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Must be born again

Jesus says in **John 3:3 (NKJV)**

3 ... "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

What Jesus says here is that although you may have been born once, you need to be born again into the new system of life, the heavenly system of life. A system of salvation by grace, through faith (**Ephesians 2:8-9 (NKJV)**)

What's interesting about this encounter is that Jesus is speaking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Being a Pharisee means that Nicodemus was a religious leader and well read in the Jewish scriptures.

He, if anyone, should know about the correct system of life and be following that correct system since. It only makes sense since he was raised and bathed in scripture.

You would never tell a doctor that they need to go back and finish high school. In the same way it sounds weird to tell a religious leader that they were lacking something to enter the kingdom of God.

I had a similar experience. I started reading the Bible when I was 12 and read it almost every day.

Sometimes my motivations weren't as holy. I remember at one point I would read the Bible as a way to fall asleep quicker and it always worked. 5 minutes and I was out cold.

I knew all the stories in the Bible and had an understanding for the basic things Christians believe, "Jesus died for your sins and turn the TV off at sunset."

I would call myself Christian all throughout my teenage years and on the outside, I was a follower of Christ.

I was certainly born into a Christian home, but I was not born again into the life Christ wanted me and us all to live.

Following while convenient

And how do I know this looking back? How do I know I wasn't born again during those years? I mean, I was reading the Bible, I could talk about the stories and their meanings?

I can see this now because I would follow God up until it became inconvenient with what I wanted to do in my life.

Philippians talks about what happens when Christ has taken a hold on your life.

Philippians 3:12-14 (NKJV)

12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

To give a timeline of what Paul is describing here.

1. Christ laid hold of Paul, we can surmise it was through love.
2. Paul, although not perfected, went after that love
3. In going after that love and calling, he left behind things and focused on what was ahead of him: the call to a better life with Jesus.

And let me tell you brothers and sisters, Christ has called us all to a better life with Him where we can throw away all the things of this world for Him.

When Paul came to a genuine knowledge of Christ, all the things of the world lost significance.

Paul says earlier in the chapter

Philippians 3:8 (NKJV)

8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ

He was willing to lose everything. He was not perfect, as he points out in verse 12 **Philippians 3:12 (NKJV)** "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected." but the knowledge of Christ that Paul received pushed him to want to get closer to Christ. To chase after heavenly things and being willing to leave the things of earth behind.

I had known about Christ growing up, but I had not yet come to the knowledge of the depth of the love of Christ. I could likely tell you Christ loved me, but I couldn't tell you what that meant in my own life.

John 14:15 (NKJV)

15 If you love Me, keep My commandments.

And I honestly did not love God to that extent, so I kept the commandments up until it became inconvenient to me.

That's the way I see lots of us operate. The Bible is true, and God ought to be followed until it tells me that I shouldn't be on these websites. Until it tells me that I shouldn't be in this relationship. Until it tells me I shouldn't be doing these things which I find pleasurable.

You can fill in the blanks for your own life and I want to give you an example of how it looked like in my life.

Compromise

I started playing basketball when I was 11 or 12. And I would often have games or practice on Saturday. So I was inconsistent going to church. This was an afterthought to me though.

When I reached high school, all I cared about was becoming a college basketball player. I wanted to play for the Duke Men's basketball team.

I was ambitious So I practiced every day, Sunday to Sunday. Sabbath to Sabbath I was in the gym somewhere practicing.

And it did dawn on me at one point, my Sophomore year of high school, that I was in fact transgressing the law. The 4th commandment **Exodus 20:8-10 (NKJV)** says to remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy. And when I sat down and reflected, I knew I was breaking it by not resting according to the commandment.

Okay

Here I am. Faced with conviction. I've come to the realization that the way I'm living is not in line with how the Bible says I should be. So instead of looking past my ambitions and following the Bible, I instead chose to compromise.

I told myself that I would spend my whole life not following God fully so that I could make a lot of money and then give it to people after I retired. After I lived my life not following what the Bible says, then I would become very religious and use that money to spread the gospel.

It was a convoluted plan, yes. But to me it was more logical to have that plan of compromise rather than accept that God had different plans for my life.

How often do you compromise in the face of something that challenges your faith. Do you trust God, or trust in your own ways more?

Our plans, God plans

And this is a common pattern for the human mind. To believe that we can devise plans for our lives better than God can. That we know better than the will of God.

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NKJV)

8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.

It's foolish to believe that you can direct your life better than God can.

If you choose to compromise you can have a worldly life filled with pleasures, filled with luxuries. But you can't have the best life, that only comes through a relationship with Christ.

John 10:10 (NKJV)

10 The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

Listen, the thief does not come except to destroy.

Anyone or anything you follow outside of Christ will lead you to destruction

You have needs and desires that only God wants to bring to you and will bring to you if you choose to obey and follow His ways.

Psalms 16:11 (NKJV)

11 You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

And that's what Jesus offers us. Fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

When we finally accept that what we want for our lives is less important and valuable than what He wants for our lives, we open ourselves up to receiving these gifts.

Deep darkness

Okay, now let's fast forward. I continue practicing our team improves and gets better. Then my junior year comes. Our team was at peak performance. We played so well that we ended up winning the state championship in Virginia.

At this point, everything from the outside looks amazing. We were the first team in our school's history and in decades for our city to win the state championship, and I was starting to get letters from colleges asking if I was interested in playing at their school. Everything seemed ideal from the outside. But that entire year I struggled.

That year, I struggled with anxiety. Every match I played I felt a deep insecurity that I wasn't capable of performing. I would try my best to drown out those thoughts with loud music or by making myself angry with violent music. That entire year I was in a depression. Basketball was eating me alive.

And when we finally won the state championship. A moment which hundreds of thousands of high schoolers dreamt of. When we sat down in the locker room after the roar of the crowd died: I felt nothing.

It was the first time I felt such an emptiness. Everything from the past 4 years of hard work culminated to nothing. Just emptiness

Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NKJV)

"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

And over the next few weeks I sunk into a deeper depression. I felt like I was just destined to live with this emptiness.

A turn toward hope

After we won the championship, we had over a month of down time. It was my first extended break in years. And during that time I decided to try church. Not just sitting in the pews, but actually being involved.

I started going to Bible study with people at my local church. When the church was volunteering I'd come out. I started being asked to do different things in church and I'd be happy to help out. I started doing AV and a whole bunch of other things.

2 Corinthians 4:6 (NKJV)

6 For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And during this month and the months to come, I experienced Christ.

The love that I found from my church community overwhelmed me. The way they cared about me, the patience they had for me and the genuineness of their love of God inspired me.

God shined light into my heart through the members at Virginia Beach SDA church. And I was changed.

I learned what God's love meant for me. It meant that although I was flawed, although I rejected His words all these years of my life, He still loved me.

That God still wanted me to be His son.

No longer did I want to live my life compromising my faith. I wanted to follow God and allow Him to lead my life for the first time.

Letting God lead

So then, I decided not to play basketball on Sabbath.

I told my coach and team and soon enough the entire school knew about it.

And after that decision, I would have people come up to me and ask me why I was abandoning the team. I would have people question my character. but I was confident in the decision to follow God and He gave me the strength to overcome the opposition.

After a while, I decided I didn't want to spend my time in college playing basketball either.

So the plan I had was to find a college that would give me a Sabbath exemption, a school like Duke would never do that but maybe a smaller one. Soon into my senior year though, I felt God's calling in my life to spend more of my time ministering.

So to remove the temptation to go back and try to work out my basketball dream, I deleted all of my highlights and all the information about my high school basketball career.

An amazing thing happens when you start to rely on God rather than your own strength.

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NKJV)

5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.

I no longer felt a fear for the future. I felt confident that God was going to bring me exactly where I needed to be.

So I applied to college.

I had no idea where to start with looking for colleges. A member from my church who supported me in my decision pushed me and got me to start applying.

One of my coaches would constantly remind me that I wanted to play basketball at Duke, to try and incentivize me to play basketball in college. God kept my mind straight and I believed He had different plans for me.

My grades were good, but I had almost no extracurriculars because I spent all my time playing basketball. And I had an OKAY SAT score.

Everyone, this story is to assure you all that God will take care of your life. He knows what you need better than you do.

You may not end up in the place you originally wanted, but He will bring you to the place you need.

The Lord gave me admission into Duke with a scholarship that would pay for all my schooling.

That school that I dreamed of playing basketball at I would be attending for free with no need to play basketball.

What I don't want you to take away from this is that if you follow God He will give you what you originally wanted. No, what I want you guys to take from this is

Ephesians 3:20 (NKJV)

20 Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us,

When we choose to allow God to work in us and bring us to the place He wants us to go. It'll be so much better than whatever we think of.

It will look different. I wouldn't trade what the Lord has given me for anything that basketball could have brought me.

The story doesn't end there, you guys will have to invite me back to hear about college. But this experience is the testimony that God will not forsake you if you stand for Him.

When you give up looking after your own glory and live for His you'll find real fulfillment.

God wants you off the fence

I want to pause here

God is knocking on your heart today.

When speaking about following God and being willing to sacrifice the things of this world Paul says in **Philippians 3:15 (NKJV)**

15 Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

If you don't believe a life spent with God is better than a life spent with your own ambitions, try the Lord. Ask Him and He will reveal the Truth to you.

Do you find yourself compromising with God constantly? Do you follow God only when it's convenient?

I know someone here today has been living on that fence. You have one foot following God and the other foot following yourself. Following your peers. Following your parents. Following the world's expectations. You can't serve two masters. So serve the master that chose to die for you.

Christ sacrificed for you

If the sacrifice that you have to make to live for God seems too large, remember that he chose to sacrifice everything for you.

Romans 5:8 (NKJV)

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for [you] us.

While you're stuck debating whether to follow God or things of this world, Christ went ahead and paid the price for you to receive an abundant life.

He demonstrated His love by dying on the cross as an argument to why you should serve Him.

Philippians 3:13-14 (NKJV)

13 ...forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Don't let the things on the Earth stop you from receiving the true prize. Don't let the things on the Earth stop you from following Christ.