 3 in today’s passage gave us the phrase “born-again Christian.” The Greek word here, *anōthen*, can mean either “from above” or “again.” Nicodemus takes Jesus to mean “again” for he asks how someone could revisit Mom’s womb and be born a second time. Yet, Jesus insists to Nicodemus that this new beginning, this regeneration is the work of the Spirit, who comes from above.

Though John’s other uses of *anōthen* in the gospel all clearly mean “from above,” here he almost certainly has in mind a double meaning, as John does with some other words when there is a point to be made. Christians are both “born again” and “born from above.”

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are made new. Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ – new creation! The old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are “born of God” and have “become children of God” (John 1:12-13). This generation of new life is a complete, total, radical transformation of our whole being. “Born again” is an apt and dramatic analogy.

But this new birth is also a birth “from above.” This is God’s work, specifically the work of the Holy Spirit. When we come to faith in Jesus, God’s Spirit, dwells in us. Paul writes, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul isn’t talking about going to your fitness club or staying on your diet. “Body” (*soma* in the Greek) refers to the total, whole person.

The second birth is a birth from God, “from above.” And it is a birth given to all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, who trust him completely. The phrase “born-again Christian” is redundant. All Christians have been born again and from above.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What does the phrase “being saved” mean to you? Is it helpful to think of it as a relationship put right? In what ways is your own relationship with God not right? How have you seen God’s salvation play out in the lives of others? In your own life?
2. Do you think Nicodemus was saved? Was he put into a right relationship with God? How would we know? How would he know?
3. What is your reaction to the phrase “born-again Christian?” What do you think it means? How would you react to someone calling you a born-again Christian? Do you understand why I say it is redundant? Why do you think it is so popular if it is redundant? How do you think “born-again Christian” came to mean something different from just a “regular” Christian? You might even talk about other popular redundancies, such as “committed Christian” and “Bible-believing Christian.” What are some others? Why do we use them?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, John 2:1-12 Jesus goes to a wedding and changes water into wine.	Tuesday, John 2:13-22 Jesus turns over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple courtyards.
Wednesday, Ezekiel 36:25-27 God promises to renew his people by water and the Spirit.	Thursday, John 7:45-52 Nicodemus defends Jesus at a meeting of Pharisees in Jerusalem.
Friday, John 19:38-42 Nicodemus honors Jesus after his crucifixion.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We will begin the book of Jonah on January 11

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We will begin a study of Philippians on January 12

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning January 10, a new series:

The History of Heaven

Scott’s Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to “worship” and then “sermons.” You’ll find the study with each week’s recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org