

Conversation with Nicodemus

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Date: 25 January 2026

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[0 : 0 0] This is a sermon from King's Church West Lothian. Like Goinsay, we are currently looking at conversations with Jesus.

! If you've got a Bible, you could have it out or on your phone.

But I think Davey will be able to show us the scripture as well as we go through. Yeah, perfect. Thanks, Davey. But before we do that, I just wonder, because we're talking about conversations with Jesus, I wonder what kind of conversations you've had this week.

Hopefully you've had some good ones. Hopefully you've had some good conversations which you've left feeling happy or loved or appreciated. I'm looking at the parents there. I hope that's happened.

Or maybe another one for parents. Maybe you've had those conversations with your kids after school and you go, what did you do at school today? And they go, nothing. Or, I don't know.

[1 : 1 5] Or maybe you've chatted to people at home, what are we having for dinner tonight? Whatever. You know, some conversations are just very ordinary, aren't they? Just very kind of everyday. Or maybe you've had tricky conversations.

The reality is sometimes we have difficult conversations and we don't know what to say. We don't know how to react to the person that said something to us. And then we leave thinking about it over and over again. Conversations, it's just really interesting, isn't it?

How these happen. And today's conversation, I think, is the kind of conversation that catches you off guard, that surprises you, that shocks you. I don't think when this man, Nicodemus, went into this conversation, he was necessarily expecting how Jesus would reply to him.

So it's quite a shocking conversation. And we'll probably get that sense as we go through. And when we read the scriptures together, sometimes because if we know the story well, it becomes less shocking to us, doesn't it?

But I hope we can enter into the story today as well. And we can be there with Jesus and listen to him. And we can be changed by him as well. So let's have a look at it together.

[2 : 2 1] The words are here if you want to follow them or you can read in your Bible. So we're going to read eight verses together. The actual conversation carries on further. So if you want to read it at home, you're welcome to.

We're just going to read the first eight verses. So it says this. How can someone be born when they're old?

Nicodemus asked. Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered. Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. 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. So we're going to explore these verses together, verse by verse.

[3 : 41] We're just going to try and understand what's going on and what was Jesus saying to Nicodemus and what is Jesus saying to us? And as we do that, I think it's important for us to be thinking and reading scripture in three particular ways.

And some of this will maybe link to some of the things we're doing in the Bible course if you've been going along. So these are sort of general principles before we dive into this text. Number one, I think it's really important whenever you're reading the Bible, any part of the Bible, we really want to understand what did it mean at the time to the people involved.

You know, so for Nicodemus, what did it mean? What did it mean for the people who were the first people to read it? Not just thinking through our own eyes and our own 21st century perspective, but trying to understand what did it mean originally.

But then secondly, we do want to understand what does it mean for me and for you? How is Jesus speaking to us today? And we believe as a church that Jesus is speaking to us today.

As we read this scripture that is going back a couple of thousand years, we believe that Jesus can speak to each of us today. And the third one's a bit different, but as we are doing this series on conversations with Jesus, part of why we're doing that is because we want to learn from Jesus.

[5 : 02] We want to be envisioned by him of how did he reach people? How did he speak to people about the things that really matter? And, you know, most of us sometimes feel that we're a bit inadequate at that.

We're not very skilled. And I loved hearing Dorothy's prayer for us that we would be courageous in doing that. And Jesus was courageous, wasn't he? So we're going to be looking at what did Jesus do?

What can we learn from that? How can we try and follow him and be like him? So an easy way of thinking about this is that we can look back. What did it mean back then? We can look in.

How does it affect my life? And also we can look out. We can look out at the people that we know and think about how does this scripture and what Jesus said apply to my friends or my neighbours or my colleagues or my family, the people that don't know Jesus.

What can we learn from today's scripture that's going to help each of us to share the gospel, the good news with other people? So let's take a deeper look. The first verse said there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who's a member of the Jewish ruling council.

[6 : 09] So Nicodemus was a man of high social standing. He was a man of high status. He was a man who was highly educated.

He was a man who was highly respected. And it's quite interesting because if you were here last week, Gordon was speaking about a person who was pretty much the opposite. So if you were here or if you weren't, don't worry.

We were looking at a Samaritan lady that Jesus met at a well. And she, in her culture, was the lowest because of her background, because of her gender, because of the things that were going on in her life.

So we see that Jesus speaks to the lowest of the low and the highest of the high. And he seems totally at ease with either.

You know, he can speak to anybody. What does that tell us about him? Well, Jesus wasn't put off by someone's background or the baggage that they brought into the situation.

[7 : 16] The Gospels show us that he spent time with all sorts of different people. He put aside the expectations that people would place on him, the cultural expectations, and he just spoke to people. He spent time with people.

What does that mean for us? Well, it's really good news that Jesus is not interested in how we appear on the outside, about how we present ourselves.

You know, in life you might feel maybe judged because of your gender, or maybe you feel judged because of your age or your nationality or your intellect or how much money you earn.

But Jesus is not here to judge you in that way. He doesn't look at the outward stuff. He looks within, doesn't he? He looks deeper at what's going on inside of us.

And actually, a couple of verses before this conversation with Nicodemus, the Apostle John tells us that Jesus knew what was in each person's heart, which is a really interesting thing.

[8 : 16] Jesus knew exactly what was inside each person's heart. And he knows what's inside my heart, and he knows what's inside your heart. And if we look out, just thinking about this thing that Jesus was with Nicodemus, he was with the Samaritan woman, he was with all sorts of different people.

If you're a Christian, and if you're called to follow Jesus, what does that mean for you? You know, what does it mean to follow him in that way?

What does it mean for you to spend time with people that are not just like you? You know, what does it mean for me to spend time with people that are not just like me, that are not similar to me, but to initiate conversations with all sorts of different people from different walks of life?

And maybe it also means examining prejudices that we have sometimes, the way that we judge people. I don't think Jesus was like that.

So it's helpful to think these things through, isn't it? And to pray about it. Because we want the gospel to be shared with every single person. Every single person in West Lothian.

[9 : 24] Every single person in Scotland. Every single person in the nations of the world needs to hear the good news of Jesus. But if we just spend time with people that are like us, it won't happen, will it?

So let's look to Jesus. Now in verse 2. Thank you, Davey, if we can have it. Great. So it says, John says that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night.

At night. It's just a small thing. But here it's a good thing to put yourself into Nicodemus' shoes. You'll be hearing that name, Nicodemus. It's quite a long name, isn't it?

Maybe I'll call him something else. Nick. I'll call him Nick. There you go. Nicky. Put yourself in Nicky's shoes. Why do you think he's coming to Jesus at night? It's interesting, isn't it?

I mean, it might be simple things. Maybe he had a very busy schedule that day. You know, maybe it's the only time that Jesus could fit him in or Nicodemus could get to him. But most commentators think there's a couple of reasons why he was coming at night.

[10 : 25] And most people think it's because Jesus was not the kind of company that Nicodemus would usually keep. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

And for him to be talking to Jesus would have been controversial. It would have created all sorts of questions. So most people think actually he's come to Jesus in private.

He's not coming out in public. He's not in the marketplace meeting with Jesus. But another point is that commentators have made is that John uses this phrase by night a few times in the gospel.

And actually it's symbolic. So I don't know which one it is. But the symbolic thing is that it's an overtone of spiritual darkness. So this theme of being at night is a theme of spiritual darkness.

And you see it in a few places in John's gospel. It's quite interesting, actually. I think, to be honest, it could be both. And I think that's totally fine to see it that way. Either way, whether it's Nicodemus being kind of embarrassed, not wanting to be out in the open with Jesus, or whether he's coming in spiritual darkness, which he probably didn't realize himself.

[11 : 34] He came to Jesus. Nicodemus came to Jesus. But maybe you can relate to that. Maybe the first time you ever came to church or the first time you ever prayed, you had this thing of, I just want to keep this quiet.

I don't want anybody else to know this. Or maybe you knew, actually, you were in a place of real darkness and you were coming to Jesus. Maybe that's how you feel today.

Maybe as you came into church, you were like, I don't know if this is the right place to be. I don't want my friends to know about this. But I'm here. Well, Jesus didn't turn him away, did he?

Jesus did not turn Nicodemus away. And Jesus doesn't turn anybody away. And as Christians who, you know, we want to share the good news of Jesus, I think we could be aware of people in our lives who are secretly or quietly seeking answers to deep questions.

There's a thing you might have heard about at the moment, people calling the quiet revival. It's really encouraging that in our nation, more and more people are turning to find out about God.

[12 : 49] And especially younger people. And there's been lots of studies about it recently. And I think the reason they're calling it the quiet revival is there's not necessarily big evangelistic events necessarily.

That kind of stuff. Not creating a lot of noise. But it's people, they're finding out. They want to go to maybe find out from their friend. Why do you believe this stuff? Or maybe they just secretly go along to church.

Or maybe they just start praying. And things are happening. And I just, I think it's important. We're looking out for those little moments. There might be people that you know that are just quietly asking questions.

And maybe you are the person that they'll ask. Something to think about. So what does Nicodemus say to Jesus? And how does Jesus reply?

So Nicky says this. Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who's come from God. For no one could perform the signs you're doing if God were not with him.

[13 : 48] And then Jesus replies. Very truly I tell you. No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. So this conversation is happening near the start of Jesus' ministry.

And John records just in the chapter before that whilst Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover, many people saw the signs that Jesus was performing. It actually says that many people believed in Jesus' name.

But then you see in the end of chapter 2 that Jesus was kind of wary of that kind of faith. The faith that just believes in signs. Or the faith that just believes in miracles.

And Nicodemus is almost presented a bit like this. Of actually that's a superficial faith. If you're just believing in a sign or a miracle, it's not real faith.

It's not really knowing Jesus. It's not really knowing God. Nicodemus comes here with his own sort of agenda, doesn't he?

[14 : 46] He's making a statement. It's a bit of a questioning statement. He's trying to figure out who Jesus really is. Whether he has the right credentials. It feels like he's sort of heading for a sort of intellectual, theological discussion.

Remember, that's what Nicodemus' background is like. He's a Jewish religious leader. And it's interesting that Jesus doesn't really respond to Nicodemus' point.

He doesn't get into a debate. He doesn't really answer the question. Jesus does his own thing. And he often does that, doesn't he? Jesus often does his own thing.

You know, someone will say something and we all expect Jesus to come back. But actually he just does something completely different. I think Jesus in this situation identifies a far more important, deeper need for Nicodemus than Nicodemus really realises for himself.

And it's the need for real spiritual life. Jesus is blunt with Nicodemus. He says, you can't earn or achieve this kind of life through your knowledge or your status or your morality.

[16 : 00] He says, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Now, what does that mean? What's Jesus talking about? John talks about seeing the kingdom of God.

And if you've been a Christian for a while, if you've read the Bible a little bit, you see the kingdom of God coming up quite a lot. Other gospel writers don't always call it the kingdom of God. You might call it the kingdom of heaven.

In fact, John often talks about eternal life or even just the word life. In the New Testament, you see the word salvation. A lot of these are talking about the same kind of thing. It's talking about the kingdom of God, which is the life of the age to come.

So, i.e. where God is king. And if someone enters the kingdom of God, they welcome Jesus to be the king over their life.

It's a new kind of life. It's a life of abundantly knowing the grace and truth of Jesus. And Jesus says there's only one way to have a life like that.

[17 : 06] There's only one way to get that new life. It's not through your status, your morality, your knowledge. He says you must be born again. You must be born again.

It's a bit weird, isn't it? A bit strange. And in your Bible, you might have a little footnote. You know, sometimes they have a little bit at the bottom of the page. And the phrase born again can be translated as born from above, which they don't sound the same, but they complement one another.

So, it could be you must be born again or you must be born from above. And I read something quite helpful about that this week. It says, I was just reading one of the commentators said, if you use the words born again, that emphasis there is on the nature of the experience of entering the kingdom of God.

It's as remarkable as physical birth. It's a brand new start. If you're thinking about being born from above, it helps us to see what the origin of that new start is or that experience.

It is from God. It is supernatural. It is heavenly. So, both are true. To know Jesus as Lord and Saviour involves a new birth into real spiritual life.

[18 : 23] And just like our physical birth, we can do nothing to achieve it ourselves. I don't know about you. Maybe you did. But I don't think I achieved anything at my physical birth.

I think I was pretty powerless. I was, you know, I was a footnote in the situation. We're just helpless babies as we're physically born.

And it's the same when we experience spiritual new birth. It's nothing to do with us. It's completely to do with a supernatural work of God in our lives.

And before we move on, it's interesting to see that Jesus, like we said, addresses Nicodemus' spiritual need rather than his intellectual question. And I guess I'm thinking about us as we seek to share about Jesus with people we know.

A lot of people come in with big questions. You know, they want to talk about the big questions. They want to maybe debate it or find answers. And that is fine and that's good. But alongside that, I just feel it's important that we remember the Holy Spirit can help us to understand that there are deeper things going on sometimes.

[19 : 35] Well, all the time, actually, in every person's life. There's deeper stuff and there's deeper needs than answering the big questions. All of us, every single person in this room, every single person in this community is in need of real, abundant spiritual life from God.

So if someone comes to you with a hard question about faith, absolutely, we should be trying to understand those questions and answer them. But also, they just need life.

They need life in God. So don't be over or don't be intimidated by the hard questions. I am. I'm like, I don't know the answer to that question. And that's fine to know that.

But do know that the Holy Spirit is with you in those sorts of conversations and he can help you to pinpoint what is it to say in that moment and to draw it back to Jesus and the life that he can give us.

So we're going to move on to verses five through to eight. And here Jesus explains what it means to be born again. So let's read those again. Jesus answered, very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water.

[20 : 46] And the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases.

You hear it sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit. So we've got water. We've got spirit.

We've got wind. What is this all about? So firstly, Jesus says to Nicky that being born again means being born of water and the spirit.

Now, that is, I think, quite confusing. And if you're reading it for the first time, you might go, I don't know what you're talking about, Jesus. And that's OK. But I think here, Jesus is hoping that Nicodemus, as an expert of the Old Testament scriptures, would understand a connection that Jesus is making here.

Because there's a real connection with an Old Testament passage in Ezekiel. I don't know if we've got those verses, Davey. It's in Ezekiel 36, verses 25 to 27.

[21 : 53] Brilliant. Brilliant. Thank you. Well, God makes this amazing promise to the people. This is the Lord's promise. He says, It's an amazing promise, isn't it?

And it's an incredible picture of new birth. The water symbolising cleansing from sin. And the spirit bringing transformation and renewal.

I think Jesus is telling Nicodemus, this is what being born again looks like. To be cleansed from sin, to be completely forgiven. And we know that it's Jesus' work at the cross, isn't it?

He died in our place so that we could be forgiven. So our sins could be washed away, cleansed completely. And the Holy Spirit comes into our life to renew us, to transform us.

It's an experience that many of us have had. And it's an experience that's available to anybody. Jesus talks about the water and the spirit. Now, what about the wind?

[23 : 20] And this is the mysterious, the most mysterious bit of this thing, the part that Jesus is talking about. So it's in verse 8 of John chapter 3. And this is the final verse for today.

Jesus said, The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it's going. Unless you're sat next to the gap there, because you can tell there's a draft.

So it is with everyone born of the spirit. Jesus in this bit is basically kind of saying that the wind is mysterious.

You can't tell where it's coming from or where it's going. Now, today, obviously, scientists can explain the origin of the wind and the nature of it. But 2,000 years later, we are no closer to mastering the wind, are we?

We're not in control of it. We don't know if it's going to be... Well, we might know if it's going to be windy tomorrow, but we can't do anything about it. We can't stop it. We can understand from these words here that Jesus is making the point that new birth is a supernatural thing.

[24 : 26] It is not something that you can just do in your own strength or choose to make happen. It is a work of God in your life. It is supernatural. Like the wind, it is out with our control.

It is out with our... We don't fully understand it. However, like the wind, despite being mysterious, God's new birth in us is utterly life-changing.

You know, last time... Well, I feel like we've had storms after storm, haven't we, the last couple of years. But one of the times, our fence pretty much blew over. And the power of the wind is just remarkable.

We're out there trying to, like, secure it. And it's just pushing and pushing and pushing. And I actually think the wind... You know, we talk about the Holy Spirit. We talk about the person of the Holy Spirit.

And that's quite right. But also, there's a picture here of the Holy Spirit being like a wind, almost. Because the power, the breath of God, it's a powerful thing.

[25 : 34] And I just... To end on that, I think it's a wonderful place to end, actually. Because you might just sense in your heart the wind of the Holy Spirit.

And you might not know what that is, really. You might be like, I've come to church today. I don't know what to expect. And maybe if you've not come before. And I just sense something different.

Well, it... I believe it could be God's Holy Spirit. And He might be speaking to you. And He might be touching your heart. We've used that phrase quite a lot this afternoon, about touching your heart.

Because I think as humans, we struggle to explain what that is sometimes. When the Holy Spirit's doing something in us. But it's like He's breathing on us. He's breathing new life upon us.

And perhaps you've never experienced that for the first time. Maybe you wouldn't say you're a Christian. But we can... We have a chance to just pray about that in a moment, together.

[26 : 35] But for each of us, if you are a Christian already, I just want to encourage you as you pray for your friends or people that you would love to know God.

I just encourage you that the wind is blowing. God's wind is blowing. Do you know? And that is not down to you. He is doing new things all of the time.

And He is at work in people's lives. When we don't... We can't see the wind. You know, in the same way we can't see necessarily what God is doing in people's lives around us. But we can be sure that He is doing something new.

The wind is blowing. And it's interesting. If you read at home, further on, Jesus carries on talking to Nicodemus. And the most famous scripture in all the Bible comes.

John 3.16. It says, 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.

[27 : 36] We're just going to end on that verse. And let's just pray together, shall we? Thank you, God. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the words of scripture that we've read this afternoon.

Thank you, Jesus, that you are our way to have an abundant life in God forever. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you invite us into that.

Thank you that we can be born again. We can have a fresh start. The slate can be wiped clean because of your mercy and your grace. Thank you, Lord, that your life is abundant and overflowing.

And, Lord, we just receive that today. And, Lord, we also pray for our loved ones, our friends, neighbours, colleagues, and also people we don't know.

We pray that they would hear the good news from us and from others. And we pray, God, that you would birth new life and that your wind of the Holy Spirit would continue to blow.

[28 : 54] Help us to be sensitive to that. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.