

John 3:1-16

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[0 : 00] Just to say, as I go through this talk, I'm primarily addressing people for whom the Christian faith is perhaps something they haven't yet found is real or they've really engaged with themselves.

! If we could turn, if you've got a Bible, to page 888-889 to John chapter 3, that would be a help too because I'm going to speak from the Bible.

And again, there may be questions from there, that's great, but unashamedly I'm going to speak from this. Christians believe that this book is written by a man, John, but inspired by God.

So as we look at that again, we're hoping it will address you very deeply. Let's pray. Father God, thank you so much for the Bible. Please help me to speak clearly now. And we pray that you'd address each one of us in the very depths of our being.

And we ask that all of us would leave here with something more to believe and something to do. Amen. I don't know if you've ever played that game, if I had my life all over again.

[1 : 22] Of course, you won't actually play that game if you're under 30. So sorry, it's a terrible introduction if you're under 30. If you're under 30, you think you're going to get your act together again. But if you're over 30, certainly once you're 40 and you realise you've had half your life and your body starts telling you that.

So I've now got a furniture problem. My chest is in my drawers nowadays. And you start to be wistful about the things you haven't had a chance to do. So you think, what if I had my life over again?

Of course, some people don't get this at all. I mean, I've spoken to some people and they say, I spoke to one person and they said, if I had my life over again, I'd do exactly what I've done. Well, I thought that said a singular lack of imagination.

What do you want to do them again for? You've already done them once. Don't you want some new experiences? So, for example, I'd love to have played a season's rugby with the Maoris in the South Island of New Zealand or with the deeply Christian Western Samoans who are known actually as the heaviest tacklers in world rugby.

Apparently their motto is Acts 20 verse 35. It's better to give than receive. I'd love to have learned to play the saxophone or the bagpipes or actually married that girl I married to someone else.

[2 : 29] That would have been interesting. I'd always dreamed of being two foot from her at the altar and I was. Trouble is, I was at mid-off, not square legs. That was the end of that. But, or played golf at Augusta. Or, well, of course, it's a game.

You can't start a game, can you? It's just a game as you look back. But, you know, ladies and gentlemen, as we come this evening, the funny thing is that when it comes to the Christian faith, unless you do start again, you never make it.

Did you know that? I wonder if you noticed that in John 3 in the Bible reading we have. It's so uncompromising, abrupt and clear from Jesus. You have to start again. Have a look. Can we see verse 3 as we look down?

What do you make about this? Just extraordinary. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one's born again, he can't see the kingdom of God. Then it comes again in verse 5.

Do you see verse 5? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. You've got to start again. And again in verse 7, Jesus says it again three times.

[3 : 36] Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. I mean, it's categoric. Unless you're born again, you can't start the Christian faith.

Just like unless there's rain, there are no crops. He's quite categoric here. A person cannot become a Christian unless he or she is born again. Now, they can't enter the Christian life unless they've got that.

Now, can I say, this is fundamental to Christianity. When the trouble is, an awful lot of people think that the phrase born again was invented by Donald Trump to get more votes off the Southern Baptists.

That's the problem, isn't it? They think it's some sort of, you know, thing that's cooked up. It's got such bad PR, this phrase. So I just want to say that it's here in the Bible and it's not about some narrow, emotional, cultic, fringe type of Christianity, which people like my dear mother, who's now passed away, used to dismiss by saying, well, I'm a Christian but not one of those born again types. I mean, in fact, this sermon is dedicated to my mother as a sort of refute to that comment. Mum would always say, well, I'm not one of those born again types. And I'd say, this is the only type you can be.

[4 : 41] So this necessity of new birth is in the original articles of every single Protestant church. It's embedded in all the original creeds.

It's not negotiable. So as we hear this phrase born again, ladies and gentlemen, it's not weird. It's not strange. It's not new. It's not loony fringe. No. It's dynamite about a creator God.

So the God who made that out the window as we look at the lawn and the tree. Who breaks into our lives. And so often it's our detonated dynamite. So please remove any unreflexive prejudice about the phrase.

It's not crazy. It's not an option. It's a necessity. And there could be nobody who was more shocked that he had to be born again than the man here in our passage.

Can we see chapter 3, verse 1? Utterly shocked. Do we see verse 1? Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

[5 : 44] A man of the Pharisees. You see, this man had supposedly all the right credentials to be accepted by God from the start. He's so much to commend him.

And I mean, surely he doesn't have to start over. First of all, he's a disciplined man. He's a Pharisee. So these were lay people who were so disgusted by the professional religious, they said, we'll do it right.

They were absolute fanatics in terms of getting things right, in terms of how they lived. He was an able man, do you see, on the Jewish ruling council, verse 1. He was a learned man.

Look how he's described by Jesus in verse 10. Do we see what Jesus says about him? Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel?

And yet you don't understand these things. He's Israel's teacher. And he's even, and I love this about him. He's an open man. He comes to Jesus with a question. You know, I was at theological college.

[6 : 40] I guess Paul would say the same. There were some people, you know, we're 25, but they'd stopped asking questions. They just answered them. So they plateaued at 25. They didn't have questions to ask.

We've all got questions. COVID, Ukraine, we've got questions. But some people said, no, I was at college with, I mean, I pity their congregations. I just answer questions. I don't ask them. But this man comes with a question.

So he's disciplined. He's able. He's learned. He's open. He's law and order. He'd have been a Bible reader, a faithful husband, a church leader. You don't get, you don't get more moral than the Pharisees.

And so there's no one more moral, legalistic, upright and rotarian than this man. He's the model of middle class respectability. And so he would have been deeply shaken when Jesus comes along and says to him, you, Nicodemus, you need to be born again.

In other words, Jesus comes along and he draws a separating line between Nicodemus and real relationship with God.

[7 : 47] He says, you're not in that relationship, Nicodemus. Now, actually, when someone said to me that I needed to be born again, I was so self-centered and self-obsessed. I remember thinking, well, I bet I do.

I could thoroughly relate to Tennyson. He said, oh, that a man would emerge in me that the man I am would cease to be. I mean, I was in such a shambles.

It never occurred to me that I didn't need to be born again. But this is such a thoroughly fine man, ladies and gentlemen, this man. Now, he's a good man and he'd have been shaken when Jesus says to him, you, Nicodemus, you need to be born again.

So do you see what he does in verse 6? He jumps straight back at him in verse 6. And he says to Jesus, that which is born of the flesh is of the flesh.

And that which is born of the spirit. Sorry, verse 4, I mean, verse 4. Nicodemus said to him, how can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born?

[8 : 44] Or, verse 4, to which Jesus, sorry, now answers verse 6, don't muck about. I'm not talking about physical things. I'm not talking about you being born physically in your mother's womb.

I'm talking, Nicodemus, about spiritual things. Yes, you need to be born physically. But verse 6, here we are. But flesh gives birth to flesh. But you also need to be born spiritually.

The spirit gives birth to the spirit. And Nicodemus, all your religious credentials, disciplined, religious, able, learned, moral, they're not good enough.

All your religious performing, it's not good enough, Nicodemus. And, gosh, here's the brutal thing again. Do come to Hope that's flawed and ask it. And they won't save you.

Do we see as we look down from verse 36? Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not abate the Son shall not see life. But God's wrath remains on them.

[9 : 41] They won't save you from hell. All your performing, they're not good enough. It's not good enough. And can I say, we can therefore conclude from the words of Jesus, that if a thoroughly good man like this needs to be born again, then, ladies and gentlemen, we can be absolutely sure that you need to be born again, and I need to be born again.

And here we go. And so does the kind Hindu and the gentle Buddhist, and the moral atheist, and the fine Muslim. Whatever your cultural or religious background, Jesus insists you need to be born again.

And of course the question now comes, why? Why? I mean, here's Jesus. He's drawing this dividing line through humanity.

It's just the sort of thing we hate today, don't we? Why is he doing it? Well, the Bible says, here's the answer, ladies and gentlemen, that all of us have said no to God.

As God, we don't want him to be God over us. And of course, that little word, sin, that you've heard of, it presses us to put ourselves first.

[10 : 57] It presses us to go, God, I know you gave me the world, farm, family, friends, falling in love, food, fitness, but I'll be at the centre, and you can be a footnote. You can be out in the suburbs.

And life's about my goals, my agenda, my desires. I'll be the main character. I'm going to push you out. And when we do that, although it seems to us to be a very small thing, it doesn't seem to matter.

People on the telly on the news are much worse, aren't they? It seems to us to be a small thing. The result of sin, here's the issue, ladies and gentlemen, is that we die spiritually.

We die. And that's why we need to be born again. Because spiritually, sin causes us to become walking corpses.

I work near Oxford Street. You see people walk up and down Oxford Street. They're young, healthy, good-looking, slim, attractive, comical often.

[12 : 00] And yet the Bible says, because of sin, they're dead. That's the problem. And that's why we need to be born again. We're walking corpses.

That's why there's this absolute necessity for it. And can you see, Jesus says, in verse 7, he says, you must be born again. Not that you can be, you should be. People like to be.

But you must be. So, first heading is it comes in. So what is new birth? What is new birth? Well, you know, what does it mean to be born again? Well, can I just say, the first thing I want to say here is what it doesn't mean.

It doesn't mean trying harder, spiritually. It doesn't mean turning over a new leaf. Like going back on the diet. I'm not talking about that.

As you can see, mine isn't going very well at the moment. I'll tell you what I did. On New Year's Day, I made a resolution that I could give up all puddings except on my day off. And then on my first day off, I had six.

[12:58] It was an absolute disaster. But I'm not talking about that. I'm not talking about that. I'm not talking about turning over a new leaf. No. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a radical change this born again thing.

That God does. It's something God does. It's not something I do. It's a radical change that God does by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Can we see that in verse 8 if we look down? What do you make of this? Hold on to your seats. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. So it's not something I do. This is something God does. And here's the issue, ladies and gentlemen. This is the issue.

It's miraculous. Being born again. I'm going on here about a miracle that God does. So God brings us back to life as new people in the Spirit world.

[13:58] He radically changes us and our thinking. So what I'm talking about here, gosh, it's so unangriquant, is a supernatural act of God in which he takes the Holy Spirit and implants the Spirit in the base of our hearts and gives us a heart transplant and thereby gives our mind, will, emotion, personality a whole new direction.

It's a miracle that God does. And so we start to think like he thinks and then consequently in a rather hopeless way that we start to long to act in his way.

And I remember speaking to a rugby mate and I was urging him to become a Christian. And he said to me, he said, look, Rico, it's no good me becoming a Christian. He said, I'll never keep it up.

And I looked at him and I said, listen, Matt, given your track record, I agree. I've been on rugby tours with him. I said, I said, I don't think you will. I said, what do you think you need to happen for you to keep going?

And I'm not kidding. He looked at me, he shrugged his shoulders and he said, I think I need a miracle. At which point, I nearly fell off my stool. I nearly fell off my stool because that's exactly what we're all about, I said.

[15:13] We're all about a miracle in which the person looks the same but God has caused us to leap into the spirit world. He's given us a heart transplant. And can I say again, you can't do it yourself.

This isn't something that you do. Let me tell you what it was like with me. Before it happened, I really didn't worry about God.

Although I do remember praying, oh God, please help me to pass these exams and I'll become a vicar. I remember praying that and here I am. Here I am.

But I didn't care about God as long as he looked after his bits and he left me alone to do mine.

Ladies and gentlemen, I didn't care about him. But when God changed me, ladies and gentlemen, I started to love him.

That's what happened. I started to love him. I was so glad at what he'd done for me. It was an amazing change. Oh my goodness what a lot of change it was. I started to love him.

[16:18] And before it happened to me, I read the Bible and honestly, I thought it was God with you. So when I was at primary school, I used to leaf through and look for references to rugby to try and make it more relevant to my life.

I found a number I was reading with one to reference in John 9 verse 1. I don't know about blinding birds. That was good. Another one to foul play in Acts 9. So Paul and Barnabas were sent off.

But I mean, you know, basically, I just thought it was for the birds. But afterwards, after I'd been born again, I'd go to the little Christian meeting run by the maths teacher, Mr. Ash, and I'd go along and it was like my name and address was India.

I couldn't believe it. That 15-minute talk at the Christian Forum, I'd be here and it was like Jesus was walking off the page of Scripture and I'm not kidding. As the speaker spoke and taught a little passage of the Bible, I'm a 16-year-old schoolboy and my heart used to burn inside me like I knew I'd found the meaning of life.

So the Bible meant nothing to me and suddenly it's like it's got my name and address in it. And before I became a Christian, I only ever prayed when I was in trouble.

[17:30] But after God changed me, I wanted to talk to him like a friend. I mean, I'd like to wake up in the morning and sometimes of sinful nature I wouldn't, but so often I'd love to just get my Bible open and talk to Jesus.

And before I became a Christian, there were many sins and I didn't give a fig about them as long as I wasn't found out. But afterwards, they really became very ugly to me as I battled and struggled with them because I knew they were upsetting to the Lord Jesus.

And I found my conscience gave me an absolute drilling. It was a radical change. It was a heart transplant. It was being born again. And do you know, it's not unlike surgery.

Do you know what happens with surgery? The anaesthetist comes in. Just by the way, if you've never had surgery, can I honestly recommend it? It's marvellous. Just pick a bit of your body you don't want and go and get it sorted out. But I mean, but someone plunges something into your arm and the most wonderful euphoria sweeps over you.

Don't you find that was surgery? And certainly I found, I sort of looked up and all the nurses looked absolutely beautiful and they put you on a trolley and the ceiling floats by and the doors swing open and you sort of see the surgeon and the next thing they go, wake up, wake up.

[18:39] And in half an hour you know they've done something. In an hour you wish they hadn't. In three hours you think you're going to die and in six hours you're afraid you won't die. So you see all the good work has gone on underneath.

It's gone on underneath. But you begin to see the evidence of it. But what did I do? Ladies and gentlemen, what I did was this. I kept going along to the Christian meeting and I kept hearing the Bible.

That's what you do. The Bible says faith comes by hearing. So your job, potter along to Hope Explored, hear the Bible. And as I heard the Bible, God did the miracle underneath.

But your job is just to hear the Bible. And as God changed me, I started to go, Rike, you've got to stop using Jesus as a swear word, which you do all the time.

You've got to stop. And I started going, do you know, he's really the son of God. And then I started to go and he really died for me.

[19:43] And he got through death so I can get through death so my Godfather's death doesn't have to overshadow my whole life and my whole morale. So as I listened to the Bible, imperceptibly, God made me into a new person.

And that's why I come along to Hope Explored. Because it's a miracle that God can do. So what is the new birth? It's a radical change that God does by his spirit.

Who needs the new birth? We all do. If Nicodemus needs it, we all need it. Thirdly, what is it that God has done so that I can be born again?

I wonder if we can look down again. I think it's going to come up on the slide, the verse. Let's have a look. John 3, verse 16. Can we see as we look down this crucial verse what has God done?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. So what did God do?

[20:46] Can you see as you look down? God loved the world. He loved the world. And because he loved the world, he loved you, what did he do?

He gave his one and only son, Jesus. So God allowed Jesus to die on the cross to take the punishment which our sins deserve. I don't know, perhaps you've seen pictures of Jesus hanging on the cross and he's there between two thieves.

You can think of it at Easter. And his mother is nearby and he cries out on the cross, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Now he is forsaken, so we need never be forsaken.

That's what happens at the cross. He took the punishment for our sin and we deserve that punishment but Jesus took it so that you and I could be right with God.

So Jesus died so that the new birth is going to be possible because God isn't going to send his spirit to transform us into new people without first cleansing us, without first doing something about our constant rebellion.

[21:56] After I'd been in Chile, Dad moved to Africa and he went to grow tobacco there and as a little five-year-old in Africa, there was no kids' TV and I had two hobbies, staff collecting and butterflies and both of them were amazing and for those hobbies as a little five-year-old, I found you needed one of these, a magnifying glass.

But I soon found as a five-year-old in Africa that making little things bigger was not the only thing a magnifying glass could do. I found that if you took one of these into the midday sun, the possibilities were endless.

I found that you could set alight a leaf or a piece of newspaper or even the gardener's hut and I found best of all if you took one of these into the midday sun, you could scare the little daylighters out of your twin sister.

Yeah, that was the parable of ordination in the Anglican Church. You see, you can take a magnifying glass and you can focus the rays of the sun into such a sharp point of intensity that it burns things.

Well, imagine if you would a massive moral magnifying glass the size of this room, but through our past, not the sun's rays, but God's righteous anger at the hatred, the gossip, the self-centeredness, the lust, the jealousy, the godlessness in my heart.

[23 : 12] I'm not even talking about yours, but these myriad of things in the way which I've shaken my fist at God and then God's anger comes down, down, down. All my sin comes down, down, down.

And it's one man on one good Friday afternoon with such terrible intensity that he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Now that is how Jesus rescues me from the coming wrath. It's no small thing. I don't know if you know what your name means. If there are any Helens here, any Helens?

Helen means bright. Any Paul? Paul means little. John? John means the gift of God which might be a surprise to the person sitting next to you. And I'm sure you know this, but Jesus, we know this at Christmas, don't we?

Jesus means saviour. So the first Christmas, the angel Gabriel said to the Virgin Mary, you'll have a son, you'll give him the name Jesus because he'll save his people from their sins.

[24 : 16] So that means the name Jesus means he died for me. Now sometimes on the golf course I hear my playing partners say it all the time.

But with whatever tone they say it, it means the same thing. Jesus, he died for me. Jesus, he died for me. Let's just try that, shall we?

Don't say it out loud because the sort of British will find it too embarrassing. But when I say Jesus, could you say under your breath, he died for me? Every time you hear it, it means the same thing. Jesus, he died for me. Jesus, he died for me. And can I say, you must be incredibly precious that God should send his son to die for you.

I mean, it's overwhelming, isn't it? I've got two little boys, I wouldn't let them die for anyone. But God says, Rico, I love you so much, I'm sending my son to die for you. It's an overwhelming thing.

[25 : 21] So let's conclude. Who needs the new birth? Everybody. If Nicodemus does, we all need it. What is it? It's something God does. It's not something I do. It's a miracle.

What has God done to enable the new birth to happen? He sent his son to die, taking the punishment we deserve. And then as we close now, what has God what has to do?

I mean, what are we meant to do? Well, have a look. Do we see as we close now, verse 16, have a look down. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Now, what does it mean to be trustworthy? It means you keep your word. So if I say, look at the end, first person up to meet me gets a £10 note. If I'm trustworthy, I'll give it to you.

I'm not, so don't bother coming. But if I'm trustworthy, you keep your word. Now, what does God's word say to us? He says, you won't perish. You won't go to a place called hell.

[26 : 24] And Jesus speaks of hell again and again. He's the theologian of hell. He says, you won't go there. He says, if you trust what my son has done, he said, he said, I'll forgive you and I'll send my spirit.

Now, we put our trust in Christ, ladies and gentlemen, by making a decision. Becoming a Christian is not like catching mumps. You know what it's like? You're a bit sore and the next day it's all up.

No, becoming a Christian is much more like getting married.

You don't wake up the day after you've got married and look across the bed and go, oh, hello, what are you doing here? And can I say, if it was like that for you, you're indeed a great enough and we continue here.

No, no, no, no, no, no. When it, when it, you know, when it comes to marriage, I mean, I did one recently and I said to the groom, David, I said, David, will you have Alice?

Do you notice I said, Will, not how are you feeling? He was sweating like a dog. I said, David, what have you made up your mind to do about this young woman? Will you have her for your lawful

wedded wife, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, for better, for worse?

[27 : 27] Do you know what for better, for worse means? It means whatever the in-laws are like. That's for better, for worse. For better, for worse, will you forsake all others and stay with her? And he said, I will.

He said, that's what I intend to do. And God, this evening, says to us, what do you intend to do about the death of my son?

I've sent my son to die and I want to know what you intend to do about it. Now, ladies and gentlemen, I want to tell you that that is the most important question you will be asked in your life. What do you intend to do about the death of Jesus? That's the question. Will you put your trust in me today and believe that I can make you a new person, I can forgive you and that we can start again together and reverse this mess we're in and trust Jesus?

And I'm going to close now. I'm going to say, if you've got questions, brilliant, please come and ask them at Hope Explored. But I've got a prayer and it's a prayer that says, look, the new birth hasn't happened to me and I want it to and I want to start again and I want to be made afresh.

[29 : 03] So here's the prayer and I think it's coming up on the screen. Here it is. So, Heavenly Father, I haven't had you at the centre of my life but from today that's what I'd like to happen.

I ask you to be my Lord. Thank you for sending Jesus to die for me. Please forgive me and please send your spirit to make me into a new person.

Amen. So, I'm going to now pray this phrase by phrase and if it's right for you, why not echo it in your own heart? So, this is a chance to become a Christian and to respond, to believe in what God has done in sending his son Jesus and trust that he'll send his spirit to make you a new person. Let me say it phrase by phrase and again, if there are one or two for whom it's right, if everyone else could bear with me, if you're not yet there, please again, come to Hope Explored but for one or two, I'm sure this is the moment to pray this day.

So, let me pray and again, if it's right for you, why not echo it in your heart? Here it is. Heavenly Father, do echo it in your own heart after me. Heavenly Father, I haven't had you at the centre of my life but from today, that's what I'd like to happen.

[30 : 25] I ask you to be my Lord. Thank you for sending Jesus to die for me. Please forgive me and please send your spirit to make me into a new person.

Amen. Well, it's just a huge privilege to speak tonight. Thank you very much. Post-COVID, it's so lovely to have real people in front of you, I can tell you.

It's just lovely to come to this evening. Thank you.