

Sermon Notes for September 26, 2004

## Understanding the Christian Life “A Christian and His Conversion” John 3:1-16

### Introduction

#### A. The WORLD’S VIEW of Being Born Again

1. **Chuck Colson**, one of the key figures in President Nixon’s White House and a critical part of the Watergate mess, was brought to his knees in this whole event.
  - a. Wall Street Journal
    1. “Hatchet Man”
    2. “Colson would walk over his own grandmother if he had to.”
  - b. After meeting with Tom Phillips, President of the Raytheon Corporation.
  - c. He was encouraged to read the book Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis.
  - d. Chuck Colson surrendered his life to Christ and became “born again.”
  - e. Word traveled quickly and the term “born again” ultimately became a household term.
2. **Larry Flynt** of Hustler magazine says that he is “born again.”
  - a. Even though he continues to publish his magazine.
  - b. He calls it “clean sex.”
3. January 21, 1980 issue of **Forbes magazine** carried a feature on “Born-again companies” describing businesses that were experiencing new prosperity.
4. **The L.A. Times** also printed an article on the sports page entitled “The Steeler Who Was Born Again” about a player who made a comeback.
5. A December 1979 **Christianity Today** article stated that according to the Gallop poll, 39.5 million Americans claimed to have asked Christ to be their Savior.
  - a. Why has our culture continued to take a nosedive?
  - b. And as Pastor Kent Hughes asked: **“If one in five adults in the United States were communists, we would all be communists within a very short time.”**
  - c. In actuality, only 6 of 10 people who claimed to be “born again” knew where the verse was or who said it!
  - d. Kent Hughes says: **“The term ‘born again’ has been pirated, emptied of its meaning, dragged through the gutter, and given back to us minus its power. Today when a person says he is born again, we cannot be sure what he or she means.”**

#### B. JESUS’ VERSION of Being Born Again.

1. We will see today the definition that Jesus has as to what it means to be “born again.”
2. For ULTIMATELY THAT IS THE QUESTION – WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN; TO BE SAVED?
3. I want to talk to two groups today:
  - a. **Those of you who KNOW that you are born again.**
    1. You will learn a lot about how Jesus shared the gospel.
    2. As well as His understanding of the way that a person is saved.

**b. Those of you who may not know if you are born again.**

1. And you know who you are.
2. There are simply too many doubts in your heart. I want to speak to you today as well.
3. Because **THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION YOU WILL BE ASKED . . . ARE YOU GOING TO HEAVEN?**

**I. One Man's STRUGGLE With Salvation.**

**A. Nicodemus HAD IT ALL.**

1. Besides Jesus, the main character in the story is a man by the name of Nicodemus.
2. Considering all that he is and all that he has, he has it all.
  - a. He was **respected**.
    1. Nicodemus was a Pharisee.
    2. One of 6000 men who spiritually led the people of Israel.
  - b. He was **smart**.
    1. He was an expert in Biblical law.
    2. He had to memorize the first five books of the Bible and know the rest.
    3. As well be well versed in the commentaries of the Midrash and Talmud.
  - c. He was **powerful**.
    1. He also was a member of the Sanhedrin.
    2. One of 70 men who served as the Supreme Court of the Jews.
  - d. He was **wealthy**.
    1. He was wealthy because of both of these positions.
    2. Tradition held that Nicodemus was one of the three richest men in Jerusalem.
    3. We see that he was wealthy because of what he did with Joseph of Arimathea with Jesus' body after the crucifixion.

**B. But . . . Nicodemus HAD NOTHING.**

1. He is **confused**.
  - a. Nicodemus comes to Jesus "at night."
    1. Is he afraid?
    2. Does he want to hide?
    3. Or is this the only time that Nicodemus can spend alone with this strange new preacher?
  - b. He has witnessed first hand the miracles of Jesus.
    1. And they speak for themselves.
    2. Nicodemus had never seen anything like this.
    3. Perhaps Nicodemus was still not fulfilled, still not a happy man.
    4. Give him credit, **DESPITE** his power and influence, he **WANTED TO KNOW THE TRUTH.**
2. He is **crafty**.
  - a. To show respect to Jesus, Nicodemus calls Him rabbi.

1. WHAT A STATEMENT.
2. A Pharisee on the Sanhedrin calling Jesus a teacher . . . even a Doctor!
- b. He gives Jesus credit –
  1. He sees that Jesus OBVIOUSLY is a unique man.
  2. Who could only perform these miracles if God enabled Him to do it.
- c. He is basically “buttering Him up” . . . wouldn’t you say?

## II. Jesus SPEAKS About Salvation.

### A. FIRST of all, Jesus CONFRONTS Nicodemus.

1. ALMOST in the middle of Nicodemus cowering before Jesus, Jesus exclaims to him “You must be born again!”
  - a. As if Jesus didn’t want to hear any more of Nicodemus’ solicitations.
  - b. But also KNOWING WHAT NICODEMUS’ PROBLEM WAS!
  - c. He cuts right to the chase!
2. Notice that Jesus reacts very DIFFERENTLY with the woman at the well.
  - a. Unlike Nicodemus, she does not know better.
  - b. While Nicodemus has been in the Scripture all of his life.
  - c. Jesus says to him, “Oh, don’t bore me with your platitudes. Let’s get down to brass tacks.”

### B. SECOND, Jesus COUNSELS Nicodemus – What Is The PROCESS of Being Saved?

## III. Jesus’ SOLUTION To Salvation.

### A. New Birth STARTS It.

Vs. 7 – “You should not be surprised at my saying, You must be **born again.**”

1. The term born again must be fully understood.
  - a. **It speaks of three aspects:**
    1. **Born as you were as a child; like you were as a child.**
      - a. The “first time born.”
      - b. You had no past, only a future.
      - c. You knew nothing until you were born.
    2. **Born again.**
      - a. Born “a second time”
      - b. As if you had two births:
        1. A physical birth
        2. And now a spiritual birth.
    3. **Born from above.**
      - a. That “this birth” was a birth from God.
      - b. That God was your father and your mother.
      - c. And this time you were born into His family.

### b. **It speaks of two requirements.**

Vs. 5 – “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of **water** and the **Spirit.**”

1. **Born of water.**
  - a. It refers to baptism but does not mean that baptism saves you.

- b. It means that “those who have been baptized with water” have taken a **CRITICAL STEP** to be baptized –
- c. **THEY HAVE REPENTED** of their sins.
  - 1. You can’t be born again **WITHOUT REPENTANCE!**
  - 2. My experience in sharing my faith.
    - a. College – Richard . . . “did he repent?”
    - b. Others
      - 1. I wanted them to know Jesus, but emphasized what Jesus could do for them.
      - 2. Instead of explaining the need to confess their sins first.
  - c. You see, our **GREATEST** need is of a Savior.
    - 1. Not just that He would be our friend.
    - 2. Not just that He would make us happy.
    - 3. But that **FIRST** He would be our Savior and deal with our sin.
  - d. You will never be truly born again until you confess that you are a sinner and repent before the Lord.

## 2. **Born of the Spirit.**

- a. The **SECOND** step to be born again is to ask God to enter your life.
- b. Do physical babies deliver themselves?
- c. **THIS** is a **WORK** of God!
- d. God must enter your life to **CHANGE YOU!**
- e. So **HOW** do you know if you are born again – **YOU WILL BE DIFFERENT!**
  - 1. You have tried to change yourself **AND** you can’t.
  - 2. There is an old story about two courtiers of a

certain king who wearied their monarch with their **incessant arguments as to whether or not a person had to be born a gentleman, or whether he could become a gentleman by training, discipline, and ingrained habit.** The king finally dismissed them from court and ordered them to go out into the world and seek conclusive proof for their claims. **A year to the date** they would each present their proofs and he would settle the argument once and for all.

The year passed. The courtier who said that one could become a gentleman had traveled far. He was in a distant land and still had not found his proof. But one day, sitting gloomily in a wayside inn, he sat up with astonishment. He had ordered a cup of chocolate, and to his amazement he saw that it was being brought to him by the innkeeper’s cat. But this was not an ordinary cat. **This cat had been trained to stand up on its hind legs.** It had been dressed in a tiny uniform and it had learned to balance a tray in its forepaws. The courtier watched spellbound as the creature,

contrary to nature, walked slowly toward him balancing the tray with his cup of chocolate.

He saw the implications at once. **If a cat could be trained to do a thing like that, why couldn't a man be drilled into becoming a gentleman?** It proved his point. He paid a vast sum and secured the astonishing feline and headed for home.

**News of the cat leaked out and the courtier's rival was plunged in despair.** He, too, had traveled far but was returning home empty-handed. **He was sure he had lost.** But then, just a day or two before the scheduled appearance in court, he saw something in a shop window that bought a smile to his lips. **He made a purchase but kept it well hidden from view.**

On the day of the trial the first courtier presented the cat to the king as proof that a person could be so trained that he could overcome all natural handicaps and become that most accomplished of civilized persons, a gentleman. As the king sat on his throne, the remarkable cat, attired in miniature court dress, walked carefully on its hind legs, made its way slowly down a red carpet, carrying a tray of chocolate to the king. The court broke into applause. Everyone looked with admiration at the cat and with pity at the other courtier, the one who said one must be born a gentleman.

But the man was ready. With a bow to the king he opened the box in which he had his proof. **The courtier released half a dozen white mice and instantly the cat forgot its training and education, its discipline and ingrained habit.** Its natural instinct surfaced and, in a flash, off it went after the scampering mice. The discussion was settled once and for all. **The cat returned purring loudly several hours later, its courtly attire rather disheveled.**

#### B. **The Wind of The Sprit REVEALS It.**

Vs. 8 – **“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.”**

1. Jesus almost talks in a riddle concerning the new birth.
  - a. He makes the point to Nicodemus that: we don't know where the wind comes from or what causes it to blow.
  - b. But we know the **effects** of the wind.
    1. Trees blown down.
    2. Rooftops taken off.
    3. Leaves and branches everywhere.
2. What Jesus is saying is this:
  - a. **When a person becomes born again, we don't really know HOW it happened.**
    1. God is at work behind the scenes through various people and situations.
    2. But God is moving and calling you to Himself, even though you may not know why or how.
    3. My own story.
      - a. I had no idea that the “wind of God” was even blowing.
      - b. But He did “blow” through various people and situations.
        1. A disappointment as a 9<sup>th</sup> grade football player.
        2. Years of searching and unhappiness. “The winds were blowing.”

3. A church camp where a counselor presented the gospel to me – I wasn't interested.
4. I heard a Billy Graham crusade – “The wind was blowing.”
5. A new Pastor came to our church and the Youth Director invited a group of kids to share their faith with our church.
  - a. And one particular girl described herself as unhappy and miserable – that was my story.
  - b. “The wind blew me down.”
    1. I didn't see it coming.
    2. I didn't even know that there was any wind.

**b. But we WILL see the effects of the wind.**

1. How did I know that God had touched my life?
2. **I BEGAN TO CHANGE!**
3. Do you see what Jesus is saying?
  - a. If God's wind has blown into our lives.
  - b. Then we will see the effects of that wind!
  - c. Harry A. Ironside, Random Reminiscences

One Sunday as he was walking through the city, he came upon a group of **Salvation Army workers** who were holding a meeting on the corner of Market and Grant Avenues. There were probably **sixty of them**. **When they recognized Dr. Ironside, they immediately asked him if he would not like to give his testimony.** He did, giving a word about how God had saved him through faith in the bodily death and literal resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As he was speaking, Ironside noticed that on the edge of the crowd there was a well-dressed man who had taken a card from his pocket and had written something on it. As Ironside finished his talk this man came forward, lifted his hat, and very politely handed him the card. On one side was his name, which Ironside immediately recognized. **The man was one of the early socialists who had made a name for himself lecturing, not only for socialism but also against Christianity. As Ironside turned the card over, he read, “Sir, I challenge you to debate with me the question, ‘Agnosticism versus Christianity’ in the Academy of Science Hall next Sunday afternoon at four o'clock. I will pay all expenses.”**

Ironside reread the card aloud and then replied somewhat like this. **“I am very much interested in this challenge.** Frankly, I am already scheduled for another meeting next Lord's Day afternoon at three o'clock, but I think it will be possible for me to get through with that in time to reach the Academy of Science Hall by four, or if necessary I could arrange to have another speaker substitute for me at the meeting already advertised. Therefore I will be glad to agree to this debate on the following conditions; namely, **that in order to prove that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has something worth fighting for and worth debating about, he will promise to bring with him to the hall next Sunday two people, whose qualifications I will give in a moment, as proof that agnosticism is of real value in changing human lives and building true character.**

**“First,** he must promise to bring with him one man who was for years what we commonly call a **‘down-and-outer.’** I am not particular as to the exact nature of the sins that had wrecked his life and made him an outcast from society—whether a drunkard, or a criminal of some kind or a victim of his sensual appetite—but a man who for years was under the power of evil habits from which he could not deliver himself, but how on some occasion entered one of

Mr. \_\_\_\_'s meetings and heard his glorification of agnosticism and his denunciations of the Bible and Christianity, and whose heart and mind as he listened to such an address were so deeply stirred that he went away from that meeting saying, **'Hence-forth, I too am an agnostic!'** and as a result of imbibing that particular philosophy found that a new power had come into his life. The sins he once loved, he now hates, and righteousness and goodness are now the ideals of his life. **He is entirely a new man, a credit to himself and an asset to society – all because he is an agnostic.**

“Secondly, I would like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to promise to bring with him **one woman** – and I think he may have more difficulty in finding the woman than the man – **who was once a poor, wrecked, characterless outcast, the slave of evil passions, and the victim of man's corrupt living . . . perhaps one who had lived for years in some evil resort, . . . utterly lost, ruined, and wretched because of her life of sin.** But this woman also entered a hall where Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ was loudly proclaiming his agnosticism and ridiculing the message of the Holy Scriptures. As she listened, hope was born in her heart, and she said, **'This is just what I need to deliver me from the slavery of sin!'** She followed the teaching and became an intelligent agnostic or infidel. As a result her whole being revolted against the degradation of the life she had been living. She fled from the den of iniquity where she had been held captive so long; and today, rehabilitated, she has won her way back to an honored position in society and is living a clean, victorious, happy life—**all because she is an agnostic.**

“Now,” he said addressing the gentleman who had presented him with his card and the challenge, “if you will promise to bring these two people with you as examples of what agnosticism can do, I will promise to meet you at the Hall at the appointed next Sunday, and I will bring with me at the very least **100 men and women** who for years lived in just such sinful degradation as I have tried to depict, but who have been gloriously saved through believing the gospel which you ridicule. **I will have these men and women with me on the platform as witnesses to the miraculous saving power of Jesus Christ and as present-day proof of the truth of the Bible.**”

Ironside then turned to the Salvation Army captain, a girl, and said, “Captain, have you any who could go with me to such a meeting?”

She exclaimed with enthusiasm, “We can give you **forty** at least just from this one corps, and we will give you a brass band to lead the procession!”

**Fine. Now, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ I will have no difficulty in picking up sixty others from the various missions, gospel halls, and evangelical churches of the city; and if you will promise faithfully to bring two such exhibits as I have described, I will come marching in at the head of such a procession, with the band playing 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' and I will be ready for the debate.**”

Apparently the man who had made the challenge must have had some sense of humor, for he smiled wryly and waved his hand in a deprecating kind of way as if to say, **“Nothing doing!”** and then edged out of the crowd while the bystanders clapped for Dr. Ironside and the others.

### **C. The Son of God SUPPLIES It.**

Vs. 13-15 – “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 desert, **so the Son of Man must be lifted up,** that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”

1. Lest you think that being born again is simply the result of a little prayer, let me tell you what TRANSACTION must take place in your life.
2. Jesus refers to a story in the Old Testament – **Numbers 21:4-9**
  - a. Moses had led the children of Israel out of Egypt.
  - b. The problem was that the people began to murmur and complain.

- c. Moses prayed and God sent a remedy.
    - 1. Enormous snakes bit the Israelites and caused some to die.
    - 2. There were hundreds and hundreds of snakes.
  - d. And then Moses prayed that God would save them.
    - 1. The Lord said to Moses – make a snake and put it on a pole.
    - 2. Everyone who will look up at the bronze snake will live.
  - e. Jesus says that He is that snake and that salvation is found in LOOKING UP AT JESUS ON THE CROSS.
    - 1. The Israelites did not organize themselves into “snake patrols.”
    - 2. They did not create some kind of anti-venom or salve.
    - 3. As James Boice said, they did not establish the “Society For The Termination Of Fiery Serpents.”
    - 4. In fact, they weren’t even told to pray – they were simply taught to “believe.”
      - a. My first sermon – “What Does It Mean To Believe?”
      - b. When the KJV of the Bible first translated the word believe in the Old Testament, they used the word trust; however, when they came to the New Testament, they used the word believe.
      - c. The word believe in the Greek means:
        - 1. To believe as true
        - 2. To commit one’s trust
        - 3. To place confidence in
3. **Thus . . . you are born again ONLY by looking unto Jesus.**
- a. To look to Him to save you – to change you.
  - b. “The look” does not involve your doing anything but truly looking and trusting.
  - c. Many years ago now, when **John G. Paton** first went out as a pioneered missionary to the **New Hebrides islands**, he found that the natives among whom he began to work **had no way of writing their language**. He began to learn it and in time began to work on a translation of the Bible for them. Soon he discovered that they had **no word for “faith.”** This was serious, of course, for a person can hardly translate the Bible without it. One day he went on a hunt with one of the natives. They shot a large deer in the course of the hunt, and tying its legs together and supporting it on a pole, laboriously trekked back down the mountain path to Paton’s home near the seashore. As they reached the veranda both men threw the deer down, and the native immediately flopped into one of the deck chairs that stood on the porch, exclaiming, **“My, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest.”** Paton immediately jumped to his feet and recorded the phrase. In his final translation of the New Testament this was the word used to convey the idea of trust, faith, and belief.
 

**“Stretch yourself out on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved”** (Acts 16:31). “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whosoever **stretches himself out on him** shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).
  - d. Resting on the water – you give up and rest on Jesus alone.

#### D. The Darkness FIGHTS It.

Vs. 19-20 – “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, **but men loved darkness instead of light** because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”

1. Isn't it great to talk about how “easy” it is to be born again.
2. Well, it's not that easy – in fact, it may be the most difficult step you will ever take.
3. Look at Jesus' illustration.
  - a. Just as a baby must be physically born
  - b. A spiritual baby must be born.
  - c. **Now . . . do physical babies “want” to be born?**
    1. No, they fight it.
    2. They resist it.
    3. Some even turn their entire bodies around!
    4. And then there is the birth itself.
      - a. Hours of labor.
      - b. Pain
      - c. And then the delivery and then what happens – the baby cries.
        1. Where are they?
        2. They were completely happy being in that womb.
4. Before you are born again, you will fight it too.
  - a. You don't want to go toward the light.
  - b. If the truth be known, you resent the light.
    1. In fact, you resent me talking like this today.
    2. Leave me alone, my spiritual condition is my own business.
5. Can I tell you why you don't “get it?”
  - a. God has not enabled you to “get it.”
    1. I didn't get it either.
    2. Like having a child – until you have a child, you don't get it either.
    3. Until God touches your life and the wind blows into your heart, you won't get it either.
  - b. We are limited in our spiritual understanding.
    1. **I Cor. 2:14** – “The man without the Spirit does **not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God**, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”
    2. We must not take this to mean that man lost his ability to reason. That is not true. It simply means that man lost his ability to reason his way to God. An illustration may help us here. There is a condition in the human body, known to doctors as *myasthenia gravis*, in which the muscles of the body cannot respond to the signals being sent from the brain. In the human body the brain normally originates the signal for a muscle to expand or contract. **The signal is sent to the muscle through a nerve, and is received in the muscle by an apparatus**

**known as the motor-end-plate.** In the condition I mentioned, the motor-end-plates are missing. Consequently, the signal is sent to the muscle through the nerves, but it is never received by the muscle. Because it is not received, the muscle does not respond, and because the muscle does not respond it eventually withers away and dies.

**That is exactly what happened in man when his spirit died through the fall.** In the human system the spirit was meant to play the part of the motor-end-plate. It was meant to receive God's signals. When Adam and Eve sinned, the motor-end-plate died. Thus, although the signals are still there, although God is speaking, people do not hear Him and the spiritual life withers.

### Conclusion:

1. Have you been born again?
  - a. Well, I have "prayed that prayer."
  - b. I go to church faithfully.
2. **The ULTIMATE question is – HAVE YOU CHANGED?**
  - a. Is Chuck Colson born again?
    1. What was he like before this happened?
      - a. Powerful
      - b. Self absorbed
      - c. Working in the White House
    2. What is he like now?
      - a. Serving God
      - b. Working in prisons
  - b. Why do you think that you are born again?

3. During the early days of the ministry of **Dwight L. Moody**, the great evangelist launched a series of meetings in Chicago, with promise of the largest crowds that he had up to that time. He was speaking on the life of Christ, and on the first Sunday night, **October 8, 1871**, he took as his topic the trial before Pilate. As he came to the end of his message, he turned to Matthew 27:22, "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" He concluded, **"I wish you would take this text home with you and turn it over in your minds during the week, and the next Sabbath we come to Calvary and the cross, and we will decide what to do with Jesus of Nazareth."**

It may have been an artistic device. But speaking of it in later years, Moody called that conclusion to his morning's address the greatest mistake of his life. For even while Mr. Snakey was singing the final hymn –

Today the Savior calls;  
For refuge fly;  
The storm of justice falls,  
And death is nigh –

The fire engines began to sound on the street on their way to their first contact with the great Chicago fire in which Moody's hall was laid in ashes and in which it is estimated that over a thousand persons lost their lives. **Moody never saw that congregation again, and some of those he spoke to that night undoubtedly died in that fire.**

In his book, An Anthropologist on Mars, **neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks** tells about **Virgil**, a man who had been blind from early childhood. When he was 50, Virgil underwent surgery and was given the gift of sight. But as he and Dr. Sacks found out, having the physical capacity for sight is not the same as seeing. Virgil's first experiences with sight were confusing. He was able to make out colors and movements, but arranging them into a coherent picture was more difficult. Over time, he learned to identify various objects, but his habits – his behaviors – were still those of a blind man. Dr. Sacks asserts, **“One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person. It is the interim, the limbo . . . that is so terrible.”** To truly see Jesus and his truth means more than observing what he did or said, it means a change of identity.