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September 2, 2018

JOHN 3:1-15

John Series: Get a Life in Jesus

[PRAYER] We're asking you to do that. I pray that you would teach us and that we would go away from here different people, understanding some new things about what it means to live for you and to trust you. In particular, Lord, we want to ask for your blessing on many of the students that are going back to school this week. Some of them are back at school, but many are starting this week. So we're asking, Lord, that you would protect them, you'd bless them, you'd help them to learn valuable things at school, but also to learn more about you and who you are as they interact with people who might not be Christians. So we know there's a worldview difference that our young people face and I ask that you would enlighten them and teach them about the differences and solidify their relationship with you in particular. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Now each week we study the Bible verse by verse. So if you were following along in your own Bible, you would be looking in John 3. So you can get out your Bible if you have one. If not, I'm going to put the passage on the screen in case you didn't bring a Bible. But we're teaching through the gospel of John. It's a great place for anyone to get to know God better is to start in the gospel of John and we're enjoying that study of which we've called "Get a Life in Jesus." It's an opportunity for us to go verse by verse through this passage and understand it a little bit more.

So I'm going to ask you to stand with me, if you would, as I read the passage in honor of God's word. This is the passage we'll be looking at today, John 3:1-15.

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Eternal life in him. That’s the message of the whole gospel of John. Eternal life in Him. That’s what we’re looking at here. And that’s what this whole section is all about this passage. “Get a Life in Jesus” is talking about the gospel of John and the things we can learn from it and the lessons.

Now it’s fascinating for me, you remember two weeks ago I taught about the wedding in Cana. Remember that? That Jesus turned the water into wine. I told you I was able to identify greatly with that story because we’re planning a wedding ourselves this month as Megan is getting married later in the month. So I was able to identify with that greatly.

This week we’re teaching about being born again. I can identify with that greatly because as you know I had a granddaughter born this week. I have the privilege of showing you some pictures of her. Her name is Lenna, born 7 pounds 2 ounces. And she is doing fine with her mom now. They’re back in Brooklyn. This is her mom, Melissa. And that’s a very proud grandpa. Lenna Morrison. Just a treat.

As I am preparing my sermon, I’m preparing a sermon on being born again and I’m studying about that and at the same time my granddaughter is being born. I’m going this is so cool to think about childbirth and to think about what God is saying. Because God in this passage is going to use the example of being born again as a way for us to understand more about salvation, or the faith life, or being a Christian, or whatever you want to call that thing we do when we know God personally. That’s what we’re talking about here.

So let’s go into our passage today in John 3:1. It says – *Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.*

There are two characters in our story today, Jesus and Nicodemus. That’s often what happens. When you come to God and you get to know Him in a personal way, everything else kind of fades out of the picture. It’s just you and God, and you’re getting to know Him. He’ll answer your questions, He’ll deal with your issues, He’ll respond to your needs, and you can get to know Him in this personal way described as being born again as we see later in the passage.

But notice this guy. You’ve just got to see what’s being told about him. He was a Pharisee. Now Pharisees were Jews. They were also good people. They studied to be Pharisees, they went around doing good for others. They were known for that, doing righteous kind of things. So he was a Pharisee, but not only that, he was a member of the Jewish ruling council. So in our

thinking it would be a cross between being a U.S. Senator and a Supreme Court Judge. This guy was big, very important guy. That's the character that we need to focus in on. Because God is going to meet him in a specific way, different than He would meet some of us and we will see is different as He meets different people in the gospel. But an important way that's very important for Nicodemus and will give us some ideas about how we can then respond to God as well.

Notice he came to Jesus at night. I wonder if he came to Jesus at night it likely wasn't very popular culturally at that point, especially among the Jewish religious leaders, to go and find out about Jesus because Jesus was saying that the religious leaders didn't have it together, that they were missing something. So I suspect Nicodemus wanted to come at night so he wouldn't be seen by everyone else. I'm sure that in your own world there are people around you who maybe don't approve of the fact that you're a Christian or it's challenging. So you might be afraid to be public about Jesus. That's a challenge. We all face that. And coming to that place where we say, "Yes, I'm going to... This is me. This is who I am. I'm going to share this with other people." That's one of the maturity things that happens in us that we're not so much concerned about other people, we are concerned about the opinion of God.

Well he came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

You see, Nicodemus had seen that other people were experiencing God. Nicodemus could see that miracles were taking place. There was something, though, that he needed, that was intriguing him about his whole experience. He needed something. So he was intrigued. He wanted to come to Jesus, find Jesus for himself. He wanted to know more about Jesus Christ. Who are you? What are you doing? I see these miracles happening in different places. But Nicodemus, even though he was a ruler of the Jews, even though he was a good person, even though he was religious, even though he was Jewish, he lacked something. He needed something. And he knew that, so he seeks out Jesus.

This is how people come to Christ. It's so great. Because they realize there's something that they're lacking and they need something that they don't have. So Nicodemus is coming to Jesus and he's saying we see these miracles that are going on and I want to know more about it. He doesn't say that, he just makes this comment because he doesn't really know what to say. He's not even asking a question. He just says, "*For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.*" So he kind of throws it out there.

So now Jesus responds to Nicodemus this way. He says – "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*"

Born again. We know what that term means. In fact I looked up "born again" on the internet to see how it's used because it's used in other places besides in a religious context. For example there's a store called Born Again Sports. That's where you can buy used sports equipment and breathe new life into it by owning it. Sometimes we say a sports team has been born again. There was another website that talked about if you have a brand, like if you're a business owner and you have a brand, this is a marketing company and they can help your brand be born again. The idea is breathe new life into it so that I can become alive.

But I want to take you back to Jesus who made these words pretty household words for us. Because the term born again describes this experience that we have with God that moves us from a place of not having Jesus resident in our life to a place where we now have Him. It's a born again experience and it happens when you come before God and you say, "God, I know I'm a sinner, that I need you as my Savior. I know that you died on the cross for me. I want to accept that personally into my life. Not just you died for the whole world, but you died for me. And I want to accept that in my life." When you do that, you become born again.

So here's this picture of new birth. Imagine a little baby, if you can, and that little baby is starting something brand new. When a person gets born again, it's something new starts to take place inside of them that launches them into this amazing place in their life. It's a whole new dimension. Jesus is trying to explain this to Nicodemus, but he doesn't get it. So Nicodemus says these words: *"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"*

So what Nicodemus is thinking very temporally, as I'll suggest many of us are thinking very temporally in our life just about what's going on. And Jesus is saying I'm going to take you somewhere else. I mean you're thinking in your life and in your whole life I'm going to take you to another dimension that you need to understand. So Jesus says – *"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."* Two different things, water and the Spirit. *"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"*

Two things – the water and the Spirit. Now what is the water? I don't know what it is. I can tell you that there are some ideas about what water is. The emphasis here is on the Spirit. I know what that is and that's where we're going. But I'll give you some ideas of what the water is. The reason I say I don't know is because I looked up some of my favorite Bible teachers this week to find out what their thinking is about the water and they don't even agree. But I'll tell you what some of the ideas are.

Maybe it's physical birth, the water, the amniotic fluid born of water in the Spirit. I tend to think that's what He's talking about. In part because the next verse kind of amplifies that by saying *flesh gives birth to flesh and Spirit gives birth...* So He's talking about flesh versus Spirit. Maybe he's talking about birth, a physical birth versus spiritual birth. Or maybe He's talking about baptism because John had been baptizing now in the Jordan River. So there's this idea of baptism. And it's not just about baptism, but it's about the Spirit. Or maybe He's talking about the Bible and the word of God and all the prophecies that of course Nicodemus would know.

It's not just about the word, which is like the water. The scriptures describe the Bible as this kind of water that washes him. It's not just that. But it's the Spirit as well. I'm not sure what the water is, but I know what the Spirit is, and that's where the emphasis is here. So let's not get sidetracked on the water part.

Let's look at the Spirit part. Because here's what's happening. Jesus is trying to take Nicodemus from just looking at the temporal things that are going on to move him to another level in his

thinking. Instead of just looking at the bills that need to be paid and the children that need to be raised and the relationships that you got to fix and the car problems you might have. Not just thinking about the temporal things, but thinking on another level, He's going to move him to spirit, not just the flesh. He says – *Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*

Let's talk about spirit for just a moment just so we are on the same page here. You have to understand that every person has a spirit. Whether you're a Christian or not, everybody has a spirit. The Bible talks about the spirit being that place where that's your personality, that's where your identity is, your vision, your passion. It's your purpose in life, your meaning. That's the spirit that is in a person. That person has a spirit and that kind of is a spiritual place.

So when you're thinking on a spiritual level, sometimes people try to get connected spiritually by trying to do something like yoga as a religion. When you think of yoga as a religion, not just yoga exercises, but some people view it as a religion. They're trying to get in touch spiritually with something. People who do transcendental meditation are trying to spiritually do something. That's a spiritual thing that they're trying to do. Neither of those are really the best solutions, obviously. In fact I would say that they're unhelpful. But rather God has designed a way for us to experience Him and to be complete. And that is to become born again.

So this idea of being born again means that we accept Jesus into our lives and there is the Holy Spirit that the Bible talks about that comes inside of our hearts and meshes with our spirit and completes us. So now our earthly spirit meshes with the Holy Spirit and we have this new meaning and new purpose and new identity. God does something inside of us that gives us new birth. He takes us to a new dimension in our thinking. So now it's not every day about my chore list. It's not just about getting to bed or worrying about my sleep problems. Now it's about there's something else going on. Now there's a spiritual dimension.

You know this. Okay. Many of you are Christians already. You've accepted Christ into your life. So you know that now when a problem happens, some kind of a challenge that you're experiencing, you can think about it on a spiritual level. It's not just about getting this thing fixed. Or if you're having some kind of a health issue or you're having some kind of a financial, there's some kind of a spiritual thing that's going on that's bigger than just this physical thing that's happening. Why? Because you can think on a spiritual plane and the Holy Spirit is then working with your spirit and something bigger is going on in life and this is the new birth. This is what's described as this being born again that drives you to this new level of thinking and this new place in your life.

It doesn't happen just by going to church. In fact let's just look a Nicodemus because I think that there are some people when they think about faith, they try to get there, they try to get to God in some different ways that I would suggest or inadequate ways. In fact they're dead ends.

Sometimes when I'm traveling I like to go to a Mexican restaurant. My favorite restaurant to go to would be a Mexican restaurant. So I'll put into my GPS "Mexican restaurant" and then I'll go to that location to find the Mexican restaurant and when I get there, this is what I find. It's a dead end. It's closed. Oh man. You can't rely on Google as much as you think you can.

There are some dead ends that exist in our lives when it comes to searching for faith. If you think about Nicodemus, you think about a guy who is religious, I would suggest that just being religious or coming to church or doing religious kinds of things doesn't make you a Christian. Having a confirmation or other kind of ritual things that happen in your childhood (being baptized as a baby or something), that doesn't make you a Christian. Religiosity doesn't get you there. Jesus is trying to communicate to Nicodemus and he even knows that. He says, "I need something besides what I've got." Because he had a lot of these things. He was a Jewish guy.

And you know another thing that doesn't get us to this place of closeness with God is our pedigree or our background. Some people think well my friends are Christians or my family is a Christian, so there's this sense in which some people think that if they're connected to someone somehow then they're a Christian. It doesn't work that way. God doesn't have any grandchildren, we can say. Okay? Everyone becomes a child of God directly when they get to know Him personally. It doesn't make any difference what country you live in.

I like the statement that was made to Billy Graham or that he made. One man in Ireland when Billy Graham was there teaching, when Billy Graham asked the question, "Are you a Christian? Are you born again?" the man said, "Oh yeah. I live in Ireland. We're Christians here." And Billy Graham said, "You know, living in Ireland doesn't make you a Christian. I heard once about some kittens that were born in a bread basket and that doesn't make them biscuits." I thought that was a cute way of saying it. But the point is you don't become a Christian, you don't get born again, you can't make that statement about yourself because of other things that are around.

Nicodemus was a man who did a lot of good things in his life. But the good things were not enough for him to get to heaven. He needed something more than that.

Whatever happened to Nicodemus? I just want you to see that. We're going to zip through some story here. Because although the passage itself does not tell us that Nicodemus became born again on that day, we see that there is a progression in his life and we see he becomes this disciple of Jesus.

If we zip ahead to John 7 we see Nicodemus as a defender of Jesus when there's this kind of uproar about Jesus and whether He should be arrested or not arrested. It says – *Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier* (that's back in chapter 3) *and who was one of their own number* (that is the Sanhedrin, the leadership there, the religious leaders), *asked, "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?" They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."* So here we see Nicodemus defending Jesus.

But here's a very touching story. This is in the crucifixion. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, there were a couple guys who came and took Him off the cross and put Him into the tomb. This is the story. *Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night.* So this guy's got a reputation of coming to Jesus at night. Right?

Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Wow. Here's a man, Nicodemus, whose life was totally changed. How? He became born again.

I want to take you a little further into the passage because I want us to understand what this means to be born again. Not just how to get there. So if you're going to get there, that means you're going to ask Jesus to come into your life, admit you're a sinner, receive this crucifixion that took place as your own personal gift from God for you, and then you're in (so to speak). Then you're born again. That's your experience being born again. It happens in different people's lives in different ways.

I met with a woman this week on Wednesday morning, a twenty-six year old woman who, "I got to come and talk to you now." I said, "Okay, come on." She had this born again experience. In fact God overtook her body and was speaking in her and through her, and it was a remarkable experience of seeing light and all of those things. Her mother was there and recorded it on an iPhone so I could watch the twenty-minute experience that was going on. It was really fascinating to see this. Her experience was very emotional and dramatic.

I'm sure the reason for that for her is because as of Tuesday night she was a heroin user and she came to me on Wednesday morning saying she's had this experience with God. She said that the high that she received on Wednesday morning and this experience that was God was greater than any of her heroin ecstasies that she had experienced. I suspect that that's how God came to visit her. Her born again experience was this sense of emotional and drama because of her heroin use and her experience that way. So God chose to meet her in that way.

We could go around a lot of us and tell stories about how we met Christ and it happens in different ways. But we all come to that same place where we recognize that there's something I don't have that I need and it's this spiritual thing and then God comes into our life and He changes us. For some of us it's emotional. For some, it's not. But still it does something to us.

Once you're born again, once you have this experience, I want you to see the analogy Jesus continues to use in our passage as He describes it. Continuing in the passage in verse 8 it says – *"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*

So what He's saying is it's kind of like this wind. Notice the first thing that He says about the wind. The wind has a will of its own. So the wind, the Spirit, there's a play on words here. Because the word *wind* there is the word *pneuma*, where we get pneumatic tires from or pneumonia. *Pneuma*. That's the word *wind*. But it's also the exact same word for *Spirit*. So there's a play on words between wind and Spirit. He's saying the Spirit is like this wind. It comes in and it has a will of its own.

So you know what it's like. If you've lived with Christ for a while, you know that sometimes you're just kind of taken and God does something different than you were experiencing or expecting. When life situations happen and some difficulty takes place, you go, "Wow. What is God doing here?" There's this movement of the Spirit that's going and you don't know. It goes where it pleases. You can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it's going. There's this part of the Spirit that you don't harness.

So if you're a control person, you're really into control, you might have a little trouble with this idea of being born again because it's a relinquishing of control. It's allowing God to run your life, to control you. That means that you always have this spiritual sense of what's happening that's different than everybody else who is looking around at the problems of life or the to-do list that they have to get done or to get from here to there, wherever it is. There's a different way to think.

Notice how Jesus describes these two different levels of thinking because it will help you get the idea of what it means to be born again. He says in verse 9 – *"So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."* *"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.*

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony." So what we know and what we see is right here on this level one. He says – *"I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"* So there are two different levels of thinking.

As you leave here today and you're starting to go through your week, you want to be thinking on a spiritual level about heavenly things. It will transform your life. When you're born again, it takes you to a different way of looking at life than other people will see it. That's what He's talking about – heavenly things, not just earthly things. *"No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man."*

Now He goes to another illustration, which of course Nicodemus would know. Maybe you don't know this story, so I'm going to tell it to you. But it's a story about Moses and the snake that was lifted up. Because it illustrates to Nicodemus what he needs to do now and for all of us what we need to do now.

Notice verse 14 – *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."* That's where we're going. Eternal life in Him. That's what we want. We want to understand what that is, not just for the future, but it starts now in the way that we think and the way that we operate.

Well the story took place back in the Old Testament when the Israelites were wandering around in the wilderness and they were focused on the temporal things. They were complaining about similar things that people complain about today. I don't like the living conditions, I don't like the leadership around here, I don't like the food that we're eating. They're murmuring and complaining about things. So God allowed snakes to come into the camp and they were biting the people and some of the people died. So they cried out to Moses, "Moses, talk to the Lord and get a solution for us!"

So Moses comes before the Lord, “Lord, what do we do here? The people want to be saved from this.” Not just from the snakes, they need to be saved from their downward looking problem of seeing all of the stuff around them and complaining about it all the time. That’s what they need to be saved from.

God says, “Moses, build a bronze snake, put it on a pole, and put it up in the sky. Put it on this big pole so the people can look at it. When people see the snake on the pole, they will be healed.” So people would look at that snake and then those who were bitten by the snakes were healed of it.

I’m sure you can just imagine the situation. That some were in their tents and groaning. “Come on, look at the snake out here.” “I’m not going to look at a snake. I’m in too much pain.” That’s how it is today. There are people who are so stuck with all of their pain and their problems and their suffering and whatever else they’re doing, they cannot look up and see what God has for them. They can’t just go outside and see that’s the solution.

See, Jesus is comparing that snake up on that pole to His own crucifixion. The fact that He died on the cross for us so that we could receive Him as our personal Savior. Then when we look up to Him and say, “I need Him,” then something happens inside of us. We experience a new birth and it transforms us. We move to a new level of thinking in our lives. This is really big.

So the people who were able to look up at this snake on a pole were healed. It became this thing that everybody remembered about God’s miraculous power and the salvation that He provided for them. Not just from the snakebites, but from their downward looking. They need to be looking up. They need to be looking at the solution that God had. And now it’s compared to Jesus Christ on that cross.

I would suggest He’s the solution. He’s the one we need to be looking at. If you’re struggling in your life in any kind of pain, any kind of struggle, any kind of challenge, we need to be looking up at Jesus Christ on that cross. When we look at Him on the cross, we go, “That is my answer. That is what I need.” When you then accept Him into your life, there’s this transformation that’s called being born again and that’s what we’re seeing today in this passage. You’re born again. Something new has taken place in your life.

I would suggest maybe there are some of you here that haven’t made that commitment to Christ yet. If you’re ready to make that commitment, I suggest you make it today. I’d be happy to pray with you. It’s simply this. It’s coming before the Lord. In fact why don’t you bow your heads with me right now where you are. And if you’re going to pray that prayer for the first time today, you can just repeat after me in your own heart these words:

[PRAYER] God, I know I’m a sinner. I thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross for me. I need that salvation for me personally and I want to accept you into my life now. I want to be born again. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Now if you prayed that prayer today, I'd like to know that. I'd like to encourage you. We have a Bible study that can get you right into God's word. You can start studying the Bible for yourself and you can start growing in your faith because you don't want to stay a baby. You can be born a baby, but you don't want to be staying a baby. You want to be growing in your faith, which means you're going to be learning more about what God says in His word about this spiritual life and what He wants to do inside of you.

Would you stand with me please? We're going to sing now, and as we do I want to encourage you to respond to the Lord in your own heart. If you'd like prayer for something in your life, you'd like prayer healing, you'd like prayer for a decision that you're making, you'd like prayer for someone else in your life, then come on up here and pray with one of our prayer counselors this morning. Let's worship the Lord together.