

A New Birth

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Date: 05 March 2023

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[0 : 00] Please stand for the reading of the gospel. This morning's gospel reading comes from John chapter 3, verses 1 through 21. This is the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to Saint John.

Glory to you, Lord Christ. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. And this man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes.

[1 : 05] So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be? Jesus answered him, Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven except he who ascended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

[2 : 19] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his work should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ. You can be seated. C.S. Lewis was a professor of ancient medieval literature at Oxford and Cambridge between the 1920s and 1960s, and he grew up in a home that attended church.

But as he grew older and as he entered into his teenage years, he gradually fell away from his faith. And by the time he was finally an adult, he was a decided atheist.

And in his biography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes his journey of conversion from being an atheist to becoming a Christian.

And for him, it was a highly intellectual experience. It involved a very slow transition over a gradual many years.

[3 : 33] It was a transition from a belief in atheism to then a belief in moral absolutes, to believing in God, to finally being a follower of Christ.

But this was a transition that took many years. It involved reading many thinkers and philosophers like G.K. Chesterton and novelists like George MacDonald. It also involved years of friendship and

conversations with people like Hugo Dyson and Owen Barfield and J.R. Tolkien, who wrote The Lord of the Rings.

But it also involved lots of reluctance and opposition on Lewis' part. Towards the end of the book, he describes himself as the most reluctant convert in all of England.

And for Lewis, the time when he actually realized that he was a Christian wasn't all that extraordinary or dramatic. It was actually on a drive one day with some friends from the town of Oxford to a zoo in a small village just north of London called Whipsnade.

And here's how he describes this moment. He says, I know very well when, but hardly how the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning, and when we set out, I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

[4 : 53] But when we reached the zoo, I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought, nor in great emotion. Emotional is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events.

It was more like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake. Our passage this morning in John chapter 3 is a conversation that Jesus has with a man named Nicodemus about conversion, about the new birth, and how somebody becomes a follower of Jesus.

And right off the bat, I think I have to acknowledge that in a place like Washington, D.C., it's hard to even mention words like conversion or the new birth without making some people cringe, without making some of us cringe.

These are cringe-worthy words in our modern culture. In our modern culture, talking about the new birth, talking about conversion, can make us cringe for a lot of reasons. For some of us, even the idea of trying to convert someone to another faith or religion seems intolerant and morally regressive.

For others of us, the term born-again Christian is conflated with politics or particular political persuasion. And for others of us, it recalls bad experiences that we've had in our past, maybe in the church.

[6 : 21] There's a lot of negative associations that arise from talking about conversion and the new birth and about what Scripture teaches. And so that's why what I'd like to do this morning as we look at John chapter 3 is to actually address some of those misconceptions.

We're not going to address all of them, but we'll address three. We're going to look at three misconceptions about conversion and the new birth and look at how our passage informs and speaks to those misconceptions.

So three misconceptions about the new birth and what our passage has to say about it. So here's the first one. The first one, one I think misconception that a lot of people have about conversion and the new birth is that it basically involves somebody getting more religion.

Oftentimes people use that when referring to someone else who has maybe said that they have had a conversion experience, that they've gotten religion. And often what people mean when they say that is that that person has maybe gotten more serious about morality.

They've added more rules to their life. They've gotten more serious about going to church. Another way of thinking about it is that they've added the app of religion onto the home screen of their life.

[7 : 39] That in all of the different things and parts of their life, it's another app that they've added to their well-curated individualistic life. But is that what the new birth and conversion are?

Is it just adding, is it just getting more serious about the rules? Is it just adding another app to your life? Well, let's look at our text. In verse one, we are told that Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

Pharisees were a group of religious Jewish teachers who emphasized careful interpretation and observance of the Torah, the law. And they believed that through their particular careful way of observing the law and applying it, that this would be part of the way that the Messiah would come and restore his kingdom.

So Nicodemus was a man with great biblical knowledge and a desire to keep God's commands and to apply it strictly in his life and the lives of other people. And verse two tells us that he came to Jesus by night.

Now, we're not told specifically why in the text, why it is that he comes at night, but we can do some godly speculation. It's likely that he came at night because he wanted to come and talk to Jesus in secret so that he wouldn't be seen in public in fear that others or other Pharisees or members of the Sanhedrin would find out and that he would lose his reputation.

[9 : 05] To be seen with Jesus publicly during the day might ruin his standing in the community among the Pharisees. So he comes to Jesus at night and he says 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 unless God is with him.

Now, on first glance, this actually sounds like a compliment. It sounds like he's acknowledging something that's true about Jesus. And I probably would have expected Jesus to affirm what Nicodemus says here.

You're right, Nicodemus. Finally, one of you actually believes me. But he doesn't do that. He actually turns the conversation and he does it by, I think, looking into the heart of Nicodemus and seeing what it is that he's really saying.

He looks into Nicodemus' heart and he looks past all of his desire to keep the law and the Torah. He looks past all of his religious credentials and motivations. And he sees, on one hand, a genuine desire to follow the law and keep God's commands.

But I think he also sees a desire to just add Jesus as another app into his already preexisting religious system. He says to a man with great knowledge of the Bible, with a great desire to follow the law, who even acknowledges that Jesus is from God, all of that is not enough to see the kingdom and enter the kingdom.

[10 : 35] You need something else. You need something else that being a good, moral, religious person can't give you. You need new life. You need to be born again.

And in verse 4, Nicodemus asks what I think is a totally fair question. He says, well, how can this be? How can somebody enter a second time into their mother's womb? I mean, how in the world is that possible for somebody to be born again?

And Jesus responds, I'm not talking about another physical birth, but I'm talking about another spiritual birth. He says, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Water and the spirit. Water here is a reference to baptism. Baptism is a sign. It's a sacrament. It's a picture of what the Holy Spirit does in the new birth.

In the new birth, the Holy Spirit gives us a new nature that imparts to us new spiritual life. In the new birth, the Holy Spirit gives us a new nature that imparts to us new spiritual life.

[11 : 45] The theological word for this is called regeneration. Regeneration. Through regeneration, the Holy Spirit indwells us, takes up residence inside of us, and transforms our hearts in a way that transforms the rest of us, that every aspect of our mind and our emotions and our will and our bodies, that it gives us new desires.

It gives us a new love for God, a new love for his word, a new love for other people, and it gives us new power. The ability, new power to follow God and obey him, it's the transformation of our desires, it's the transformation of our hearts and our nature.

And so this is where we see that the new birth and conversion aren't about getting more religion. It's not about getting more religion, but it's actually about receiving a new nature.

It's about receiving a new nature. And twice in this passage, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he actually should not have been surprised by this. He says, don't marvel that I am saying this to you.

Nicodemus, being the biblical scholar and teacher that he was, should have remembered, should have called to mind the words of the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 36. This was an Old Testament passage about how God would literally put his spirit in the hearts of his people.

[13 : 08] Ezekiel chapter 36 says, I will sprinkle clean water on you, which is again this reference to baptism. And you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from the heart of flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you.

This is a promise in the Old Testament about God's plan to indwell people with his spirit. And this is the new birth. It involves cleansing from the old sinful nature, this removal of the heart of stone and the creation of a new nature, the creation of a new heart, a heart of flesh.

And so that's what the new birth is. That's what the Holy Spirit does in the new birth. But I think that begs a question for us, which is, why do we need this in the first place? Like, why do we need the new birth?

Why do we need conversion to happen in the first place? Why do we need to receive a new nature? And part of the answer comes in what Jesus says later in verse 19. Later in verse 19, Jesus says, this is the judgment.

[14:19] The light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. He's saying that at our core, our fundamental problem isn't that we sometimes do bad things, but that at our core, our fundamental problem is that we actually love the darkness.

Scripture teaches that the fundamental problem of humanity isn't that we're imperfect people who just need to learn how to be better people. It's not that we're ignorant or uneducated people that just need to be taught or enlightened.

It's that we are dead people who need to be made alive. We are slaves who need to be liberated from the power of sin and death.

This is what Ephesians chapter 2 says. Ephesians chapter 2 says, and you were dead in the trespasses, in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world. We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and we're by nature children of wrath. Apart from God's intervention, apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, we are dead in our sins.

[15:37] We're spiritually dead. We're held captive to its power, and we cannot create new life in our hearts on our own. And so that is why we need the new birth.

That is why we need a new nature. That's why we need the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. We don't just need another app on the home screen of our life.

We need an entirely new operating system. We need an entirely new operating system. And that's why getting more religion or getting more serious about the rules isn't going to deal fundamentally with our main problem.

We need to be made alive. We need new hearts. We need a new spirit. And this is also why the new birth isn't just for people who aren't religious.

It's for people who grew up in the church. It's for people like Nicodemus who knew the Bible and taught the Bible, who even believed that Jesus came from God, but didn't have the life that Jesus came to bring.

[16:45] And so everyone needs the new birth, even the church people. Even the church people. So that's the first thing that we see is that the new birth isn't getting more religion, but it's receiving a new nature.

Misconception number two, another misconception about conversion and the new birth is that it always involves a dramatic emotional experience of decision.

or that it involves or that it involves an experience that can feel forced or manufactured or maybe even emotionally manipulative. But is that the case?

Does conversion and new birth always involve a dramatic emotional experience? Well, let's look at our text. Jesus continues the conversation in verse eight and he says, the wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. Both the Hebrew word ruach and the Greek word pneuma can both be translated as wind or spirit or breath.

[17:57] And here, Jesus brings those together and says, the work of the Holy Spirit is like the wind. Even though you can't see it, you can feel its effects.

It is real and powerful. You can feel the wind blowing in your face. You can feel it shaking the trees, which many of us did yesterday. Yesterday was a pretty windy day, right? You can, even though you might not be able to see it, you can feel its effects.

It's real. It's powerful and it's mysterious. It's not something that we can control or even predict. So it is with the Holy Spirit. Even though we cannot see physically what God is doing in the heart of someone, it is nonetheless real and powerful and it's also not something that we can control.

It's not something that we can manufacture. It's not something that we can predict. And that is because the new birth isn't something that we do. It is something that God does. It's something that God does.

1 Peter 1, verse 3 says, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again into a living hope.

[19 : 07] He has caused us to be born again. This is the work of God. It's not us. Just like the wind, the Holy Spirit brings about the new birth in ways that are often mysterious, often unpredictable, and often out of our control.

Sometimes it can happen in a dramatic way, like if you think about St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, right? Blinding light, a voice from heaven, dramatic experience, power, right? But other times, it can happen in more ordinary, subtle, mundane ways. For others, it's more like the story of C.S. Lewis. It's like somebody waking up slowly and eventually realizing that they're awake. This is the work of the Spirit. It's unpredictable. It's mysterious. We can't quite control it, but this is because it's the sovereign work of the Spirit. This is where we see that the new birth is not an experience we can control.

It's not an experience that we can manufacture, but it is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. It's a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. And rather than this being something that makes us cringe, this is actually something that should greatly and deeply encourage us.

[20 : 33] This should be something that should be incredibly encouraging. Over the years, I've actually had heard more than a few people express a mild, vague sense of shame that they do not have a more powerful testimony.

They don't have a more powerful experience of coming to faith. It's as if having a more powerful story of the new birth would make their current experience of the Holy Spirit more real and powerful in their life.

But for many people, many of us, God uses ordinary means like friendships and growing up in a Christian family to bring about the new birth into our lives. And this isn't something to be ashamed of.

This isn't something to feel guilty about. This is something to be celebrated and rejoiced in. This is just as much of a testimony to the sovereign power of the Spirit to bring about the new birth just as a dramatic moment like Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus.

We should rejoice in both dramatic and ordinary and mundane experiences of the new birth because the same sovereign Spirit is at work in both.

[21 : 47] It is His work, not ours. This should also bring us great encouragement as we think about friends and family and coworkers that we want to know Christ. Do we have the responsibility of sharing Christ with them?

Yes, we have the responsibility to share our faith, to share the gospel with them, to pray for them, to ask them questions. But we don't have any of the pressure, we don't have any of the responsibility to see any results, to see them come to faith, to see them actually experience the new birth.

That's not on us. That's the work of the Spirit. He is the one who brings about regeneration and new birth in the hearts of people. And so we can relax because it is His work that He does.

Parents, this is also true for you as you think about your kids and as you hope and pray, as you think about wanting your kids to express faith in Christ someday. There may be an exact moment when this happens or there may not be.

It may be more subtle and mundane and ordinary. It might be just what we pray every Sunday and what we prayed earlier that there would never be a day that they know apart from knowing Christ.

[23 : 03] But regardless, this is the new birth in your children is not something that you have to force to happen or control or create the perfect conditions for. And it's ultimately not something that you are responsible for as a parent because it is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit who brings about the new birth, who regenerates hearts.

So what we see is that the new birth and conversion aren't about getting more religion. It's about receiving a new nature. We also see that it's not an experience that we can control, but it's a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

And so here's a third and final misconception that we often have about the new birth. A third and final misconception is that it's really just describing spiritual experience in general.

It's describing a spiritual experience that happened in lots of other religions and faiths and other forms of spirituality. There's nothing unique about it. But as Jesus continues his conversation with Nicodemus, he recalls a story from Numbers chapter 21 that Laurel read earlier.

And this is a bit of a bizarre story when you first read it. The Israelites were complaining to God as they do multiple times. They were complaining to Moses about God that he had brought them out into the wilderness only to die.

[24 : 27] That they were longing to go back to Egypt. And God judges them. He judges them for their sin of unbelief by sending venomous snakes. And these venomous snakes bite the people causing many of them to die.

The people realize their sin. They cry out to God. They repent. They acknowledge they've sinned. God in his mercy provides a way out. And he tells Moses to create a bronze snake and put the bronze snake on a pole.

And anyone who looks at the bronze snake, anyone who's been bitten can look at the bronze snake and live and be healed. That's a bizarre story, right?

But the point of the story is this, that people who were dying because of their sin, people who were dying because of their sin were able to look to a symbol of judgment and death that was lifted up, the bronze serpent.

They were able to look at a symbol of judgment and death and live and be healed and experience new life. And Jesus says to Nicodemus, this bizarre story in the Old Testament is about me.

[25 : 45] It's about me. Verse 14, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Nicodemus, just like the serpent, I too am going to be lifted up. Not on a pole, but on a cross. Not just as a symbol of judgment and death, but I'm going to be experiencing real judgment and real death so that whoever looks to me will experience new life.

Now, why on earth would Jesus do this? Why would he be lifted up as a symbol of judgment and death? Well, he tells us, he tells Nicodemus in the next verse, and this is a familiar verse to many. In fact, it's maybe the most well-known verse in the Bible. John 3, 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

he did it out of love. Perhaps you're here this morning and you, like Nicodemus, have been curious about Jesus, but maybe you have never actually received the new life that Jesus has come to bring.

[27 : 09] Maybe you've thought Jesus' teachings were interesting or true. Maybe you even believe that he's from God, but you have never actually received the light that he has come to bring you.

Well, this shows you how you can, this shows us how you can receive the new birth. This shows us how you can receive the new life. On one hand, the message of Christianity is so simple that even a small child can understand it.

On the other hand, the message of Christianity is so deep that it will take you a lifetime, even an eternity, to plumb the depths of its wisdom. And so, my friends in this room who are have lots of degrees and who have lots of education, who are highly educated, do not miss the crystal clear simplicity of the gospel that is here in this passage.

Don't miss the crystal clear simplicity of what Jesus came to do and how we receive what he came to do for us. We are spiritually dead in our sins.

We are headed towards an eternity of perishing without God. but out of his great love for us, because God so loved the world, because he so loved you, he came and exchanged places for us, with us, by being lifted up on the cross.

[28 : 37] At the cross, Jesus experienced everything that you and I deserved, judgment and death, that we could experience everything that he deserves, new life.

God's judgment so we can receive God's acceptance. He received God's wrath so we can experience God's peace. He received God's absence so that we can receive God's presence, and he received eternal death so that you and I can experience eternal life.

And all you have to do, just like the people in Numbers chapter 21, all you have to do is look to him, to believe in him and to trust him. And what that means is that when you look to the cross, you believe and trust that what he did there, he did for you.

He did for you out of his great love for you. God so loved the world, he so loved you, that he gave his only son for you.

And when we see that, when we look to that, when we trust in that, we are not only given new life by the Holy Spirit, but we are brought into loving union with Christ.

[29 : 49] In fact, it is our union with Christ, it is our union with Jesus that brings about the new life given to us by the Spirit. Ephesians chapter 2, this passage that we read earlier that talks about us being dead and our trespasses and sins, after it talks about us being spiritually dead, says this in the next verse, because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive even

when we were dead in our transgressions, and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms.

Made alive together with Christ, seated with him, raised with him. It is through our union with Christ that we experience the new birth, that we experience new life, love.

And it is through our union with Christ, given to us by the Holy Spirit, that we experience God's love. And so this is where we see that the new birth isn't just about spiritual experience in general, but it is about eternal life that brings us into loving union with Jesus.

It's about eternal life through loving union with Christ, and it is wonderfully and beautifully Trinitarian. It's the love of God the Father revealed to us in Christ the Son, given to us, applied to us by the Holy Spirit and received in faith.

And this makes the new birth immensely practical. It shows us how to receive the new birth if we're not a Christian, and it also shows us how the new birth affects us even if we've been following Jesus for a long time, even if we came to faith a long time ago.

[31 : 44] Because the new birth isn't just a one-time moment that you use to check your get-to-heaven card. It isn't isolated from the rest of your life.

It actually is the very operating system that makes your entire Christian life possible. It is the seed that allows us to grow up into Christ-likeness.

It is the seed that allows us to grow as Christians. Just as we experience in conversion, we grow as Christians by receiving the love of God the Father through union with Jesus and the power of the Spirit.

The power of the Spirit. So to tie all this together, to tie all this together, conversion and the new birth, it's not about getting more religion. It's about receiving a new nature.

It's not something, it's not an experience that we control or manufacture, but it's a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. And it's not about spiritual life or spirituality in general, but eternal life through a loving union with Christ received by faith.

[32 : 56] Now, whatever happened to Nicodemus? John, here in John chapter three, actually just moves on. Like, the conversation just ends. And then he moves on to the next thing.

So we actually don't see Nicodemus' response. We don't see Nicodemus until John chapter 19. And John chapter 19 tells us that after Jesus died, that Joseph of Arimathea got permission from Pilate to receive the body of Jesus after he was crucified and after he died.

Joseph of Arimathea received the body of Jesus and placed the body of Jesus buried in his personal tomb. And who would come to the burial but Nicodemus?

John chapter 19 says that Nicodemus arrives on the scene at Jesus' burial and he brings with him 75 pounds of burial spices, myrrh and other spices.

75 pounds. This would have been incredibly expensive. This would have been incredibly extravagant for a burial. This would have been the only thing that would have been done for the burial of a king.

[34 : 13] This would be the sort of thing that would have been done not just for the burial of any one person, it would have been an act of worship. Somewhere between John chapter 3 and John chapter 19, something changed in how Nicodemus saw Jesus.

Somewhere along the way, Nicodemus realized that Jesus wasn't just a teacher, but that he was a king. Not just that he was sent from God, but that he was God.

So when did this happen? Well, we can't know for sure, we can only speculate, but I wonder if it was on that Saturday when Nicodemus went out to Golgotha where Jesus was being crucified, and I wonder if as he saw Jesus being crucified, suffering and dying, I wonder when he saw Jesus lifted up and suspended on the cross, I wonder if Nicodemus remembered back to his conversation at night when he told Nicodemus, just like Moses lifted up the bronze snake, the Son of Man must be lifted up.

And I wonder if he recalled those words and not only looked at Jesus, but believed in him for eternal life.

Now, that's just me speculating, we can't know for sure, maybe this change had already occurred weeks or months earlier, maybe like C.S. Lewis, it happened when Nicodemus wasn't even conscious that it was happening.

[35 : 50] We can't know for sure, in some ways it really doesn't matter, and in many ways that's not the point. The point is that at some time, Nicodemus understood that when Jesus was lifted up on

the cross, that it was for him.

It was out of his great love for him. Jesus was there out of his great love for Nicodemus. And it was that love that changed him.

It was that love that created a new heart and a new spirit. And it was that same love that changed C.S. Lewis. It was the same love that gave him a new heart and a new spirit and a new life.

And it is the same love for us that changes us, that regenerates our hearts and gives us a new spirit and gives us new life.

Let's pray together. Father in heaven, thank you that you have revealed your love in Jesus Christ on the cross and you allow us to experience the new birth by giving us new hearts.

[37 : 03] Help us to not miss the simplicity of the gospel that you so love the world, that you exchanged places with us on the cross, that whoever looks to you, whoever believes in you, shall not perish but have eternal life.

Amen.