

Today we begin our summer series of JESUS ENCOUNTERS. Over the next 3 months we will look into the gospel of John where we find various Jesus encounters with both individuals and groups of people. Each instance, we will watch Jesus teach and reach, and hopefully learn how we can more effectively extend our reach to others in our encounters. We want to learn how to (1) better teach who Jesus is and (2) better draw our listeners to Him. Jesus was the expert at doing both, so let us learn from our Master!

### **NICODEMUS**

Our first JESUS ENCOUNTER is with Nicodemus – a man of the Pharisees and a ruler of the Jews. The Scripture tells us that he came to Jesus after dark, perhaps for discretion sake or for fear of being seen. Then we learn what he thought of Jesus, after having heard of, and perhaps witnessed, the miracles Jesus had already been performing.

***John 3:1-3** Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."*

We all know people who would say that Jesus was a great teacher and miracle worker. And they hold a degree of respect for this Jesus because they understand that in some way he was supernaturally connected with God through His amazing words and deeds. These people may or may not be church goers, but they would consider themselves religious, trying to live a good life the best they can. This would also be Nicodemus. So what we learn today in this JESUS ENCOUNTER might well be good example for us in how to reach out to our semi-religious, Jesus-acknowledging friends.

### **BORN AGAIN**

The phrase that has long been associated with Nicodemus is "born again." In our Bible we find this phrase used only here and in the first chapter of First Peter. Jesus initiated his encounter with Nicodemus with what is called a "mashal," that is, a paradoxical saying coming across as a veiled remark, something like a riddle to be solved.

***John 3:3** Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Nicodemus clearly did not understand what Jesus was talking about, which undoubtedly was Jesus' intention in order to draw Nicodemus into conversation about a saving relationship with God.

***John 3:4** Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"*

Now Jesus, being who He was as the God-man, knew exactly where Nicodemus was at and what his reason was for coming to Him. Notice the verses that directly precede this encounter.

***John 2:23-25** Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.*

Jesus knew what only He could know because he was the all-knowing God-man. But this also reveals that He "knew what was in man." And so do we, because of Scripture. We know that all men are sinners in need of a Savior, and are looking for a relationship with God whether they know it or not. And we know that those open to spiritual things want to know what it is they need to do or be in order to be right before God. This was Nicodemus and Jesus knew it, and this is many of our

friends and we know it. Don't let the enemy confuse you into thinking that "most people" are not interested in God or spiritual things. That just is not so. Jesus tells us "the fields are white unto harvest." (John 4:35, in another encounter we will study another lesson).

"Born again" gets a bad rap in our present society. To many it means a radical "Jesus freak." Or it means to others a super-conservative, ultra-judgmental Christian. In our current political cycle we hear of the "evangelical" or "born again" voting block, who are always typified by the left as radically conservative and intolerant.

Yet "born again" was Jesus' way of explaining the new life that comes to one who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, bringing that one into God's kingdom. It is another way of saying "saved" – and even "saved" is a word to explain coming into a life-changing relationship with God.

**I think using "born again" is a great strategy we can learn from Jesus in our encounters.**

"What do you think it means to be born again?" could be a question to ask. Or you could be even more specific: "Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again. What do you think me meant by that?" Or if you wanted to lead into an opportunity to share your testimony, you could say: "I have been born again, and I hope you'd agree that I'm not too weird. May I tell you what that means to me?" And then you could proceed with explaining as Jesus did to Nicodemus.

**John 3:5-8** *Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

I see three points of helpful explanation here.

1. Just as water brought us into the world in physical birth, and water is used in baptism to cleanse our physical being, so the Spirit – the Holy Spirit of God – is the only One who brings us into spiritual relationship with God. Our eyes, hearts and minds must be opened supernaturally to experience the things of the spirit by the Spirit of God.
2. Don't wrongly think that we can make this being "born again" happen by our own physical efforts. We can accomplish many things by our fleshly actions, but not being born again into God's kingdom – the Spirit must do that. The flesh and spirit are distinct.
3. Just as the wind is not seen but felt; just as the wind is mysterious in its coming and goings; just as the wind is known by its effects rather than by sight – so the Spirit's working is perceived spiritually, is mysterious and is known by its affect on a life.

And we too should be able to explain in our encounters that becoming a Christian, or being "born again" is a work of God, not a work of man. It can't be explained in physical terms or by a list of "do's" and "don'ts." It is so radical that it like being born all over again. A Christian doesn't look any different, but should certainly act differently. The affect should expose the miracle of what has happened inside. It is what Paul explained to the Corinthians as becoming a "new creature."

**2 Corinthians 5:17** *Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*

So, if being "born again" is all about the Spirit and not by action of man, then what is one to do who wants to be born of the Spirit – or be saved – or come into God's kingdom (all equivalent) ????

## THE ONE LIFTED UP

Nicodemus responds to all these explanations with "How can these things be?" This may or may not be the response of those to whom we speak. But our conversation must always lead to what one must do to receive this gift of God. A simple question to ask is "would you want to be born

again and receive this gift of the Spirit?"

Jesus tells Nicodemus: "No one has (ever) ascended into heaven. But He who descended from heaven (is the) Son of God." (v.13) Jesus is saying that He is the only one qualified and able to help you spiritually in this quest, for He is the One who has come from heaven to do that very thing.

He then uses an illustration with which Nicodemus would have been very familiar. Although those we speak to today may not be so familiar.

**John 3:14-15** *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.*

Jesus is referring to what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness, as recorded in Exodus 21:6-9. God was punishing His people for their disobedience by sending fiery serpents among them. When Moses interceded for the people, God had Moses make a bronze serpent and set it on a standard above the people, so that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he would live.

This was taught by Jesus to Nicodemus as a foreshadowing of what God did in lifting up His Son on the cross of Calvary. The stinging of the serpents in the wilderness was foreshadowing the stinging of the Serpent, the Devil, bringing death by sin. Yet any one who looks to Jesus who was lifted up on the cross of Calvary in payment for sin, and believes, is saved from spiritual death – is "born again." So what part is one to play in the miracle of being "born again"? Answer: look to Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross for your sin, and believe in Him as your Savior. This is made oh so clear in the most beloved verse that follows.

## THE GIFT OF LIFE AND LOVE

**John 3:16** *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*

See here ...

1. **The Character of love** – "so" loved – love to the extreme, active from eternity past
2. **The Author of love** – God Himself, not only loving but love through and through
3. **The Object of love** – all of mankind, created in God's image by marred by sin
4. **The Gift of love** – literally "His Son, the only begotten, he gave" – His Son the gift
5. **The Purpose of love** – to bestow the very life of God to all who believe in the Son  
(Important note: annihilation is not the antithesis result, but lack of relationship with God - forever perishing apart from the life and love of God)

Here we have great example for how we can encounter others. John 3:16 may have been used and even overused in some situations, but it is the best synthesis of the gospel message that we have in Scripture. Use it unashamedly and liberally, instructing what it means. And don't forget to include mention of the truth in the following verse, verse 17.

**John 3:17-18** *For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

Oh how many wrongly see God as the cosmic judge and kill-joy. Though He has every right to judge us for our sin, through Jesus He chooses to reach out and save and bring new life, not cause punishment and destroy life. Share this glorious aspect of our God with all you can!

The Nicodemus encounter concludes with Jesus making clear that the Light of God either attracts people or pushes them away. Just as physical light either attracts moths or causes cockroaches to scurry, so the spiritual light of God causes those who are called to draw near, or those who don't

want their deed to be exposed to walk away. You can ask your encounters, “which are you?” – moth or cockroach? Are you drawn to Jesus and His message, or not?

**John 3:19-21** *This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.*

## **SUMMARY OF SUGGESTIONS FOR ENCOUNTER**

1. **Share “born again”** in conversation. See what they think of what it means. Then tell them what it means to God, and to you.
2. **Share Jesus as the One lifted up for them.** The example of the serpent in the wilderness may be used or not, but use the example of the cross of Calvary.
3. **Share John 3:16** and it’s many wonderful layers of truth
4. **Ask if they are drawn to the Light of God** or pushed away by it. If they are drawn, ask if they are ready to be “born again”