

Sermon Summary – John 3:1–21 (Nicodemus and the New Birth)

Cornelius began by asking the congregation what the most iconic verse in the Bible might be, and many responded with John 3:16. Because the church included people from many nations, he invited members to share the verse in different languages, highlighting how widely known and powerful this passage is. He then introduced the reading from John 3:1–21, the account of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus.

Cornelius explained that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, part of the Jewish ruling council and one of the religious leaders of Israel. The Pharisees were highly educated in the law of Moses, the prophets, and many religious traditions. They believed that obedience to the law and religious works would lead to salvation. Nicodemus had seen Jesus performing miracles and teaching with an authority that the Pharisees themselves did not possess. Curious about Jesus but cautious about public opinion, he came to Jesus at night to ask questions.

Cornelius described the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus as a clash between the carnal, intellectual mind and the spiritual reality of God. Nicodemus tried to understand Jesus with logic and human reasoning, while Jesus spoke about spiritual truths. As a result, Nicodemus struggled to grasp what Jesus meant.

Jesus immediately made a profound statement: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." Cornelius emphasized that Jesus repeated this idea several times, showing its importance. Being born again is not simply an optional experience or an additional spiritual step; according to Jesus, it is essential. Without this new birth, a person cannot see or enter the kingdom of God.

Cornelius then reflected on the phrase "see the kingdom of God." He explained that Nicodemus believed salvation came through following the law, but Jesus revealed a completely different path. Salvation is not achieved by religious effort or good works. Instead, it comes through a spiritual transformation—a new birth from God's Spirit.

To illustrate the nature of the kingdom of God, Cornelius referred to Daniel's interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. In the dream, a statue made of different metals represented the great kingdoms of the world. A stone, cut out not by human hands, struck the statue and destroyed it, and that stone grew into a mountain that filled the earth. Cornelius explained that this stone represents the kingdom of God, which will ultimately replace all earthly kingdoms. Human kingdoms rise and fall, but God's kingdom is eternal.

He compared this idea with natural citizenship. A person belongs to a nation by birth; likewise, to belong to the kingdom of God, one must be spiritually born into it. Simply learning about God or participating in religious activity cannot accomplish this.

Cornelius then pointed out that Jesus challenged Nicodemus, saying, "You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?" Nicodemus had extensive knowledge of the Scriptures and the great figures of Israel—Abraham, Moses, and the prophets—but those figures shared something deeper than knowledge. They had a relationship with God.

Cornelius explained that it is possible to know a great deal about God while still not truly knowing Him. The new birth brings that personal relationship.

To explain faith and salvation, Jesus referred to an event from the book of Numbers. When the Israelites complained in the wilderness, venomous snakes came among them. God instructed Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole so that anyone who looked at it would be healed. Cornelius explained that Jesus used this story as a picture of His own mission: just as the serpent was lifted up, the Son of Man would be lifted up on the cross.

Cornelius emphasised that the act of looking at the bronze serpent required no works or effort, only trust in God's provision. In the same way, salvation comes through faith in Christ. When a person looks to the cross and believes, an exchange takes place. Cornelius quoted 2 Corinthians 5:21, explaining that Jesus, who had no sin, became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God.

This truth is beautifully summarised in John 3:16, which Cornelius described as one of the most complete verses in the Bible. It reveals that God loves the world, that He gave His only Son, and that whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have eternal life. Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save it.

Cornelius then spoke about what happens when someone is born again. He described his own experience of encountering God: a deep sense of peace, overwhelming love, and great joy in worship. At the same time, he noted that following Christ can also bring persecution or misunderstanding, as some people reject the light and prefer to remain in darkness.

He also described how conviction came into his life after his conversion. One of the first things he felt led to do was seek forgiveness from his parents for past conflicts. Writing them a letter of apology led to reconciliation, and they later told him they had been praying for his salvation for many years. From this he learned the powerful connection between prayer and people coming to faith.

Cornelius shared how this understanding shaped his later ministry in Africa. While running a children's home, he realised many of the children had no Christian heritage and no one praying for them. He felt led to build a house of prayer and dedicate himself to prayer and fasting for the children. After a period of perseverance, he saw dramatic change when several troubled boys joined him in fasting and prayer and experienced powerful spiritual transformation. This moment marked a turning point in the ministry, demonstrating to him the power of intercession.

Cornelius concluded by explaining that the cross is the gateway to new life. It is not the end of the journey but the beginning of a transformed life with God.

Finally, he invited anyone who had never been born again to respond to God's call and receive prayer. He also encouraged those who had loved ones who were not yet believers to come forward for prayer and agreement, trusting that God hears prayer and draws people to Himself by the Holy Spirit.