

# Guest Preacher Rev. Donald A. Macdonald

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Preacher: Rev. Donald A. Macdonald

[ 0 : 00 ] Let us now turn to the part of Scripture that we read, the Gospel according to John, chapter 3, and we may read again at verse 10.

Gospel according to John, chapter 3 and verse 10. Jesus answered Nicodemus, Are you the teacher of Israel?

And yet you do not understand these things. The Gospel writer John, in this section of his Gospel, writes about events that took place between two visits made by Jesus to Cana of Galilee.

Both of these visits resulted in a miracle being performed. First of these is recorded in the second chapter, the turning of water into wine.

Jesus was in attendance at a wedding reception. The second miracle was the healing of a certain nobleman's son who had been on the point of death.

[ 1 : 30 ] You could say from the first miracle to the second miracle that the featured theme of these passages is of making new.

New wine, which receives the compliment of the good wine. John also records how Jesus speaks of the erection of a new temple.

He teaches the necessity of the new birth. And finally he speaks of the new birth. In his conversation with the nameless Samaritan woman who came to the well.

And it is against that kind of backdrop that we find the words of our text, the teacher of Israel. And I'd like to spend a little time with you this morning reflecting just on these words.

The teacher of Israel, under four headings. First, his identity. Second, his intrigue. Thirdly, his indispensable necessity.

[ 2 : 50 ] And fourthly, the impact of the teaching he received. His identity, his intrigue, his indispensable necessity, and the impact of the teaching which he received.

His identity. And the Gospel writer tells us he was the teacher of Israel. And I want to emphasize the definite article, the.

Because I believe it is highly significant and important in the context. It sets before us the absolute significance of the statement, the teacher of Israel.

There were other teachers in Israel. But this person was the teacher. That for me indicates the elevated status of this man.

Tells us something about his office and function among the people. Person of intellectual power, ability, and learning.

[ 3 : 58 ] The phrase, the teacher of Israel, suggests that he was the leading Jewish theologian of the day. Like someone in our culture might be addressed as reverend, doctor, professor, or so on.

Such was the theological status of this man. One to whom the people looked for direction and guidance. He'd be looked on as one, if not the most respected figures of his day.

Admired for his theological knowledge. One to whom the people looked and came to for instruction in the law of God. His position and gifts would mean that he'd be held in respect and possible all by the general population of the Jews.

We are told that his name was Nicodemus. Which suggests a Greek influence in his background. As it was apparently a common Greek name.

But used by the Jews. His name possibly means that he had a Greek education.

[ 5 : 16 ] He could have been a Hellenist. That is one who read the Old Testament in Greek rather than in Hebrew. If he was, and I'm in the realm of speculation, he may have been influenced by Greek philosophy.

We also know that he belonged to the section of Jewish people who were known as Pharisees. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus.

The term Pharisees may present images to our mind that may not always be strictly true. We tend to think of the term Pharisee as being synonymous with being a hypocrite. And although there may be some grounds for thinking in that way, I don't believe that that would at all be an accurate reflection of this man.

The Pharisees tended to be a limited number within Israel, about maximum 6,000. And because of their limited numbers, they tended to form a kind of select brotherhood.

[ 6 : 31 ] They were fastidious in their observance and adherence to the law. They were the theological conservatives of their day.

They believed that the Old Testament was the revealed word of God. That the first five books of the Old Testament contained an inspired code of ethics.

To be believed and practiced literally. It was the goal of the scribes to work out the exact meaning of the law. It was the determined purpose of the Pharisees to keep it.

So being a Pharisee would mean that Nicodemus would be a keen student of the law. As a Pharisee, he represented those of his day and of our day who seek the meaning of life in religion but do not find it.

He belonged to the church, but he knew nothing of the personal life-transforming relationship to Jesus Christ upon which the true church of Christ is founded.

[ 7 : 55 ] This highly educated, prominent theologian was also a politician. Where do we get that information? Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

He was a member of the ruling Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. That was the highest legislative body in Judaism.

It combined in itself all the powers that we generally divide between the legislative, administrative, and judicial branches of government. Although it must be stated that under the Roman rule, as the Jews were at the time, the powers of the Sanhedrin were curtailed and restricted.

For example, they could not inflict the death penalty by crucifixion. It required to be passed on Jesus by the Roman governor.

But the Sanhedrin was the chief authority in Israel. It conducted trials, investigated heresies, wrote laws, carried out most of the official dealings between the people of Judea and the Roman authorities.

[ 9 : 15 ] Nicodemus was a member of this exclusive governing body. But this religiously devout, morally impeccable, high-powered intellectual, socially respectable and admired teacher by others, member of the elite ruling body, he was no supreme being.

He was a mere man. Now, says John in the opening verse of the chapter, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus.

At the close of the previous chapter, and that's why we read, at the end of verse 2 you find written, when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.

But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and he did no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

He himself knew what was in man. And then, that's the end of chapter 2. Chapter 3 begins, There was a man.

[ 10 : 35 ] It's as if Nicodemus is introduced on the pages of Scripture as a representative of the fallen human race, belonging to the family of Adam, a man with all the failings of a man.

As the psalmist reminds us, sure each man at best is holy vanity. And that is how he is introduced to us on the pages of the Bible.

So, his identity, the teacher of Israel, a man, a sinful man, an intellectual, a theologian, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body, a politician.

That brings me to my second point, his intrigue. John writes, This 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.

And from the opening statement of conversation, I get the impression that Nicodemus was intrigued by the teaching and actions of this person, Jesus.

[ 11 : 55 ] He would have heard of the teaching of Jesus, belonging to the ruling body. They would have been monitoring what Jesus was doing.

He would have heard of the miracles that he had performed. And so he comes to discuss matters with Jesus under the cover of darkness. We are told he came by night.

And although John tells us that this man came under the cloak of darkness, John does not specify why. Was Nicodemus afraid of being seen associating with this person, Jesus?

A person of power who had begun to perform miracles. John uses the word signs for miracles.

That's one possibility. Nicodemus' street cred might be compromised if he was known to fraternize or engage in discussion with this person, Jesus.

You know, there are those in an unconverted state who also feel that their street cred would be shredded if they were thought to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 13 : 16 ] Perhaps you are one of those. And you are present here today or listening online. At the end of life's journey facing death, do you think that your street cred is going to be important when you come to the end of the road?

I think not. Again, John, in his writing, frequently contrasts light and darkness in his gospel.

For example, he tells of one member of the disciple group who exited from the group who were gathered in the upper room. And you may remember what John wrote when this man went out. And it was night. John was not merely indicating the hour, but the fact that this man who left the group, Judas Iscariot, was under the dominion of the forces of darkness and manipulated by them. He was himself in darkness, on the way to outer darkness, where no light ever shines.

[ 14 : 49 ] And the fact that Nicodemus came by night could be a metaphor to indicate the spiritual darkness darkness that engulfed the Spirit, the teacher of Israel.

And I think the conversation bears out the spiritual darkness that still enveloped the mind of the teacher of Israel.

Notice apparent compliment to Jesus. Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God. He addresses this apparent, unschooled individual, Jesus, who had not graduated from any of the recognized schools of rabbinical teaching as a rabbi.

Is Nicodemus been truly complimentary, or is he just condescending? It's difficult to know. But he is obviously intrigued by what Jesus does.

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. Note he does not say, I know, but we know. He's not using the royal we.

[ 16 : 08 ] In other words, as if to convey that he is speaking on behalf of others who are also in positions of power, as if to indicate to Jesus the strength of position and resources that he represented.

we know you are a teacher. And you know, many are prepared to give that position to Jesus, a teacher.

But they're not prepared to go any further. You remember how John's gospel begins. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, or face to face with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of man, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

This person, Jesus, was no mere teacher. He is God incarnate. He is the Son of God revealed in true humanity, treading the world stage for a time as one who came to die in order that sinners like you and me might live eternally.

[ 17 : 30 ] Nicodemus came to Jesus. He wasn't, as he looked on his own life, going through a crisis period.

As far as he was concerned, his life wasn't a mess. He appears as a man who has life all sorted out. He has all that he wants.

He doesn't appear at this stage to be seeking. He doesn't even come with a question. He comes with an apparent statement of conviction. We know that you are a teacher come from God.

Did he come by night in the hope of co-opting Jesus to that cause? Intrigued by what Jesus did brings him to Jesus by night.

His identity. Thirdly, his indispensable necessity. His attempt to patronize, if that's what it was, cuts no ice with the teacher of teachers who knows what is in man.

[ 18 : 39 ] Remember how the psalmist summarizes the knowledge of the Lord. Lord, you have searched my life. Know my heart. You search me and know me through and through. You know me

when I sit and when I rise.

From afar my thoughts are known to you. You see my going out and lying down. You have perfect knowledge of my ways before I speak a word. You know it, Lord, for nothing can be hidden from your gaze.

And so, as the conversation develops, Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand that it is Nicodemus who requires a radical new beginning.

Remember this man, he's not going through a crisis experience. He's not on the fringes of the church. Nicodemus is actually the teacher of Israel. He's a church attender.

He's a Bible scholar. He's a community leader. He's a good man. He has all the upright credentials. If anyone's life should attract the favor and blessing of God, it's Nicodemus.

[ 19 : 47 ] But Jesus says bluntly to this morally impeccable devout man, you need to be born again, Nicodemus. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

In other words, he's saying to Nicodemus, your church involvement is not enough. your charity work, your community involvement, your education, your religious knowledge, your wealth is not enough.

You need to be born again. For unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God.

And if this remarkable man, Nicodemus, of all people, required the new birth, the implication is that everyone needs the new birth.

the very best of us need the new birth. We all need the new birth. Supposing you don't have Nicodemus' pedigree, supposing you're hardly ever in church, supposing your life is far from together just a mess, doesn't Jesus' message to Nicodemus encourage you?

It encourages me. Why? Because you don't qualify for God's kingdom on the basis of how good you are, how intelligent you are, or how religious you are.

[ 21 : 14 ] That's Jesus' message. When it comes to citizenship in God's kingdom, the entrance qualifications are universally the same. You must be born again.

You don't need to clean yourself up first. You don't need a moral reformation to gain entry. It's not good people who qualify and bad people aren't beyond hope. What you need is to be born again.

That's the indispensable need of each and all. Nicodemus needs the new birth, not because he's a Pharisee, but because he belongs to the fallen family of Adam, as we all do by nature.

He's a fallen, sinful human being. We all belong to that number by nature. Truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Unless one is born again, he cannot grasp the reality of the kingdom. He or she is like a blind person spiritually. No grasp of spiritual reality.

[ 22 : 20 ] It's not intellectual application that is required to understand the gospel. It is power and illumination from on high. And you can see from the ensuing conversation how deeply puzzled Nicodemus is by the teaching of Jesus.

And what you can deduce from the conversation is that he is stating by what the thoughts to which he gives expression, I do not understand.

understand. His very thoughts as expressed in speech confide his lack of understanding.

And Jesus emphasizes if he does not see, if he does not understand, then there is no way that he can enter into the kingdom. Truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

He is spiritually powerless and helpless. You know, there is the danger that we are prone to think that we can enter the kingdom later at a time of our own choosing.

[ 23 : 40 ] When I have done this or that or the next thing, but not now. And you know, the enemy of your soul, Satan, will always encourage you to think along these lines.

I trust, my friend, if you are not in the kingdom, that you discover the truth before it is too late. What truth? That your own resources are absolutely futile.

You are powerless to enter the kingdom without being born again. God needs to break into your life with a heavenly birth. And chapter one helps us to understand something of the nature of this heavenly birth.

John reminds the readership that Christ came to his own. And then he goes on to say, his own people did not receive him.

Now his own, in the first instance, it's not speaking of people, it's speaking of the things to which he came. His own people did not receive him.

[ 24 : 49 ] And then John went on to write, in contrast to those who did not receive him, but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, not of the will of the flesh, not of the will of man, but of God.

In other words, there were exceptions to those who rejected Christ. And when you ask the question, who received Christ, the answer from the Bible is those who believed on his name.

The receiving and believing in that particular instance are synonymous. They received him not as a teacher, but as the promised Messiah from God.

And they received him not on their own terms, but on his terms. To them he gave the right, or as it might be translated, the power to become children of God.

They received the privilege of children because a certain power was exercised on their behalf. They were given the nature of children.

[ 25 : 59 ] The nature was given by divine power, and through this power they are born anew. And to show how that came about, three negative terms are used, not of blood, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God, not of blood.

In other words, this was not something that was or is hereditary. Had it been, Nicodemus is a Jew, a son of Abraham, according to the flesh, were not required to be born again.

But he did. The new birth is not something that is handed down from parents or grandparents. It can only be received and laid hold on by faith. Not as it of the will of the flesh.

It's not something that arises from environmental conditioning. You can train up a child in the way that he should go. Even give them a sheltered life. But that in no way guarantees that the child, when he becomes an adult, will be of the number of whom it is written, but to all who receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Now, I am in no way decrying that such teaching is not desirable or even laudable, but what I am saying is that of itself, it does not lead to being born anew.

[ 27 : 25 ] Saul of Tarsus is an example that comes to mind. He sat at the feet of Gamaliel. He received precious teaching. He boasted in sources of self-righteousness, the things he considered to be spiritual assets, his bloodline, his upbringing, in his circumcision, his religious works and morality.

Yet, in his unregenerate state, he became a zealous persecutor of the Church of Christ until the day that he experienced divine intervention in his life.

And when that happened, he realized, as he writes in the letter to the Philippians, whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, he says, I count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God that depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection.

And you may be saying, yeah, but hold on, minister. What about the scripture that says, train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

[ 28 : 47 ] Yes, that's very good. That is a quotation from the Bible. But my response would be, who, which one of us is able to fulfill that injunction as it is written on the pages of scripture?

Now, I'm not saying that to discourage parents from their duty. Of course, that is our duty as Christian parents. What I'm drawing attention to is that that of itself is no guarantee that the child will go on to enjoy the blessing of the Almighty in the sense of being born again.

Not is it of the will of man. In other words, we do not produce the new birth. we do not produce it by our own efforts.

We cannot earn or contribute to our own salvation. It is of God from first to last. God is the author of this birth whereby one by nature becomes a child of God.

In the act of power, the divine nature is imparted. So as Peter states, through great and precious promises, you may be partakers of the divine nature.

[ 30 : 07 ] We're born again, Jesus says, by the secret, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Sitting in church, perhaps, and unbeknownst to you, perhaps the person beside you, the secret work of the Holy Spirit is ongoing.

Drawing a person from where they were into a different location. The wind blows where it wishes. You hear it sound.

You do not know where it comes from. Where it goes, so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. The wind is mysterious and free. We don't control it. It blows where it wishes. We experience its effects, but its direction and power we cannot control. That's how it is with the new birth. God does it. It's a gift.

It's a miracle. Not something we manufacture or control, something he gives, just as Paul realized. And as Jesus demanded of Nicodemus, no matter who we are, we need to be born again.

[ 31 : 22 ] We need to put aside any claims that we might make of merit before God, for we have absolutely none. Our responsibility is to receive.

Nicodemus' indispensable necessity was to be born again. And that is true of every one of us. His intrigue, his identity, and finally the impact of the teaching.

John doesn't record for us, perhaps we might like him to have recorded, how Nicodemus parted from Jesus that night. But I think it's safe to assume that this person of impeccable character had been given much food for thought.

Did he go away sorrowful because, as it were, his whole theology had been turned on its head? Did he go away reflecting deeply on what Jesus had taught?

Well, we can find some evidence of the latter. Why do I say that? Because you find later on that Nicodemus speaks out against the course of action being advocated by the Sanhedrin with regard to Jesus.

[ 32 : 53 ] Does our law, says Nicodemus, judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does? And then again, at the cross, you find Nicodemus identifying with Jesus along with Joseph of Arimathea when they came to collect the body of Jesus.

Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds in weight, took the body of Jesus, bound it linen cloths with the spices, says the burial custom of the Jews.

earth. Here is a man who had been in woeful ignorance of the necessity of the new birth.

But he's been brought out of his darkness. His sin-darkened understanding has been enlightened on the once Hashem teacher of Israel, no longer embarrassed to be identified with Christ.

New life has flooded into his heart. New affections control his lifestyle, no longer needing to hide under the cloak of darkness.

[ 34 : 21 ] Thus the hymn writer puts that I am not ashamed to own my Lord or to defend his cause, maintain the honor of his word, the glory of his cross.

Jesus, my God, I know his name. His name is all my trust. Nor will he put my soul to shame, nor let my hope be lost.

And the word shame there means more to be let down or disappointed. And so you may be here today, and you too have been intrigued by the teaching of Jesus.

Maybe you still have some unanswered questions you would like to explore further. Maybe you know, actually, that you need the new birth for yourself.

Perhaps you came along this morning thinking that a little religious top up wouldn't hurt. Or perhaps you came desperate for answers.

[ 35 : 33 ] It could be that you want Jesus to fix everything in your life, but to change nothing. Well, I hope whatever brought you, that you've come to see what Jesus really offers.

He offers you a new life by giving you a new heart, a radical, supernatural new beginning that he has purchased for sinners through his death on the cross.

You need to be born again. You need Jesus to give it to you. And he holds it out to you here today.

Will you look to him? the teacher of Israel, his identity, a man of power, politician, but still a man.

It's all the frailties of sinful humanity. His intrigue, he wondered about the things that Jesus was doing and the reports he was receiving.

[ 36 : 46 ] His indispensable necessity, he needed to be born again. and the impact of the teaching in that instance, was to the eternal good of the man who was once in darkness, the man who was once deeply puzzled by the necessity of the new birth.

He came to realize the blessings that are to be found in Christ. May that be true of you too today.

Let us pray. eternal and ever blessed Lord, we thank thee that you receive unworthy and undeserving sinners, ill-qualified to be the objects of your love and of your grace.

But that is the wonder and the marvel of grace that such are received by you into union with thyself. Forbid that any of us be strangers to that union and the glory shall be thine.

In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Let us conclude by singing to God's praise from Psalm 119, page 159 of the Psalter.

[ 38 : 17 ] Psalm 119, page 159, verse 33. Teach me to follow your decrees, then I will keep them to the end, give insight, and I'll keep you low, with all my heart to it attend.

Lead me in your commandments path, for there, O Lord, delight I find. Incline my heart towards your laws, from selfish gain, preserve my mind.

O turn my eyes from worthless things, give life according to your word, to me, your servant, keep your pledge, so that you may be feared.

O Lord, remove from me the shame I dread, your laws excel in uprightness. O how I long for your decrees, preserve me in your righteousness.

Let us sing these verses, Teach me to follow your decrees. Teach me to follow your decrees, then I will keep them to the end.

[ 39 : 40 ] Give inside God, I'll keep your law with all my heart to which attend.

Lead me in your command best heart. For there, O Lord, delight I find, incline my heart towards your laws.

from selfish fear preserve my mind.

O turn my eyes from worthless things, give life according to your word.

to be your servant, keep your flesh, so that you may be feared, O Lord.

[ 41 : 18 ] Remove from thee I shame my dread, your love's exhalate of brightness, O God, who I long for your decrees, please serve me in your righteous hand.

now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit, rest on and abide with you all, now and forever.

Amen. Amen. to