



John 3:1-8  
People: The Secret of Greatness  
Chuck Colson: Born Again

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This morning we continue our series on people who lived for Jesus in some pretty inspiring ways with a look at Chuck Colson. Now, if you're old enough to remember Watergate and you never found out about what happened to Chuck Colson the next 38 years after it, then you might be surprised to hear that Chuck lived for Jesus in the latter half of his life. But did he ever.

Charles W. Colson was born the first time on October 16, 1931 during the Great Depression in North Boston. He graduated with honors from Brown University in 1953. That same year, he got married, and received his commission in the Marine Corps, serving in Korea just after the end of the major US involvement there. He rose through the ranks to become the youngest captain in the history of the Marines.

After finishing his time in the Marines, he went to Law School at George Washington University, and graduated, again with honors, in 1959. He had gotten involved in politics in 1948 when he was only 17, and in 1960, he became engaged again, managing the campaign for a Massachusetts senator – who won. After that, he started a law firm, which became highly successful. But his personal life was not so much, and he and his wife got divorced. In 1964, he married Patty Hughes, who would be his wife for the next 48 years until his death.

He then became involved in the 1968 presidential campaign, for the successful election of Richard Nixon. In 1969, at age 38, Nixon appointed him to be his special counsel – one of his lawyerly advisors. Chuck had the ear and the confidence of the most powerful human on the planet.

Chuck became known as the “hatchet man”...the one who would do anything for the President, though he learned many of his tactics in that first political campaign in 1948. Lying, spying on others, misinformation, covering up...he did it all, masterminding some of the dirtiest tricks that led to Nixon's downfall, and his own. **“When I complained to Colson, I felt confident**

**that something would be done,” Nixon wrote. “I was rarely disappointed” (RN: *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, by Richard Nixon, and quoted in *The New York Times*, April 21, 2012).** Bryce Harlow, a former counselor to the president, said, “Colson started talking about trampling his grandmother’s grave for Nixon and showing he was as mean as they come” (Ibid.).

To him, it was all for a good cause: for the President of the United States. But in 1972, before Watergate got big, he was removed from his position by Nixon. Chuck went back to the law office, and built up his practice. In mid-March of 1973, with Watergate growing, Chuck found himself in the offices of Tom Philips, the CEO of Raytheon, a company Chuck hoped to land as a client.

In that conversation, Tom Philips told Chuck that earlier that week he had given his life to Christ. He told Chuck if he’d like to hear about that, to let him know. Chuck left the meeting, not really interested. It was four months later that a lower-level White House aid revealed that Nixon had secretly recorded Oval office conversations. Chuck Colson knew right then that many conversations he thought were private could quickly become public. And that would not cast a good light on him. Reporters and camera-people started showing up at his house. There were three bomb threats that brought the FBI to investigate. His life became chaotic. He got out of town on vacation, and took part of a day to visit again with Tom Philips.

This time, Chuck asked him to share how he came to faith in Jesus. **Tom told him about the emptiness he had in his life in spite of all his hard work to build Raytheon into one of the greatest companies in America.** And how it was only Jesus, he discovered, who could fill that emptiness. And now he had a whole new outlook on life. They talked about pride and power...they looked at a chapter from C.S. Lewis’ book, *Mere Christianity*, and Chuck started to see how his own pride and the great power he had, had gotten him to this place of turmoil and on the brink of disaster.

For the next week, while still on vacation with his wife, he read through *Mere Christianity*, taking notes, writing down his questions and his objections. He

was a brilliant lawyer seeking to see if Jesus and the Christian faith really was true. Because: **The truth of the gospel is crucial. If it's not true, it doesn't really matter.** And in C.S. Lewis, he found a logic and a presentation of the truth that Colson couldn't refute, and he had to acknowledge the truth. Lewis famously writes in that book, that there are only three possible labels to put on Jesus: He's either Lord, a liar, or a lunatic. A person couldn't make the claims that Jesus did, and be a great and moral teacher unless they were true. So either he's lying – which is a-moral and discredits him as someone worth following – or he's a lunatic – and who wants to follow a lunatic – or Jesus is who he says he is. Colson writes, **“There was my choice as simple, stark and frightening as that...No fine shadings, no gradations, no compromises. No one had ever thrust this truth at me in such a direct and unsettling way”** (Chuck Colson, *Born Again*, p. 125, quoted by Eric Metaxas in *7 Men...*).

A few days later, he prayed a simple prayer, asking Jesus to come into his life, and he was born a second time. Now, sometimes people come to a place of faith hoping that if they trust God, then God will rescue them from specific consequences that seem to be almost inevitable. And you have to wonder if that was part of Chuck's motivation. A few months later, however, he was sentenced to prison for 1-3 years, leaving his wife and their three children behind.



But he was committed to his faith. He knew that Jesus was the truth. After the sentencing hearing, he came out onto the courthouse steps with the cameras and newspaper reporters waiting, and he said, **“What happened in court today was the court's will and the Lord's will. I have committed my life to Jesus Christ and I can work for him in prison as well as out”** (Chuck Colson on June 21, 1974, from *7 Men...*).

At Maxwell Federal Prison Camp in Alabama, he stayed true to his word. It wasn't easy, but eventually he found two other prisoners who wanted to study the Bible and grow in faith like he did. Their group slowly grew. He helped write letters for inmates who couldn't read or write, and helped in other ways

as he was able, too. He had confidence that God had actually brought him to the prison to help the prisoners, to disciple them, and that God had a plan for all of this. That does not mean it was not all peaches and cream, however. About 6 months later, on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1975, the Virginia State Bar association barred him from practicing law in Virginia ever again. A few days later he found out that his son, Chris, was arrested for drug possession. At about the same time, four of the other Watergate defendants had been released from prison in early January 1975. His judge was not inclined to be so gracious, and his own request for release was denied. All of this together in the span of a few weeks was very disheartening to Chuck. It was perhaps the lowest point he'd been at.

On January 29, at the urging of a friend who visited him in prison, he decided to give everything over to the Lord. So Chuck prayed, "Lord, if this (me giving everything to you) is what this is all about, then I thank you. I praise you for leaving me in prison, for letting them take away my license to practice law – yes, even for my son being arrested. I praise you for giving me your love through these men, for being God, for just letting me walk with Jesus." Chuck later recalled, **"That was the real mountaintop experience. Above and beyond me the world was filled with love and beauty. For the first time I felt truly free"** (Aitken, *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed*, p. 278).

Ironically, two days later, on January 31, 1975, the judge granted a request Chuck had made for a 10-day furlough to be with his family in light of his son's drug arrest. In fact, the judge granted even more: he granted Chuck's release from prison. After giving everything to God in that prayer, He was now free to go home, and stay home.

But he never forgot his experience in prison, nor the experience of the others who were there, too. So he kept ministering to prisoners. Who better to do so than someone who'd been in prison? About a year after his release, he started a ministry called *Prison Fellowship Ministries* that trained ex-



prisoners and other volunteers to minister in prisons. It has grown to become the largest ministry in America to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. We participate in a part of their ministries every year here at Rose Hill with the Angel Tree Ministry, where we give Christmas gifts on behalf of prisoners, to their kids. The ministry has gone international as well, and is now operating in 120 countries. When Gwen was in college, she went with an affiliate ministry to a maximum-security prison in Florida where she and other college students shared the gospel message. When I had the opportunity to speak to a group of 50 or so prisoners in a remote part of Uganda, and serve them some food, I thought about how that local ministry was undoubtedly impacted by Chuck Colson's ministry. Chuck started a radio commentary show called BreakPoint; he was instrumental in helping Catholic and protestants to seek common ground; and he started other ministries that sought to help shape the morals of our culture, because he believed a lack of morals was the root problem of crime – it had been for him, and it was for the prisoners he met. Additionally, he authored or co-authored some 30 books.

Chuck passed away on April 12, 2012 at 80 years of age. His memorial service was held at Washington National Cathedral a few days later and was a decidedly bi-partisan affair, which he would have greatly appreciated.

There are so many Biblical passages and themes that correlate to Chuck's life: the Apostle Paul's conversion; the importance of deep Christian relationships with people who will walk with you through thick and thin; **Proverbs 16:18 certainly comes to mind, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before the fall."**

But I think what Chuck Colson himself would probably land on in the end, is the importance of this idea of being "born again" that Jesus speaks of. After all, Chuck's first book was his own biography, published a couple years after he was released from prison, and it was simply titled, "Born Again." Chuck is the epitome of what Jesus means by this phrase. And everything that he did in his prison ministry, culture-shaping ministries, politically in his later years, and more was rooted in people having a relationship with Jesus Christ.

**So: This encounter of Nicodemus' with Jesus under the cover of darkness is not too unlike Chuck's encounter with Jesus, too.** Chuck grew up in a vaguely Christian home, but the first time he was really confronted with the idea of knowing Jesus in his life was in that meeting with Tom Phillips, the CEO of Raytheon. It was a private meeting, just the two of them, tucked away in an office. The next time was at Tom's home when Chuck was on vacation nearby. Neither was literally under the cloak of darkness, but both were very private conversations that, unlike some of his conversations with President Nixon, weren't secretly recorded. And of course Chuck was very much immersed in darkness in his life, and had been for over 20 years at that point. Then, Chuck continued to grow in his new-found faith through the bi-partisan and non-political prayer group he was a part of, and then still even further behind the walls of the prison. There was a lot of "undercover" discipleship and spiritual growth going on, just as Nicodemus meets with Jesus away from the public eye. And he does so, to ask some questions about Jesus. He gathers information about Him.

One of the things I love about Chuck Colson is that once he was presented with the gospel message, he didn't just blindly say, "Ok...I believe." **He went back to the place where he and his wife were staying for vacation, and he studied for several days.** He wrote down his questions. He wrote down the answers he found. He gathered information. He approached this with the mind of a top-notch lawyer, looking to punch holes in the gospel message to see if it held up. And for me, I really resonate with that. I'm kind of a logic-based guy who wants all the pieces to fit neatly together, with no missing parts. No holes. I get it that there are certain gaps we have to live with. It's called "the Christian *faith*" for a reason. But so much of the Christian faith fits together and explains the questions about our universe and our world and what it means to be human, that it leads me to a place of trust for the things that really take a big leap of faith – like the resurrection of Jesus, and my own hope for eternity with God – that I'm confident in doing that. God may not tell us everything, but he's told us enough. I think Chuck was much the same.

**Now, in some ways, coming to faith in that kind of logic-based way just seems at odds with this idea of being "born again."** Obviously, with this

phrase, “born again” it plays off of the idea that we’re all born, physically, into the world to begin with. But physical birth is not necessarily logical...starting with conception. Not many people sit down and plan out pregnancy in a logical, rational kind of way...like how it fits in with their lives, and how they’ll afford raising a kid, and have everything kind of laid out in steps, starting with conception. That’s just not the norm; if it were, not many kids would be born, because there’s rarely a logical time to have kids. Usually, it’s a few weeks after conception that a husband and wife realize, “Oh my goodness! We’re pregnant!” There’s nothing logical about it – it’s all romance and emotion and passion that causes people not to think straight in the moment...and then boom: You’re expecting! And nine months after that illogical behavior comes this glorious event of the birth of a new child who has their own radical, life-altering, transformative moment of going from a dark, watery world to one of light and air.

And so when we think of being “born again” oftentimes that’s what people envision: some spiritually charged moment where the blinders fall off in an instant and they’re able to proclaim, “I once was blind but now I see.” And the reality is, it just isn’t that way for probably most Christians. Some, yes...but probably not most. *Especially* in Presbyterian churches. ☺

**Being “born again” is usually much more of a process.** It’s not usually “I don’t believe in Jesus” one moment and “Church worship leader” the next. It’s like a sunrise, perhaps. Before the sun comes up, it starts to get light. And for a lot of people like me and like Chuck Colson, and maybe for some of you: coming to faith and living by faith involves asking a lot of questions...trying to poke holes in Jesus and the Christian “story” to see if it holds water. That’s the light of the sun while it’s still below the horizon. But there comes a moment where the sun finally can be seen. Similarly, if a person is going to be born again and be in relationship with Jesus, there comes a point in time where a prayer is said that we want to have Jesus come into our lives and transform us and make us holy in God’s eyes. For many Christians, it’s a point we revisit regularly and come back to Jesus again and again and again...but there’s a point where we say, **“Ok Jesus, I’m going to trust you. I confess I’ve sinned (whether we’ve gone to prison for them or not)...I want your Spirit to fill me and lead me, I want to know you in**

**my life, and I'm trusting you to transform me and make me holy, from now until the day you welcome me into eternity."**

That's the beginning...and living into that relationship with Jesus is living into a life that's born again. It happened for Chuck Colson, and it absolutely turned his life around, from a Watergate hatchet man to one of the greatest evangelists for Jesus the world has ever seen.

I don't know what God's plans are for you or for me. I certainly hope they don't involve prison. I don't know that His plans involve ministering to tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands as Chuck has through his founding and leadership of Prison Fellowship Ministries...but I do know that God's plans for us include being born again...trusting in Jesus and being transformed by his love and grace. We can't do it on our own, just as a baby can't be born on its own. Being born again takes an act of God, and he's done that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You can be born again through faith in Jesus. It happened to Chuck...and so it can definitely happen to any one of us. And if it hasn't happened to you, I invite you today to be born again. Let's pray...Amen.