

# Rebirth

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning again. Welcome again to those who are joining us for the first time. We have one final Sunday to remember and celebrate Christmas. Some of you know I'm from North Carolina and our license plates all say first in flight. And there's a reason for that. It's because in December 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright made the first sustained, powered, controlled flight in human history in the dunes at Kitty Hawk on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Now, this was a major event.

No one in history had ever accomplished this, and it's clear to us looking back that this event changed everything. The ability to traverse the globe physically connected our world in ways that went beyond anything anyone could have imagined at the turn of the 20th century. But here's the thing.

At that time, almost no one cared. No one cared. Their hometown newspaper in Dayton, Ohio, thought it was so insignificant they didn't even report on it. It wasn't worth the ink in the paper to print. At the turn of the 20th century, all of the educated people and all of the most respected national newspapers like the New York Times were openly skeptical that human beings could ever actually achieve flight. So when they heard this story stirring, they assumed this is just a handful of nobodies in a remote town making outlandish claims. Story not even worth telling. And that is not unlike the events of the first Christmas. There were no front page articles, no press conferences. Most of the world had no idea anything was amiss. The people who did hear something assumed this is probably just a handful of nobodies in a remote town making outlandish claims. Only later did it start to become clear that something significant had occurred. In fact, something extraordinary had happened. It was something that would go on to change the world. And that only became clear when a new kind of community began to emerge. Here's a letter from the second century AD that describes this new community.

The writer says, Christians are indistinguishable from other people either by nationality, language, or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own or speak a strange dialect or follow some outlandish way of life. With regard to dress, food, and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in. And yet, there is something extraordinary about their lives.

[ 3 : 12 ] They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them, their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their tables, but not their beds. They live in the flesh, but they're not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. In many ways, this new community, these Christians, were indistinguishable from other people. They blended into the culture. They had normal jobs.

They had typical families. And yet, there was something extraordinary about their lives. Something had happened that transformed these people to make them into something new.

So the question before us is, what was it? What happened? And in Titus chapter 3, Paul gives us the answer. In short, these are people who have been reborn. They have been reborn.

And when we talk about being reborn, we're really talking about three things. The dawning of a new perspective, the gaining of a new identity, and then the joining of a new community. So a new perspective, a new identity, and a new community. Let's pray, and we'll look at these words together.

Our Heavenly Father, as you have come to be with us, what we celebrate at Christmas, so now we believe that you dwell with us, that you are Emmanuel. You are God with us. So now we ask, Lord, not because we deserve it, but because of your grace, that you would illuminate your word for us,

that you would speak to our hearts in ways that we desperately need to hear this morning. And we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. A new perspective. Titus, if you're not familiar, a lot of people have never even heard a sermon on the book of Titus. It's a little book, one of Paul's pastoral epistles.

[ 5 : 27 ] Titus is a man who served as a bishop, the first bishop, over a network of churches in Crete. And Paul had left him in charge. And so this letter is something that Paul wrote later to encourage Titus in his ministry. And Crete was a challenging place. It was a lot of upheaval. It was a lot of animosity. Cretans had a bad reputation for all kinds of reasons, some of it justified.

And so it was a kind of rough area. And Titus's job is not an easy one. He has to oversee these churches in this very challenging sort of crossroads for the Mediterranean.

In verse 3, Paul reflects on his earlier life. And he says this, For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others, and hating one another.

Now, he could very easily be describing any of his Cretan neighbors. That was probably a pretty apt description. There was a lot of animosity, a lot of infighting. It was a hotbed for rebellion against the government. There was a lot of hatred to go around. The thing we need to recognize, though, is that Paul is talking about himself. And at first, this seems like a fairly harsh self-assessment. Most people, if you said that this was their background, would probably be offended by today's standards. We also need to remember that Paul had probably been one of the most respected, upstanding people in his day. Paul had devoted himself to living an upright and a pure and a righteous life. He had memorized vast sections of the Old Testament. He was a rising star in the religious world. And yet, this is what he says about his past. And what we realize is this, at some point, the Apostle Paul, before he was the Apostle Paul, when he was still the Pharisee Saul, began to look under the surface. He began to self-reflect. He began to look under all of the religiosity, all of the performative righteousness, all of the virtue signaling that characterized the culture of the religious leaders. And he began to actually see and admit the truth about himself love. And so, in this moment, he's saying, essentially, you know, Titus, when I look inside, when I looked inside, I saw a lot of things that I'm not very proud of.

And to be honest, as much as I like to seem in control, there were passions and desires in me that I had no control over. And if I'm being totally honest, they controlled me. And my best hope was just to hope that nobody found out. And then I saw other things. I saw envy. I saw resentment.

[ 8 : 33 ] Maybe when he looked at other people who were further ahead in their careers, but younger. People who got more respect. People who got more recognition. And he says, and then I saw anger.

And then I saw hatred. I saw all of this when I looked inside. And Paul looks inside. He begins to realize that there is this disconnect between the outward persona that he projects into the world and the inner reality. And he began at some point to realize the truth about himself that inside, he was spiritually dead, which is a way of saying spiritually helpless and unable to change.

All of those years of religious study had done nothing to curb those passions. And once Paul realized that, Christmas began to take on a whole new meaning.

This man had persecuted Christians, dragged them out of their homes, arrested them for the things they said about Jesus. But once he began to realize the truth about himself, he began to realize the truth about Christmas. Here's how he talks about it in verse 4.

You ask the Apostle Paul, what happened on Christmas? Paul says in verse 4, that's when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared. The goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, and he saved us. See, Paul realizes God has sent his goodness and loving kindness in the flesh. He realizes Jesus is God's goodness. Jesus is God's loving kindness in the flesh. And that changes everything in Paul's life. And see, this is how Christian rebirth begins.

[ 10 : 22 ] It begins with a new perspective that we gain on ourselves. If you read the conversion stories of people all throughout history, whether it's people in ancient history like St. Augustine or a little more recent, people like John Newton, people like C.S. Lewis, people like Lee Strobel or Lacey Mosley, Jackie Hill Perry, all the conversion stories that are out there for us to read and ponder.

You'll notice that they're different in lots of ways, but they all, if people are honest, they all have at least one thing in common, and that is that at some point, before these people came to faith, their perspective changed. All these people I mentioned started out thinking fairly certainly about themselves as being good, self-sufficient, decent people. These are all people who thought, on

balance, I'm probably one of the good guys. Upper 50%, at least, if not upper 25% of human beings. And then these people started to look inside.

And with the help of the Holy Spirit, they began to see the truth about themselves. And this is the thing we need to realize. Only when we see the truth about ourselves, only then will Christmas become something more than just a sentimental holiday.

Only when we realize the truth about ourselves will we realize the truth about what actually happened on that first night. But that means something very challenging. That means admitting that our only hope is to be rescued. It means admitting our powerlessness, that we need someone to save us. And I don't know about you, but that runs against everything in my being. And it runs against everything in our culture. Because we live in a culture that defines adulthood, that defines success as self-sufficiency. We live in a culture that prioritizes and is obsessed with self-optimization. You know the Cambridge Dictionary Word of the Year for this past year? The word manifest. Now, it's not the older use of the word manifest. It's the newer use of the word manifest. It's a word that's been popularized by gurus and celebrities.

The concept is manifesting. It's a new age concept that if I know the things that I want in my life, I can focus on those things and send them like vibrations out into the universe, and that if I do that successfully, the universe, whatever that means, will return those things to me, that I can manifest the life that I want. So we live in a culture where people actually believe that they can control reality with their minds. The truth is, we are spiritually helpless.

Now, that's the opposite message. That's the opposite message. So one of them is true, and one of them is not. The truth is, we need someone to save us. And this is what Jesus came to do by offering us not just a sentimental holiday, but a new identity. That's what Paul means when he talks about the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

[13:53] The Holy Spirit begins to work in you, begins to regenerate you, begins to illuminate the truth about yourself to you. And then you begin to see the truth of the gospel. You begin to see that God saves us, not because we deserve it, but because of his mercy. And then we are baptized. This is what Titus almost certainly has in mind when he talks about the washing of regeneration.

And in baptism, our old identity is washed away. And we are given a new identity. Paul says, heirs according to the hope of eternal life. And you need to understand this new identity is something that God has promised his people for centuries. It's what people have been waiting on.

And we actually see a beautiful reference to it in our Old Testament reading for this morning. Listen to what God says. Behold, the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth. Say to the daughter of Zion, behold, your salvation comes. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him. And they shall be called, here's the new identity, the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord. And you shall be called, sought out, a city not forsaken.

That's what the new identity means. It means that no matter what you've done, no matter who you were, no matter what used to be true about you, when you come to faith, when you're baptized, you are no longer that person. God has renamed you. And from here on out, you shall be called holy, redeemed, sought out. Now imagine how different your life would be if these were the things that you rooted yourself in, if these were the things that you most believed to be true about you. How much easier would it be to admit your mistakes or to receive criticism if your identity was rooted in the truth that you have been made holy?

[16:13] All of your defensiveness, all of your self-justification would evaporate. You know, if you're rooted in that, then you're more likely, if somebody criticizes you, instead of defending and justifying yourself, your response is probably going to be, you don't know the half of it. You think that's the worst thing about me?

Man, I could tell you some stories. But I've been made holy. Not because I deserve it. I clearly don't. But because God is that kind of God. How much easier would it be to forgive other people, to seek reconciliation, if our identity was rooted in being redeemed? If that was your name, I'm redeemed. If the deepest truth about you is that the God of the universe paid an unimaginable price to forgive you and to purchase you, how could you not forgive somebody for whatever trifle they committed against you? And imagine just for a minute how different our lives would be if the thing that we most believed to be true about ourselves was this, you are sought after.

You're sought after. In Jane Austen's book, Persuasion, I think it's her last book, a woman named Anne is engaged to Captain Wentworth, but her family and friends persuade her to break it off. Can't imagine anybody doing that kind of thing. But they break it off. If you know anything about our

background, same thing happened to Laura and me. That's a different sermon. But in Jane Austen's book, they break off the engagement. They don't think he's a good enough social standing for her. It's a more practical decision to marry somebody else. And then years go by. Years go by. And she can't stop thinking about him. And she's still in love with him. And no matter what happens, her heart remains firmly turned in his direction. But she assumes that he's angry. She assumes that he resents her. She assumes all the worst things. And at the pivotal moment in the book, she is at a writing desk. She's been over her writing desk. And she discovers a letter that he has left for her. And she opens the letter. And here's a section of that letter.

[ 18 : 36 ] This is from Captain Wentworth to her after over eight years. He says, I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach.

You pierce my soul. I'm half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone forever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you.

And Anne can hardly breathe, let alone speak. There's a kind of agony in her. There's a joy that is so overwhelming it almost breaks her. And also a remorse for all of the time that they could have been together that has been lost. And this realization that she is still and perhaps always has been, the sole object of Wentworth's undying affection fills her with an overpowering joy.

And I would submit to you that that is just a glimpse, just the faintest glimmer of what God has in mind when he looks at us and says, you are sought after.

Now, this is one of the most famous passages in all of Austin's writing. And I think that one of the reasons it's so famous is because it resonates with us. And I think the reason it resonates is because somewhere deep down, this is what all human beings long for. This is what we all want to hear.

[ 20 : 34 ] Deep down, I think we're all longing for someone to tell us, you are sought after. I think that's why we strive for the things that we strive for. Now, men and women, we may do this differently.

We may feel it and experience it differently. But I think this is why we strive for success at work and for attention and recognition and approval and affirmation, the attention of other people. I think this is the reason we long for these things. I think it's because deep down, we know that this is what we were made for. And here's what the gospel says.

Long ago, humans were in relationship with a God, but we broke it off because we thought our lives would be better. It was a very practical decision. We could make our own decisions about where we want to go and how we want to live. But God never stopped loving us. And the gospel says that God's goodness and loving kindness has now appeared. And we got more than a letter. We got God in the flesh.

And that God has come to say, I have loved none but you. I have always loved you. And he has come to offer himself for those who would receive him. And so in this way, we see that when we begin to gain that new perspective on our hearts, that begins to shift how we see Christmas and we begin to realize that Christmas is actually telling us that the thing that we're most longing for has happened. The God who made us and loved us has been seeking after us and now he's here. And when that realization hits you, and for some of us, it is the slow dawning of dusk turning to day. For others, it is like an earthquake.

But however that realization hits you, when it does, your identity completely changes. But the problem is that new identity in us is very, very, very fragile.

[ 22 : 40 ] And so we need the support of a community to sustain it. The new identity is fragile. It is so easy to come to faith, to receive this new identity, to have a few days of, or a few weeks, or maybe a year of feeling on top of the world. I see this a lot with people who come to faith. They come to faith and they're exhilarated for a season. But then there's a kind of falling off of the excitement.

And people tend to forget very quickly. We tend to go back to living the way we used to live, as though nothing happened. Just as a child needs the love and support of a family, a Christian needs the love and support of a church. We're not designed to live out of this new identity in a vacuum.

And this is why the bulk of this letter is Paul instructing Titus to do everything he can to safeguard this community so this new identity of God's people will be protected and nurtured and strengthened. Verse 1, remind them of these things. Verse 8, insist on these things. Verse 9, avoid

unprofitable controversies that will distract from these things. Paul's saying, you have no idea how precious this is. Your job as a pastor, your job as a bishop is to do everything you can to do to safeguard that in your community. And he says, you know, there may even be some situations where someone in the community represents such a threat to this new culture. They represent such a threat to this new way of life that they need to be removed. There may be a situation where somebody is living so against these truths that they need to be removed, hopefully temporarily. You know, verses 10 and 11 refer to a situation where someone's behavior is so harmful and divisive that for the good of the whole, that person needs to be removed. Now, whenever this is done, it is always done with a hope and the prayer that that person will be restored to the community, that they will repent. This is referring in many cases to what we call these days church discipline. This may sound harsh to people if you've never heard any reference to this before. But imagine you're an alcoholic and you're trying to get sober after years and years and years of addiction. And you go to an AA meeting hoping to find support from other people who are doing the same thing. They're committed to the same journey of freedom as you are.

And imagine someone shows up to that AA meeting not long after you start, and that person claims to be in recovery. They claim to be sober just like you, but they bring a big cooler of beer with them to the AA meeting. And they start handing out beers to everybody in the meeting while they're talking about their story of sobriety. Right? You'd pull that person aside and you'd say, hey, this isn't in line with the journey of freedom that all these people are on. You're actually doing something that's actually going to get people moving in the other direction. You're putting people at risk of going back into slavery. And after again and again and again admonishing that person, please don't keep doing this. If they kept doing it, you would have no choice. For the good of the group, you would say, hey, until you're serious about sobriety, you can't come to this meeting. And what we need to understand is that the church is that kind of place. The church is a place for people who are serious about spiritual transformation, who have looked at that old life and have said, I don't want that anymore.

I don't want the slavery to those desires. I don't want the slavery to those passions. I don't want the slander. I don't want the bitterness. I don't want the false accusations. I don't want the misinformation. I don't want all the ways people talk about each other behind each other's backs and assume the worst about their motives and say horrible things about them.

[ 26 : 37 ] I don't want all of the conflict and all of the bitterness. I want to live out of a new identity. I want to live out of the reality that I'm holy, that I'm redeemed, that I'm sought after. And I want to be around people who are going to encourage me to stay rooted in that because everyone else in my life is trying to pull me back to the way I used to be, and I want to be free. So the church is a place for people who are serious about spiritual transformation, who are serious about learning how to live out of a new identity, people who want to know what life looks like when we're rooted in the truth that we really are all of these things.

Now, that doesn't mean that the church is full of perfect people. That's very important to understand. Sometimes you hear people say, well, I don't go to church because it's full of hypocrites. You know, that's like saying I don't go to the gym because there's people who are out of shape there. I don't like going to the hospital because there are some sick people in the hospital. You would only want to go to a gym where there's fit people or a hospital where there's well people? I don't think so. Why does a gym exist? Why is the hospital even there?

It exists for the people who need it. It's the same as a church. A church exists because, hey, in different ways, we are all hypocrites. There's just people who have the guts to admit it and the people who don't and the people who like to pretend we can control the universe with our minds. The church is a place for people who are serious about spiritual transformation. Doesn't mean it's full of perfect people. Quite the opposite. But it means if you're somebody who wants to be free, who wants to live out of a new identity, wants to know that you're holy and redeemed and sought after, that's where you need to be. And what we see in this passage, last thing we want to look at is that when you have a church full of people like this, they look like what we see in verses one and two. I mean, just look at this just snapshot. These are the people who make the most ideal citizens wherever they live because they have a very balanced view of politics. That would be really helpful in the coming weeks. These are people who engage. They vote their conscience, maybe even run for office. They're willing to submit to the local authorities.

Now, people in Crete were very likely to try to overthrow the government. Most cases, they don't do that. They submit. On the other hand, they don't worship the local authorities. There's a big cult of emperor worship in Crete and other places. So they don't worship and idealize their political leaders. They don't demonize their political leaders. They know that they're just normal, sinful people like everybody else. They vote, they engage, they move on. They seek the common good. He says they're always ready to do good work. They're very careful to use their words in ways that build others up. They never use words in ways that tear people down either to their face or behind their back. They're peacemakers.

[ 29 : 43 ] They're reconcilers. They assume the best about other people and their motives. When there's a vacuum of information and they don't know what's going on, they assume the best about everyone involved. They treat everyone with dignity and respect. And I got to say, wherever churches like this are located, those neighborhoods benefit. Those cities benefit. All of the residents benefit, regardless of whether they ever darken the door of that church. And Paul says, we got to safeguard that.

So as this Christmas season comes to a close, as we take down the lights, as we sweep up our pine needles, as we make our resolutions, the question remains, what do the events of the first Christmas mean for us personally? Was it just a handful of nobodies in a remote town making outlandish claims?

Or are we open to the possibility that the goodness and loving kindness of God has actually appeared? That now it is possible for us to be reborn, to become something altogether new, to know that the thing most true about us is that we are holy, that we are redeemed, and that we are sought after. Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we thank you for the truth at the heart of this. And know that this is a truth that has to be spiritually pressed into our hearts for it to change us. And so we pray that as we continue in our prayers, in our confession, and as we gather around your table, that we would encounter you, the God who wrote these words for us, now that you have kindled a hope in us, be true to your word, and meet us, those of us who open ourselves to you, with a fresh realization of what these things mean for us. We pray this for our good, in your glory, in your Son's name. Amen.