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Life In Christ

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I think for the most part we enjoy celebrating milestones, and that celebration can look different depending on the person, some enjoy large gatherings and others with a small, intimate crew, with even just yourself and spouse or best friend. Now, maybe we don't enjoy that it reminds us all that another year has passed on our finite time on earth, yet, being believers in Christ, we recognize our eternity with Christ. That gives great comfort. We think back to our milestones in our life, sometimes with joy, laughter, a smile, or even frustration, sadness. My 30th birthday I remember being sleepless as I had just given birth to Madi 5 days prior, who thankfully despite some hiccups at birth, was fairly healthy even though we were battling with very sleepless nights and extreme colic, and a toddler at home. I remember for one of my birthdays I had been away on a canoeing trip for work for the week getting my canoe instructor course when Mark sent me a video of the kids wishing me a happy birthday. I'll show you the video just merely for the cuteness. Despite that being 10 years ago,

it's not something that I've forgotten (or the fact that when I got home he had a surprise birthday party for me with a bunch of friends over, despite me just wanting to come home and rest after 5 days away in the woods and on the water, but nevertheless he was so excited to celebrate with me that the gesture was beautiful). This past year for my birthday I celebrated with VBS to then go to the city instantly to be with my best friend and spend the rest of the day not knowing if her husband would make it through the surgery, praying to God that this not be the end of his life, to then 12 hours later finding out my sister had a cardiac arrest on the floor of her home, not knowing what that was going to bring for her life. While very challenging days, I am thankful to God that everyone is improving, and that, while that birthday is a milestone in my life I will never forget I am extremely grateful that no matter the circumstances God is right there, whether you reach out to Him or not, he hasn't left.

So, while those are some of the milestones in my individual life as you have had milestones also in your individual life, we also share milestones with others, and to that I think of firstly with our spouses or significant others, whether it be our anniversary of our marriage, or our first date. Mark and I celebrated our 19th anniversary this summer. Yeah, not a "significant" one in terms of you'll find it on a card, Hey Happy 19th Anniversary, not like your 20th, or 25th, or your

50th (as Charlie and Doris celebrated this summer), or even 70th as you rarely see (though it can happen, I believe my grandparents made it past their 65th but not to their 70th before my grandmother passed away). But let's go back to those first few days, weeks, even years of that milestone. Do you remember those butterfly feelings you might have got on your first date, or maybe it took a bit longer, depending on your story or the background of the two of you? Do you remember the moment when you knew they were the one?

So, where does this lead us? Like any relationship, it must be cultivated. It is a blessing to look back and see how far the relationship has grown, yet it also calls for continued faithfulness and devotion as it deepens. This fall we will be reflecting on our life in Christ - our relationship with JESUS, how it is a lifelong relationship that should deepen as the Lord continues to walk alongside us, our declaration, how we remember this relationship and some of the biblical distinctives that make us baptist. So let's start on this journey by looking to our initial and continued commitment to Christ. For some, this initial commitment might have been within the last year or so, for others it may have been decades ago, and still others may be considering a commitment to Christ as they hear about who this Jesus is. No matter where you fit along this spectrum there is space for you here in this place and

Jesus' arms are wide open welcoming you as part of the family.

“It has been said that the two most important days of your life are the day on which you were born and the day on which you discover why you were born.” And so, while we usually celebrate our birth through our birth day every year, do you celebrate the day when you discovered why you were born? Do you KNOW why you were born?

As it says in John 3:1–3 “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.””

As John Bartol says about this passage, “Think of a newborn baby coming into this world with nothing to regret. Everything lies ahead, nothing behind. And in those words of Christ we have the promise of such an experience a second time. What a prospect — beginning life all over again, by being born again! It is the glory of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that it offers that chance to every person living on planet earth.”

We don't remember the day we were born, no one does, yet we often celebrate it. But there is a time, I would argue

even more important than this, and that is what we label as being born again, or our second birth. When we began life all over again, spiritually reborn “to know God and enjoy Him forever,” the reason why we were born.

When looking at these first three verses of the third chapter of John you might be a little perplexed. This is the first time Nicodemus shows up in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus is a knowledgeable teacher, a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. He came from an important aristocratic family in Jerusalem and was an authority on Scripture. We’re not sure exactly why he came at night, there are many different speculations, but I will speak more on this shortly.

This is the only time recorded in the gospel of John that Nicodemus and Jesus meet though Nicodemus later publicly participated in Jesus’ burial. Nicodemus starts with a statement, not a question, saying that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God, at which Jesus replies with an answer, but an answer to what? Nicodemus hasn’t asked a question yet and what Jesus responds with seems completely unrelated to what Nicodemus says. Nicodemus didn’t ask about the kingdom of God, or how to see it, it seems like they are on two completely different wavelengths. Yet, if you know Jesus, he always knows what he’s doing, so why does Jesus respond to Nicodemus’ assertion about who Jesus is, with “no one can see the

kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus’ assertion of Jesus’ identity is misplaced, he has bound it by certain preconceived categories of knowledge, that Jesus is a rabbi and teacher from God, but isn’t Jesus so much more than that? Nicodemus’ problem is not that he opposes Jesus but that he misunderstands him, not grasping fully who he is. As the conversation continues, more categories for understanding the agency of God, worked in and through Jesus, are introduced and developed, but Nicodemus still struggles to grasp them. Jesus is challenging Nicodemus’s conception of what is possible, of who Jesus might possibly be. Nicodemus then changes his tune as he started out with an assertion of who Jesus is to, as it says in verse 9 “How can these things be?”” He is baffled. Jesus continues “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” Despite Nicodemus being a teacher of Israel, Jesus is the one in the know, who shares his knowledge of heavenly things. The identity of Jesus as revealer, as the definitive revelation of the Father, is more than a “rabbi,” a holy man “from God,” and thus much more than Nicodemus had supposed.

Back to the night, when Nicodemus approaches Jesus.

Potentially unusual but not necessarily something that I thought too much about until you look back to the beginning of the gospel of John, as it states in John 1:1–5 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Or when Jesus says in John 8:12 “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Jesus is the light that has come into the world and the world must choose either to come to the light or remain in the darkness. Symbolically, the darkness in which Nicodemus comes to Jesus is suggestive. Will Nicodemus come to the light? Has he, in coming to Jesus, already begun his journey toward the light? We do not know of Nicodemus’ immediate response to Jesus’ challenge. Nicodemus is a seeker of wisdom, but not able to perceive in Jesus what he desires, it is impossible, but it doesn’t end there. Nicodemus appears two more times in the gospel of John where we can see gradual shifts to his openness to Jesus. First in John 7:45–52 “Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, “Why did you not arrest him (meaning Jesus)?” The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” Then the Pharisees

replied, “Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.” Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”” Then with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus anoints Jesus with a lavish amount of spices as befits a king John 19:39–40 “Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.” These two other appearances in the gospel of John suggest that this initial encounter sends him on a journey of progressive understanding. The sign of Jesus, the Son of Man, on the cross, may have brought about a new birth for him, and has finally brought perception of the kingdom of God.

As an individual made in the image of God, our deepest need is for someone to know us, to understand us, who can do for us what we cannot do for ourself. This is why Christian conversation is not following a set of rules or rituals, or signing a creed. Bishop Stephen Neill gives the

following definition of a Christian “No one is, or should be called a Christian until they have personally encountered God in Jesus Christ, until they have personally repented, until they have personally accepted God’s gift of salvation through Christ. The reality of the Church in every generation consists of those who have thus been born again.” The bishop doesn’t define Christianity in terms of church membership, baptism, or good works. It is a living relationship with a living person, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not something we do for ourselves on the outside but something that God does for us on the inside.

Just as a wedding begins with two people saying “*I do*,” the Christian life begins with us saying “*yes*” to Jesus. But a marriage isn’t built on those two little words alone—it takes daily commitment, love, forgiveness, and effort to grow together. In the same way, following Jesus is more than a one-time decision. It’s the start of a relationship that deepens as we walk with Him, trust Him, and grow in His love day by day. The only way you have been able to know your spouse better throughout the years is by first hand knowledge. Spending time with each other. Jesus is no exception to this. We do not benefit from a second hand faith, it comes through first hand experience. God doesn’t have grandchildren, but children. Christianity is not trying but trusting; not feeling but faith; not simply believing with your mind but receiving Christ into your heart and life.

Salvation, a gift, unmerited, undeserved, free but not cheap. Accept it, and recognize every moment of every day how much you need Christ in your life.

When looking at John 3, despite the riddles and shifts to Nicodemus, the story is ultimately addressed to the audience of the gospel, to those reading it, us, we are all the main target, given the previously known information. Jesus alone, is the source of full truth, the embodiment of Truth as the Word become flesh, the light in the darkness. Truth, though, is not limited to Jesus, no longer physically being present in the community, but through the Spirit, which continues teaching in their and our midst (As Jesus says in John 14:26 “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”).

Our first birth gives us access to human life, that is mortal (of the flesh). Our second birth draws us into the life of the Spirit, into participation in God’s eternal life. Our birthday milestones mean another year on this earth, but even more importantly hopefully you can say, despite whatever circumstances have gone on in your life that you love the lord, you walk with the Lord, and you continuously work, despite your flaws and failues, to reflect more of Jesus in how you interact with the world. Celebrate that. As children of God we share in God’s Spirit and insight, we have a unique position of power with this access to truth.

However, even Nicodemus, the “teacher of Israel” required instruction and we have great responsibility. As believers we ought to be a family of children who reflect the love God made manifest in the person of Jesus. In Jesus’ physical absence, it is up to us, Spirit-shaped children to embody this love as we participate together in God’s ongoing story. So, celebrate your second birth and in doing so think about, what are you reflecting daily in your life?