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# The Nativity in the Gospel of John

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## ➤ Introduction

Before I begin with tonight's message, I just want to say a few words about the passing of **Nelson Mandela** on Thursday night. While he was *not a perfect man*, I think that it is obvious that God had used him powerfully in this country, and perhaps even the world. We can thank God for his life, and that God allowed him a ripe old age. No one can do great things if God does not allow and empower that person. We can pray *that he will one day stand beside us as we bow before the God of all creation*.

I was just about to turn out the light and go to sleep when I read about his passing. It hit harder than I might have expected it would. I spent the next hour following tributes on social media. I watched as friends and strangers, both local and far abroad, expressed their (surprising) shock and paid tribute. As the **Church Mouse** said, *"Twitter is a much nicer place tonight"*. He said so because people who would normally be quarrelling and bickering were united in recognising and honouring a great man.

In the years to come, we will all remember where we were and what we were doing when we heard the news of Madiba's passing. It was a monumental event; one which divides eras. Such is it with the passing of great men: we remember their deaths.

How much greater, then, is a person when the world remembers His birth? Usually, when great people are born, there is no indication that they would become great people. But in **December** we remember the **birth of Jesus of Nazareth**. Apart from His parents, there were shepherds and innkeepers who, while He looked like a normal baby boy—and had no idea what He would go on to do—, would remember the night that He was born. And we continue the tradition, every December, to *remember the night that the Hope of the World came down to earth*.

### ➤ Nativity

And because it is December, this time of remembrance, **I thought that tonight I would speak about the nativity story in the Gospel of John**.

Now, first thing first: **what exactly does the word “nativity” mean?** It is one of those words that you only ever hear around Christmas time and likely would not have known if it was not for the story of the birth of Jesus. A nativity is, quite simply, the event of someone's

birth. We each have at least one nativity story, namely that of our own birth (even if we don't know it). Parents, doctors, nurses and EMTs may have more than one nativity story: their own and that of their children or the children whose births they've witnessed.

For example, I know that

1. I was born **early on a Saturday morning**.
2. **I was born about a week late**. So early on I liked lying in.
3. While it was a **relatively easy birth for my mother**, it must have been traumatic for me, because I am now not very fond of getting up early on a Saturday morning.
4. **That said I also had jaundice**, which is a common ailment for babies at birth and I had to be kept in a box with a light shining on me with my eyes taped shut. My mom said that it was quite distressing for her to see me like that.

That is my nativity story. It is unlikely that history will remember my story: most people's are forgotten eventually. But some famous people have had their nativity stories recorded in history. The Buddha, for example, it is told was born while his mother was hanging on to a tree. But perhaps the most famous nativity story of all time is that of Jesus of Nazareth.

## ➤ First Reading

Getting back to tonight's message, the more astute amongst you will tell me, "Wessel, the Gospel of John does not contain the story of Jesus's birth". That is true, but the Gospel of John does tell about birth. And I want us to look at that. Please follow along as I read to us from John chapter 3.

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.[a]"

4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit[b] gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You[c] must be born again.' 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." [d]

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.[e] 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,[f] 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." [g]

## ➤ Pharisees

This story opens with a man named Nicodemus going to Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Now, the Pharisees were a Jewish religious order which existed at that time. Any Jew could join their movement: they had normal jobs and did not lock themselves away in monasteries. But they were very strict and most people could not live as strictly as them for various reasons. They were also very educated and knew their Bibles back to front. Because of this, the average Jew held the Pharisees in high regard, while the Pharisees might have looked down a little bit on the average Jew because they were not as religious as they were.

We are also told that Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council, so he had some extra esteem and prestige. So it is strange to see Nicodemus going to Jesus at night.

## ➤ Night-time & new teachings

Back then there weren't any street lights. When it became dark, people usually went home and spent the night with their families. They didn't usually visit at night, unless they wanted to conceal their movements. So in general, if someone was out and about at night, then something underhanded was going on.

The reason why Nicodemus was going to Jesus at night was because the religious scene in Israel at that time was being shaken up, and the Pharisees were trying to figure out what was going on. First John the Baptist starting preaching repentance, and baptising people. So the Pharisees sent some people to question him. We read that in John 1:19—28.

**19** Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders<sup>[a]</sup> in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. **20** He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”

**21** They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?”

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

**22** Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

**23** John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”<sup>[b]</sup>

**24** Now the Pharisees who had been sent **25** questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

**26** “I baptize with<sup>[c]</sup> water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. **27** He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

**28** This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Soon after this, Jesus started preaching and gaining a following. The Pharisees didn't know what to make of these new preachers. It would be like if a new church opens up a block down the road from here. We would ask ourselves, why would they build a new church if

there are already a number of churches here? We would be interested, and concerned, about what they teach people. So Johan might try to meet their pastor and get to know him and what they are about. Or some of our people could go from here to there and then report back what they believe and what they teach. It is likely that, at the time that Nicodemus went to Jesus that, for the Pharisees, the jury was still out: they had not yet decided what to make of Him. Because we see that even though Nicodemus tells Jesus that they think He was sent by God (John 3:2), we know that later the Pharisees would turn against Jesus. The reason for Nicodemus's visit is likely that he was intrigued by Jesus's teaching and wanted to learn more from Him without raising the eyebrows of the other Pharisees.

### ➤ Being Born Again

Now when Jesus starts talking to Nicodemus, Nicodemus's mind gets thoroughly bent. Have a look at John 3:3—4. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to be “born again”. Today this phrase is normal to us. We've all heard of the term “born again”-something-or-the-other before. *For us it means someone who has been revitalised and refreshed by something. In Hindu communities, the term “born again” would remind people of **reincarnation**, something with which*

we are also familiar. But in this time, in this setting, it was a brand new phrase. Nicodemus had *never* heard it before.

Please spare a thought for this intelligent and influential man trying to imagine how he was going to crawl back inside of his mother and then come out again! **It's a bit of a disturbing image.** He probably also wondered what the use and significance would be. But Jesus had said so, *and Nicodemus already believed that He was sent by God*, so he was ready to obey.

Probably to his relief, Jesus then tells him that it is not a physical rebirth that he needs, but **one of “water and of the Spirit”**. At this stage Nicodemus is still puzzled. But if he had paid attention, Jesus had already given the game away. If they had paid attention to what John the Baptist and Jesus had said earlier, it would have made sense. To understand what is going on, we need to go back to John chapter 1 where John the Baptist is baptising people.

*(Aside: John the Baptist did not write the Gospel of John—that was the apostle John.)*



## ➤ Baptism

In chapter 1 we read that John the Baptist was, unsurprisingly, busy baptising people. While today people think that baptism is a “Christian” thing to do, notice in John 1:24—25 that the Pharisees do not ask John *what* he is doing, but *why* he is baptising. In Jewish religious customs it was normal to have a ceremonial bath to “wash yourself clean” after something had made you “unclean” or “unholy”. So the *practise* was known, but the *way* in which John was doing it was new. *Usually someone would wash themselves clean after a certain ceremony or period of time.* But now John was washing people, dunking them underwater (that is what the Greek word “baptismo” means: submerging). He was telling people that they could be clean by *turning to God* for forgiveness, not by *doing* all sorts of ceremonies to win His favour.

But what does baptism mean then? It is symbolic: baptism symbolises death when you go into the water, and then birth when you come out of it. When you have made the commitment to become a Christian, you choose to “kill off” your old life and desires and to embrace a new life of servitude to Jesus. You “lose your life” and in its place is the life of someone dedicated to Jesus. We should do this once, and then make a sincere commitment to God, not many times like the Jews did.

## ➤ Justification

After we have realised that we are unclean—that we are tainted by the wrong things which we have done—and we *make the decision to not be that person anymore*, but ask Jesus to give us a new way of thinking about the world, then our attitudes, our values and our priorities begin to change. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, which God sends. That change that happens is what it means to be **“born of the Spirit”**.

But how does this all work? Do we simply wake up one morning and decide to change? No: it is not because of our choosing or finding of Jesus which saves us. The apostle John makes it clear: God revealed Himself to us by sending His Son, Jesus—the God-man—into the world. Please follow along as I read from John 3:15 onwards.

14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,<sup>[f]</sup> 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”<sup>[g]</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

## ➤ The Cross

When Jesus said that He had to be “lifted up [like] the snake in the wilderness”, He is referring back to the Exodus when the Israelites were being punished for their unbelief. At God’s command, Moses had made a bronze snake and set it on top of a pole. Any Israelite who looked up at the snake was spared their punishment.

Here Jesus is referring to His death on the cross. John explains this in verse 16—the most famous verse in the entire Bible—and onwards. God sent Jesus into the world to reconcile humanity with Himself. *He left His place of Glory and came to down be born humbly to a family of carpenters.* He then began to teach people how they can have a real relationship with God. Like John, He taught people that they must turn to God and ask for the forgiveness of their sins. He reached out to us. He gave us another chance.

## ➤ Our Depravity

Verse 17 tells us that God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world. But why would the world need to be condemned? On one level I think we all acknowledge to a degree that something is not right with the world. Violence, dishonesty and hatred are commonplace. It is a part of our lives. Even if we do not

necessarily do these things every day, we are affected by people who do do them.

But on another level, it is because we as the world reject God. God originally intended for us to live in obedience to Him and in harmony with each other. But we broke with those good intentions and decided to rather pursue our own pride and selfishness. Verses 19—21 explain this.

The “darkness” that John speaks about is our attitudes and actions which do not honour God or respect other people. *God knows our hearts and our minds, what we whisper and do in secret.* We can fool other people and maybe even ourselves, but God knows our motives and our drives. Jesus elsewhere made it clear that no-one can meet God's standard of goodness. It is not even a high standard, but a perfect standard. And then that even would not be something for which we can be commended, but would be the bare minimum of what is expected.

### ➤ **Being reconciled with God**

And so for this reason God did not send Jesus to condemn the world, but to save it. Jesus began His ministry not by threatening people with hell, but telling them that the Kingdom of God is close by. What He did was making an offer of reconciliation: making it possible for

the relationship between man and God to be restored; *that people no longer run around on the world chasing after what pleases them*, but submit themselves and ask God what He wants from them. God wants to bury the hatchet: the one which we picked up when we pushed Him out of our lives.

But verses 19—20 say that there were, and still are, people who prefer not to be reconciled with God. They “love the darkness”, as John writes. And it is a natural reaction. There is a reason why we do things in

- the dark,
- bottle up things inside of us,
- when we are alone,
- or under cover.

We recognise badness. We recognise emptiness. God was gracious to give us the ability to discern between what is good and should be, and what is bad and should not be. That allows society to function. But if we recognise badness inside of ourselves, we condemn ourselves. And we don't want to condemn ourselves, so we make excuses for what we do, and then eventually for what other people do.

But this ability to tell what is right and what is wrong eventually also allows us to reach the point where we can be honest with ourselves and with God, where we can say “I am messed up, I need help”. Those are the people who have come to the realisation about the true state of their lives. They are the people who “come into the light”, as verse 21 says. Once we acknowledge God and hang our sins on the cross along with Jesus, then we can actually breathe a sigh of relief, because we no longer have to hide and cover up. We are exposed to God. Our secrets no longer need to be kept.

(That does not mean that we necessarily have to expose ourselves to other people. But we might feel the freedom to do so, because we know that we do not stand condemned by God over them.)

Jesus wants us to have a restored relationship with God. It needs to be restored, because it is not what it should be. And it is a relationship, *not a one-way street of worship or favour begging*. When John the Baptist baptised people he was telling them that they needed to stop living the way which they had done, which was only for themselves. They had to put it to death, symbolised by the water. But you cannot just leave a person in limbo just like that. Jesus told Nicodemus that one has to wake up to the spiritual blessings which can only be found in a real relationship with God.

## ➤ Closing and Application

We cannot think about the birth of Jesus without thinking about the death of Jesus. As He was laying in the manger and the angels, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph were looking down upon Him, He was already destined to be butchered and hung on a cross. If that was not the case, then the birth of Jesus would have been God coming down to earth to taunt people: to tell them of how they could have been reconciled with Himself, but not doing anything about it. But Jesus did not come down and just speak; He also did. He lived a perfect life and died an atoning death for us. His death enables us to be born again: of water (which is us responding to Him), and of the Spirit (which is His good gift to us).

### ▪ **Believers**

If you are here tonight and you are a Christian, then I hope that you have been encouraged and perhaps have a better understanding of this passage, and how John and Jesus's ministries complemented each other. I also want to challenge you to go home and think about your lives: the one to which you have died, and the one which you are living now. How different are they? Are there still traces of the old one left? Does the life that you are currently living out reflect the joy and thankfulness that comes from not being bound by your sins? How is your journey progressing to become more like Jesus?

- **Unbelievers**

If you are here tonight, and you do not have a relationship with Jesus, then I want you to know that such a relationship is possible. Many people desperately ask, “Where is God? Why Doesn't He show Himself?” But how much more clearly can God reveal Himself than by coming down to earth, walking amongst people, speaking to and teaching them, sharing meals with the people who most desperately need and desire Him? God cares about people. He cares about you. He is reaching out and offering to carry your burdens. He wants you to talk to Him and to comfort you. And so I plead with you tonight to accept this offer being made by Jesus. The Kingdom of God is near, and it would be wonderful to see you there. But first you must realise that the life which you are living is not honouring God as it should. You need to put it to death. That is a scary thought, I know. But I promise you that there is a better life on the other side. Let Jesus's death bring you a new birth.

Amen.