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Q&A#17 What Does Jesus Mean When He Speaks About Being Born Again?

July 26, 2018



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Today's question: "What's your reading of the Nicodemus story in John 3? Why does Jesus tell him that he must be born again, and what does that mean?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what's your reading of the Nicodemus story in John 3? Why does Jesus tell him that he must be born again? And what does that mean? For most readers today, I think among evangelicals, the tendency to read is to read these verses as a reference to individual regeneration, to the changing of the heart of the individual so that they are drawn to Christ and the Spirit's work within them. I don't think that's quite what John is focusing upon here.

I think John's talking about an event that's on a broader scale of redemptive history. He's referring to something decisive that has to happen in Israel's experience. Now within the Old Testament, there are a number of occasions where there's an allusion to or reference to birth as some significant event in the national history.

So the whole story of the Exodus is told as a birth event in certain respects. So the story begins with women struggling in birth, with the trials that are faced as Pharaoh seeks to kill the newborn children. And then you have the story of Israel developing and focusing very much upon the firstborn from the womb, upon Israel as God's firstborn, upon God hearing the travail and the pain and the groaning of Israel in slavery.

And then leading up to this point where they cross the Red Sea when they're delivered

from, as it were, the womb of Egypt through that narrow passage. And immediately before that, there's the giving of the commandment concerning the firstborn, the firstborn who opens the womb. This is a significant location for that particular command.

It helps us to understand what exactly is taking place, that what is taking place is a birth event, that Israel is being born. Born through the water of the Red Sea. Now that's important to bear in mind.

There are other allusions to the concept of birth elsewhere in scripture. When Isaiah talks about a nation being born in a day, it's not entirely clear what he's talking about. There's debate, but it's quite possible he's referring to the ease by which Israel returns from exile under the decree of Cyrus, that there is this national rebirth that occurs, that Zion is like a woman groaning in birth in Isaiah 66.

Before she travailed, she gave birth. Before her pain came, she delivered a male child. Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall the earth be made to give birth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once? For as soon as Zion travailed, she gave birth to her children.

Shall I bring to the time of birth and not cause delivery, says the Lord? Shall I who cause delivery shut up the womb, says your God? Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad with her, all you who love her. Rejoice for joy with her, all you who mourn for her. That you may feed and be satisfied with the consolation of her bosom.

That you may drink deeply and be delighted with the abundance of her glory. For thus says the Lord, behold, I will extend peace to her like a river and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream. Then you shall feed on her sides, shall you be carried and be dandled on her knees as one whom his mother comforts.

So I will comfort you and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. So Jerusalem is about to give birth to her children and this can be a reference to resurrection, a national resurrection, a national rebirth, this coming back from exile. And the theme of resurrection is also used as an image in this context.

In Ezekiel 37, the valley of dry bones is first of all a reference to the restoration of the people after exile. And so these images are significant ones. These images are charged images that are connected with each other.

They have a history. So by the time that we encounter John 3, these are not the first times that we've seen images of national rebirth. Now I'm talking about national rebirth here, but I may be begging the question, why is it that we should read this as a story of national rebirth at all? Well, in verse 7, I think it helps to understand that when Jesus says, do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again.

You is plural. This is not just about Nicodemus as an individual. This is about Nicodemus

as the teacher of Israel and Jesus teaching him something about what must happen to Israel.

That Israel must be born again. Israel was born in the Red Sea. Israel had another sort of national rebirth in the return from exile, a rebirth that was far less painful far less painful than it was when they came out of Egypt.

So that was a time of travail. Whereas this, that later rebirth was one that was fairly painless. And I think that might be what Isaiah is talking about.

But that event also looks forward to something yet to come. As we discussed in a recent, I think it was last time, the significance of the parallel between the 70 weeks of years and the 70 years. There's a parallel between the return from exile and the later events that are associated with Christ.

Christ brings about a new birth for Israel, a new resurrection for Israel, but a resurrection on grander scale. And so this is a significant background for what's taking place here. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus.

He's speaking to Nicodemus as the teacher of the Jews. He's saying you, you plural, must be born again. Must be born unless one is born of water and the spirit.

Water and the spirit, it could be through John's baptism and then through the events of Pentecost, the gift of the spirit that is the birth of the church. Now people can complain about that. The idea saying that the church was born at Pentecost saying, well, the church always, the people of God have always existed.

But the people of God have had continuity through time. But there are a number of events of birth and rebirth of the people of God, even within that continuity. And so the event of Pentecost is a rebirth, the constitution of the people in a completely different way.

A new temple, a new people that's Jew and Gentile, and a new constitution around one who is now seated at God's right hand, ascended on high. So there is a rebirth. There's a rebirth that's founded upon Christ's rebirth from the dead.

Christ is the firstborn from the dead. That language of birth is important. Later on within John, you'll see the language of birth associated with Christ's resurrection.

A woman, when she is in labour, has sorrow because her hour has come. But as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore, you now have sorrow.

But I will see you again and your heart will rejoice and your joy no one will take from you. So here we see an image of a woman groaning in birth. Israel, Zion, groaning in birth

because her hour has come.

Now that's charged, pregnant language within the Gospel of John. Christ is always using the language of his hour having come, or the hour coming, or his hour has not yet come. All this language is used in a charge way to refer to his death and his exaltation that is associated with that.

So this woman is struggling to give birth. When her hour comes, she gives birth to a child. And this male child is the promised son.

And later on within Revelation, I think we see this image taken up again. That this woman in Revelation 12 is in travail. She gives birth to a male child who will rule the nations.

That child is snatched up and then she gives birth to the rest of her children. Now within the context of the Johannine corpus, I think there's something significant taking place here. That's a reference, I think, primarily to the death and resurrection of Christ.

The travail and the birth. And the appearance of the ascension very shortly after that is because the ascension occurred very shortly after the resurrection. The ascension occurs 40 days after the resurrection, which is the period between the child's birth and the child being presented in the temple in the law of Leviticus.

And so it's a significant period of time. We see the same thing in Jesus' first birth. That as Jesus is born in his incarnation, 40 days afterwards he's presented in the temple.

40 days after his new birth, he's presented in the heavenly temple. He ascends on high. And so there's parallels between these two births within the gospel.

Between Jesus' initial birth and then his later birth. The body wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger. And then the body wrapped in linen garments and laid in the tomb.

These are parallel images and lots of other things around it are associated. There's a Mary and a Joseph. There are shepherd-like figures who have an annunciation to them.

There are angels. There are all these other themes that compare and relate these two events. Christ's resurrection is a new birth.

He's the firstborn from the dead. And associated with his birth is this theme of bearing children. So his mother is always referred to in the Gospel of John as his mother.

Never referred to by name. That's significant. She's a more archetypal figure.

She is the mother. And so beneath the cross, Jesus declares to John, Behold your mother. And to his mother, Woman, behold your son.

There is a sort of birth that has taken place here. A new relationship that has been formed by Christ's death. And this is associated with him giving to the beloved disciple.

Giving the beloved disciple to his mother. And his mother to the beloved disciple. There's a new relationship formed there.

That's associated with themes of birth. So Christ is the firstborn from the dead. And this is the first.

He is the firstborn of the dead more generally. This is the first fruits of a broader resurrection that's about to happen. A broader birth.

Now we have the first fruits of that. We have the first fruits of the adoption. First fruits of this birth event.

And what Jesus is talking about here is a climactic, redemptive historical event that must befall Israel. They are being prepared for this event by the baptism of John. Which the rest of this chapter is concerned with.

Towards the end of the chapter, it moves on to the witness of John. And to the baptism of John. But that could also be a reference to Israel being born in the Red Sea.

They must be born of water and the spirit. It's not enough that they had the Exodus experience constituting them as a nation. They must also have the Pentecost experience.

This new Exodus type event. They must be brought out and they must form a new covenant. As the law was given at Sinai, so the spirit must be given at Pentecost.

And so they must be born of water and the spirit. Later on within the first epistle of John, we have similar language being used. Jesus is the one who comes by water and blood.

The water is his baptism. The blood is his death. And later on it refers to the spirit, the water and the blood.

And the spirit is the one associated with the baptism of Pentecost. And so there are these three related events. Pentecost, the baptism by John the Baptist and the witness there.

And the anointing for ministry. And then his death, his baptism of his death as it refers to in Mark. So there's a significant event that takes place.

Christ's rebirth from the dead, which is the basis for the regeneration of Israel. The formation, a rebirth of a people. And that rebirth, that reconstitution of a people is something that explains a lot of things that we see within the New Testament.

The New Testament, particularly when we come to the book of Acts, it's not just about people coming to faith for the first time. It's about people entering into a rebirth, into a national event, into a corporate event that is changing the constitution of the people as a whole. So someone like Cornelius is a God-fearing person.

But he must be born again. He must enter into the regeneration, must enter into this national rebirth. In some ways, if he did not, he would be like a believing person who just remained in the lands of exile and didn't return to the land.

Now, he's obviously a believing person and he enjoys many benefits and blessings and he will be saved on the last day. But he's not entering into the full reality of the national rebirth that's taking place. And that's what the apostles declared to people, to believing people in Israel and to believers among the Gentiles, that there is this national rebirth that is taking place through Jesus and you must become part of it.

That this is how you enter into the kingdom of heaven, through this national rebirth. And this being born of water and the spirit, this being born through, whether it's the baptism of John that harks back to the Exodus event, you go outside the land and there's a baptism in the wilderness, in the Jordan, a significant location, a re-entry into the land, retracing the path of the Exodus, or whether it's a reference more immediately back to the original Exodus. That is not enough.

You must also be born of the spirit, born from above or born again. And so Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus as someone who should know this. This is not news to Nicodemus.

This is something, this shouldn't be news to Nicodemus. This is something that is spoken of in the prophets, that there's this national rebirth that is anticipated, this national resurrection that is anticipated. Now part of that is fulfilled in the context of the return from exile.

There's the earth giving birth to its dead. There is the bringing together of these bones in the valley of dry bones. There's the daughter Zion bearing her children.

All of these images are associated with the coming back from exile, but all of these strain towards something more. They look towards something more. And Jesus is saying that there is this something more.

There's this national rebirth that must take place. And unless that occurs, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. This must occur.

You must enter into this. And so throughout the rest of scripture, when we're talking about regeneration, it's not just about God's work in the individual soul. It includes that, God's spirit working within us.

But it's more than that. It's a national event. It's a corporate event.

It's a reconstitution of the whole people of God on a new footing. It's the formation of a new temple, of a new priesthood, of the establishment of people as a new prophetic body. It's the formation of the people under the rule of Christ who sit at God's right hand.

All of these things have changed and the constitution of the people and where we stand in relationship to God has changed with it. There has been a rebirth from the dead, from the dead of this metaphorical exile that Israel continued to be in. This not entering into the fullness of God's presence again.

There's a new birth just as they were born out of Egypt in the original exodus, just as John the Baptist's baptism anticipated a sort of birth. As John the Baptist said, I baptize you with water, but there's one coming after me whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie. He is the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

There's a baptism with water and there's a baptism with the spirit. And when that baptism with the spirit comes, the people will be constituted new. They will become a different sort of people.

And so Christ is the pioneer of this new order. Christ is the firstborn from the dead. He's the new Moses.

He's the one who has opened up the sea of the grave so that we might pass through on dry ground. This is the resurrection. This is the regeneration that John's gospel talks about here, that Jesus is discussing with Nicodemus.

It's the resurrection event. And all that that means, the resurrection event is something that leads immediately to the reconstitution of the people around the spirit of the resurrection, Christ's spirit that is given to his people. But it's beyond that.

It's also anticipating an even greater event where there will be a new birth on a fuller level still as our bodies are raised on the last day. And Jesus can bring these two events together in various places. For instance, in John 5, these are significant relationships, whether between the Old Testament and the events of new birth within the Old Testament and the New, or between the event of new birth in Christ's resurrection and all that that leads to in the church and the later event of rebirth as the final resurrection is looked to as an event of birth from the dead.

So what Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about here is not something that should be focused narrowly upon individual salvation. It's got a far bigger scale than that. And individuals are caught up within this event, caught up within this event by the spirit who changes our hearts, who works within us, who moves our will to serve God, to serve God from the heart, who conforms us to Christ so that we might have the first fruits of his resurrection within us.

And in all of these ways, we are participating in the regeneration. But the regeneration, the new birth that is being spoken of here is something bigger. It's something greater than just a lot of individuals having God's work within their heart.

This is becoming part of God's work in history, part of the climax of the covenant, to borrow some name, some words from N.T. Wright. This is the central event that's taking place in history. And we've been caught up in the slipstream of what's happening.

And it's a very exciting way, I think, to read John's Gospel because a lot of things start to come into focus and in the New Testament more generally when you start to recognise that the work of Christ is not primarily focused upon something that happens to individuals in their hearts, but upon this thing that's taking place on the broad canvas or the broad stage of history and in which people from all tribes, tongues, peoples and nations and languages are all brought together into something new, something great, something that fulfils the purpose that God has had from the beginning. The purpose, the mystery that was not declared before. All God's purposes are suddenly coming to fruition and we can understand who we are as we see what Christ is doing, as we see the meaning of this regeneration.

And as we understand that, I think that a lot of other things within the New Testament and within the Old will start to fall into place. I hope that this helps and please leave any further questions you might have in my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support these videos, please consider doing so at my Patreon account and I'll give a link to that too.

Thank you very much.