

BORN AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN**

03.01.26 John 3:1–17

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“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.” — John 3:1

Nicodemus appears only in the Gospel of John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke either never heard of him or didn't consider his story essential to their purposes. In John's gospel he appears three times: first, in today's passage—the nighttime conversation with Jesus; second, in chapter 7, when he cautiously defends Jesus before the Sanhedrin; and finally, in chapter 19, when he helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.

In today's passage he comes to Jesus after dark, probably because he doesn't want to be seen or remembered talking to this radical young rabbi. His name literally means “Victory of the People,” or as we used to say in the hippy days, “Power to the People.” His being a Pharisee tells us a great deal about him: he was well educated in the Torah, he was wealthy, he likely dressed in black, and he probably wore a long, untrimmed beard.

Like all Pharisees, he held certain beliefs very seriously:

- Strict adherence to the Torah: They believed strict obedience to the Torah was the only way to salvation.
- Observance of ritual purity: They emphasized ritual cleanliness and separation from anything considered impure.
- Belief in the afterlife: They affirmed the resurrection of the dead at the end of time and the existence of angels and spirits.
- Role of tradition: They believed tradition served as a living and active component of faith.

Nicodemus addresses Jesus with respect— “Rabbi,” or “Teacher”—and tells him he believes Jesus is sent by God because of the signs and wonders he has performed. In other words, he has seen Jesus' résumé and accepts it as authentic. Jesus' credentials are, in Nicodemus's view, legitimate.

Jesus brushes these compliments aside and cuts straight to the heart of the matter. Pharisees were deeply concerned with entering the Kingdom of God—both in this life and the next—through obedience to the Torah. They spent much of their time interpreting the Law of Moses and debating which interpretations were correct so they could obey it perfectly and earn their way into God's kingdom.

Jesus offers an alternative key to the kingdom: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus misunderstands him.

The Aramaic word Jesus uses—*ella*—can mean “from above,” “of the Spirit,” or simply “again.” We have words like this in English too—words whose meanings depend entirely on context. “Cleave,” for example, can mean to split apart or to cling tightly.

So, when Jesus says *ella* and means “from above,” Nicodemus hears “again.”

He asks, “How can a person be born a second time?”

Jesus explains that to enter God’s kingdom—both now and in the life to come—one must be born of water (physically born) and born *ella*, of the Spirit. Nicodemus asks how this second birth happens. Jesus answers, in essence, that we cannot make it happen. Just as we did not make our first, physical birth happen, neither can we make our spiritual birth happen. It is a gift from God through Jesus Christ.

IT HAPPENS OR IT DOESN’T HAPPEN

When I was born, I didn’t have any say in the matter. No one consulted me. No one asked my opinion or permission. The same is true for all of us. We have no control over it. It simply happens—or it doesn’t. And when it does happen, it comes as a gift. We don’t earn it. We don’t pay for it. Our birth into this life is given to us.

Jesus uses our physical birth as a metaphor for what happens spiritually when we come into full contact with God and God’s grace. It’s like being born all over again—not in our bodies, but in our spirits.

A couple of months ago, when I fell unconscious, the EMTs and doctors didn’t know whether I would come back. After what Jean describes as agonizing hours, I began to stir. Slowly—an eye flicker, then a word, then a movement of my head, then a raised hand. After two days, a sentence. I spoke to Jean and answered the doctors’ simple questions. I was as weak as a child. I couldn’t walk unassisted.

Another day passed, then more tests. I was able to sit in a chair and eat soft food. Then I walked with a walker—to the door and back, then to the nurses’ station, then around it, then down the hall. Slowly but surely, day after day. After eight days I was allowed to go home and begin the process all over again.

It was only a couple of weeks ago that it struck me—when I stepped up over a curb and onto the sidewalk, easily and unassisted. I thought back over those days and weeks: the pain, the weakness, the difficulty, the fatigue. And I realized that all that time, I was being reborn. Reborn physically, yes, but spiritually as well. That illness had sent me back to a kind of infancy—weak, defenseless, utterly dependent—so that I could be reborn with the help of my wife, my friends, my doctors, and God Almighty into a healthy adult.

I had survived the same sepsis infection that took my brother Scot’s life five years ago. He had everything I had, but he did not survive. It happens or it doesn’t happen. It had not happened for Scot; it happened for me.

And because my body was being restored, my spirit was being restored as well. As one doctor said, I had danced too close to the edge and lived to tell of it. And because of that, I will never be the same. My perspective has changed. My outlook has shifted. My viewpoint has been adjusted without my permission.

AGAIN, AND AGAIN

That wasn't the first time, though. Being reborn can happen over and over again. There is no limit to how many times we can be reborn.

I've been reborn with a new perspective several times in my life.

When I was twelve years old at church camp, we were talking about what we wanted to do with our lives. My camp counselor asked, "Dean, have you ever considered being a minister?" I had—but now someone else saw that possibility in me too.

When I met Jean and realized, after a few dates, that I was in love with her. When we got married.

When my kids were born, I looked at the front page of the newspaper and wondered how they had missed it.

When my parents died, I realized that I had become the patriarch of my family.

On the day of my ordination, when Bishop Loder placed his hand on my head and said, "Take thou authority to preach the word."

And there was one other time—perhaps the most eye-opening spiritual awakening of my life. If you'd like, I can help you refine the ending, craft a conclusion, or shape the final movement of the sermon so it lands with the depth and grace you're aiming for. Here is a ****clean, polished, ready-to-preach version**** of your entire conclusion. I've preserved your voice, your honesty, and the emotional arc, while tightening grammar, smoothing transitions, and clarifying meaning. It should read smoothly aloud and carry the weight of your story with dignity and pastoral depth.

OLDEST CHILD SYNDROME

I'm the oldest of five siblings, and I have always had what I now know is called "Oldest Child Syndrome." Yes, that's a real thing. I didn't know it until a couple of years ago when I stumbled across it while looking up something else.

Here are the seven major symptoms of Oldest Child Syndrome—and I have every one of them. If you're an oldest child, I sympathize. You probably have at least five.

1. We are people pleasers.
2. We tend to be overachievers.
3. We received harsher punishments.
4. We didn't have to wear hand-me-downs.
5. We sometimes feel resentment toward our younger siblings.
6. We tend to be serious, and sometimes solitary.
7. We love acting as teachers.

Like I said, I checked all the boxes—some more than others—but especially the one marked “people pleaser.”

I spent my childhood terrified of upsetting my mother. When she was in one of her dark moods, she could be physically abusive. But even more than that, I wanted her to be happy with me. That desire shaped me. A compliment could make my week. Her smile could make my day. A pat on the hand could fill me with contentment. But a frown or a raised voice could scare the daylight out of me. And hearing her bark “Dean Edward!” would send me running to hide.

So, I dedicated myself to pleasing her. I did my chores before they were due. I asked her to teach me how to cook. I looked after my younger siblings. I sang in the children’s choir, went to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School without complaint, tried hard to get along with the neighborhood kids, and worked diligently for good grades—because nothing pleased my mother more than good grades.

I was a very good student, but no genius. Mostly A’s and B’s, with an occasional C in a subject where I had no natural talent. Every six weeks we lined up for her to examine and sign our report cards. A’s and B’s received no comment at all—she simply signed the cards and handed them back. One C earned a frown of disappointment. More than one, and she would sign the card and throw it on the floor.

My sister Lisa, the youngest student in the house at the time, was the best of us. She routinely brought home straight A’s. Mom would glance at the card, say “Straight A’s,” sign it, and hand it back. Then one day she looked at Lisa’s card—also straight A’s—signed it, handed it back, and said, “An awful lot of minuses on there.” That was all. A perfect card, and all she noticed were the minus signs.

And in that moment, I realized: I would never get grades good enough to please my mother.

So, I turned to a different parent figure—my coaches. Football, basketball, track. I practiced and played until my body was covered with bruises. But I was a lineman, and I learned quickly that no matter how well I played, it was the guys who carried the ball who got the praise. Same in basketball and track. I was good enough to make the team, but too clumsy or too slow to be a star. And the stars were the ones who won the coach’s approval.

So, I turned to music and theater, and there I finally found my place. It turned out I had a natural talent for both. I could read music with only a little instruction, and I could play and sing by ear. Memorizing lines came easily. And I could even dance without tripping over my own feet. Public speaking was like an addictive drug. Performing was my medium. Applause was my tonic. I soaked it up like a sponge. It healed my wounds and filled me with life and energy.

But the songs always ended. The concerts fell silent. The plays closed. The speeches concluded. And each time, the applause faded. The audience who loved me so dearly a few

moments before got up and went home. And I had to come down from the mountaintop and return to real life.

The older I got, the harder it became to please the adult figures in my life—teachers, bosses, coaches, audiences, parents. I could please them for a moment, maybe even a day, but eventually their approval faded, receded like the tide, and I had to prove myself all over again. Tomorrow brought a new challenge, and today’s achievement was forgotten.

That constant pursuit of approval was exhausting. Eventually I no longer had the energy to try. In college, I began doing the bare minimum—just enough to get by. I turned in my assignments, but without pride or polish. B’s and C’s were good enough.

YOU ARE ACCEPTED

It was my pastor, Bob Sinks, who first noticed the change in me—the shift in my gait, my posture, my voice. He realized I was depressed. He didn’t suggest therapy. He suggested theology. He recommended a weekend retreat where youth and adults studied four essays by four great theologians.

One of those essays was a sermon by Paul Tillich, a German pastor and theologian who had fled the Nazis and come to America. The sermon was called “You Are Accepted.”

I read it and came to a paragraph that made me stop. I went back and read it again. And then again—a third time.

Tillich described the experience of human despair -- hopelessness, darkness, sadness, the moments when we wonder whether life is worth living. And then he wrote:

“Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!’”

For me, it was as though I had been stumbling through a dark room and suddenly someone turned on the light. Everything looked different—my successes and my failures, my family and my friends, my past and my future.

I was accepted. My sins, my mistakes, my failures were forgiven. My life was a gift, and my future was open.

It wasn’t a one-and-done experience, you understand. I would have to hear that message over and over again throughout my life. I still do. But I hear it—and that’s the thing. Every time I hear it, I am born anew in my spirit.

AMEN