

The Holy Spirit....Converts

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome once again to our service, a chance for us to sing together, a chance for us to hear God's words, to pray together that we might be encouraged to be reminded of our God.

I want to begin with words that we'll come back to later on from Ezekiel chapter 36, one of those passages in the Old Testament that point us to the hope of the new covenant in Ezekiel 36 and verse 24.

Here is the promise of God through the prophet Ezekiel. For I will take you out of the nations. I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.

I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

[1 : 1 5] You will live in the land I gave your forefathers. You will be my people and I will be your God. There are some wonderful promises from God for us that come true for us in the gospel, in the coming of Jesus.

And now we're going to continue our study in the Holy Spirit and his work in the lives of his people. And we're going to look at Jesus and his encounter with Nicodemus in John chapter 3.

We'll read from verse 1 to verse 15 and concentrate on the first 10 verses to see what we learn about the Holy Spirit and the new birth.

So let's again hear God's word together. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

He came to Jesus at night and said, In reply, Jesus declared, How can a man be born when he is old? Nicodemus asked.

[2 : 3 5] Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered, I tell you the truth. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

How can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth. We speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen.

But still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

[3 : 39] Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

So today we are going to think about the Holy Spirit and the new birth. And we are going to begin with a comparison. So Jesus is talking with Nicodemus and he leads the conversation around to the kingdom of God.

And particularly how does a person become a citizen of God's kingdom? So it might be helpful for us to compare to how a person can become a citizen of the United Kingdom.

So there are two main ways, basically. One, you can be born here to UK parents. Or you can apply for citizenship, in which case you have to meet a number of criteria.

You have to be able to pass certain tests and you have to pay some money. Now, the whole Bible and the words of Jesus show that neither of these are how it works when it comes to God's kingdom.

[4 : 56] We are not citizens of God's kingdom because of where we are born. Coming from a so-called Christian country does not make us part of God's kingdom.

Being born into a religious, to a church family is an advantage, certainly, because we get to hear the truth. But it does not make us automatically citizens of God's kingdom.

Nor is the way in through having a set of religious rules to meet. There are not certain moral tests to pass or some sacrifice that we have to pay for entry.

That's not how it works in God's kingdom. So then, how can you and I enter and enjoy life in God's kingdom? And that's where we need to think about the Holy Spirit and the new birth and Jesus' words here.

And again, what we've seen in the last few weeks is that there is no spiritual life outside of union with Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth and the life.

[6 : 03] And it's new birth then, as we'll see, that creates spiritual life that makes faith in Jesus possible. And to receive this new birth requires the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, transforming us, uniting us by faith to Jesus who is our life.

So to be a citizen of God's kingdom, you and I need the work of the Holy Spirit to apply salvation to our hearts, to unite us to Jesus by faith.

We need the new birth. So as we look at this conversation briefly, I want us to notice three things. First of all, they're all about the new birth. First, it's about new sight, not adjusted lenses.

There is a sense in which the new birth teaching can be unsettling for us. And one of the ways it can be unsettling is that it exposes our hopeless condition.

Left to ourselves, we are in a hopeless condition. And a prime example of that is somebody like Nicodemus. Now, who is Nicodemus?

[7 : 15] Well, according to our reading in verse 1 and 2, we see some important things about Nicodemus. First of all, he's a Pharisee. And that means we know that he is someone who is highly religious.

He is a model of morality. You would want him to be your neighbour. We're also told he is a member of the Jewish ruling council. So he is highly respected.

He is part of the religious elite. And we see, too, that he has a positive view of Jesus. He calls him a teacher. And he appreciates that the teaching of Jesus and the miracles of Jesus are evidence that he has been sent from God.

Not saying he's the son of God, but saying he's been sent from God. So he has a high view of Jesus. And yet, how does Jesus speak to him in verse 3? Jesus says, In other words, Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, spiritually Nicodemus, you are blind.

You are in the dark. It's interesting, John records that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, which is symbolic of his spiritual darkness and lack of understanding at this point.

[8 : 38] So when it comes to the new birth, we need to appreciate this is not like making a trip to the opticians. Where we're talking, we're saying, well, you know, I get a bit fuzzy vision around the edges or I've been looking at a screen or doing work for a while.

I get tired eyes and the optician gives you a new prescription and your lenses get adjusted slightly. That's not the message for Nicodemus.

You know, be a little bit more religious, be a little bit more good. No, despite all his religious effort, despite his goodness, Nicodemus, Jesus says, is blind. And so you and I, whoever we are, we need the work of the Holy Spirit to give to us this new birth, that we might be born again, that we might be born from above.

So that we could sing with John Newton, I once was blind, but now I see. How does that happen? It's the gift of God's amazing grace.

We need the work of the Holy Spirit to see Jesus as more than. More than just a good teacher and more than a healer and a doer of good works.

[9 : 54] We need the new birth to hear and believe the whole testimony of John in the gospel that he has written, that we would believe in Jesus and that by believing we would have life in him, in his name.

So even at this stage, and we're early on in John's gospel, you read the first three chapters, you discover Jesus is the word who is God, who is the supreme revelation of God.

And we're told that the only way you can be a child of God is by faith in Jesus. John records for us, John the Baptist words, that Jesus is the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world.

And Jesus has just declared in chapter two that he is the true temple. That if you want access to God, if you want to be in God's presence, then you need to come through him.

So we need the new birth to give us new sight so we see Jesus as more than. But then on the flip side, we need the new birth to see ourselves as less than.

[11 : 03] Because spiritually we tend to be proud and self-reliant. And so there is the lie of legalism that we can buy into.

Where we think, well, I can be good enough for God. I can work hard enough to earn God's approval. So we try and get to God without coming through Christ, which is a dead end.

Or there is the corruption of comparison that comes. Where we're looking around and saying, well, I'm better than most. So I must be okay.

And we fail to compare with the sinless perfection of our God. So we need the work of the Spirit to open our eyes to spiritual reality.

Following on from that, the new birth and the teaching on the new birth shows that we need new life, not new religion.

[12 : 07] So Nicodemus, we've been introduced to Nicodemus. He's a man with lots of spiritual knowledge. But as this conversation with Jesus develops, we are led to understand that he cannot see and he cannot understand the truth that Jesus is sharing.

And one of the things that Jesus does is he says that the Old Testament points to the same truth that Jesus points to, that people must be born again. To enter the kingdom of God requires a work of God.

Now, what is the kingdom of God? Again, remember, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus as an Old Testament teacher. So let's think about the Old Testament and what it says about the kingdom of God.

The prophets, they spoke from God of a future day coming when a son of King David would come and he would set up his kingdom.

He would come as the servant of the Lord. Indeed, he would come as the Lord himself and he would establish an everlasting kingdom. And that kingdom would promise eternal life with God to those who would receive it.

[13 : 22] So then the question is, well, how do I get that? How do I become a citizen of that kingdom to enjoy life with God forever so that I'm gladly following God's king?

And the message from the Old Testament, the message of Jesus is that we need new spiritual life, not some more religion.

To be born again requires a new creation to take place. The same power that created the world, God needs that same power to make us new.

So this is not speaking about some moral adjustment to our religion. This is speaking about a radical new power, the power of God entering into our hearts and lives.

This is not about trying harder. It speaks to us of complete corruption. Therefore, we need complete renewal. We need an overhaul, not some minor tweaks and little adjustments.

[14 : 26] And it's important for us to recognise. Jesus says to Nicodemus, you should know this. You're a teacher of the Old Testament, so you should know this.

This isn't some new thing that Jesus is bringing. This is Old Testament truth. In verse 7, he says, you shouldn't be surprised at my saying you must be born again. And when Nicodemus says in verse 9, how can this be?

Jesus says, you're Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things? So let's think about the new birth speaks about new life and not new religion.

Verse 5, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit. Now, where in the Old Testament do water and spirit come together?

Well, we read at the beginning key verses, central verses that bring these two concepts together. New covenant hope, Ezekiel 36, 24 and 28.

[15 : 29] Answering the question, how can God's people be in God's place and join his rule and blessing? That's what's set up in verse 24. In verse 25 that we read, there needs to be a sprinkling, a washing with water.

The stain of sin, our moral and spiritual impurity must be dealt with. We must be washed clean of our idols and our idolatry.

Those people and things that we look to for value and meaning and significance and security. So we need to be washed. The stain of our sin must be removed.

And then in verse 26, we discover we need a new heart and a new spirit. We need a new life. We need new desires. We need new power. Indeed, we need a new heart.

We need a spiritual heart transplant. That God must take our stone heart, which is beating and pumping physically, but which is dead and cold to the beauty of Jesus and the truth of God.

[16 : 36] That needs to be replaced with a heart of flesh. One that allows us to hear the gospel as good news. One that allows us to believe, to see and to be changed by the beauty of God in the face of Jesus.

To see the holiness and the goodness of God. To see ourselves as sinners in need of salvation. We need that change of heart. Because it's only when we have a new heart that we will ever put our faith in Jesus.

How does that happen? How does this new life, how does this new desire come to us? Verse 26 tells us God puts his spirit in us with the result that, verse 28, you will be my people and I will be your God.

It needs a whole new life. Spiritual life. So in verse 6 in John chapter 3, Jesus says, Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit.

We are born physically and we must be born spiritually. And we need the spirit to give us that new life. To give us new birth so that we are united by faith to Jesus who is the resurrection and the life.

[18 : 02] One of the things this reminds us, if we're Christians, is that every testimony is amazing.

Every person who is a Christian has a wonderful story of the miracle of grace and new birth at work in our hearts.

Even if you feel your story is ordinary, boring and routine perhaps. You know, born into a Christian family, trusted in Jesus at a young age, never went off the rails, lived a wild, rebellious life and had to be sort of come back like the prodigal.

The truth is, we were all spiritually dead. We were all following, not Jesus, but the devil.

We were all God's enemies. But now we are made alive. Now we are reconciled to God.

[19 : 13] Now we are children of God. And that's all by grace. And that all gives glory to God. So every testimony is wonderful.

And we should be thankful, whatever our story is. And then before we move on, if you're not a Christian and you're tuning in this evening, we're really glad to be able to share the teaching of Jesus with you.

It's really important to understand that to enjoy life with God, to enjoy God's love, God's presence with you now, and with the hope of eternal life, perfect life forever in the future that lasts for all eternity.

It's so important that you understand that you can't do that by yourself. You cannot earn the favour of God.

Faith in Jesus is a gift that comes from God. New life is a gift that comes from God.

[20 : 22] Therefore, what all of us need to do, what you need to do if you're not Christians, you need to ask God for that gift. You need to trust that Jesus died on the cross for your sin to give you salvation.

You need to believe that Jesus is the way back to God and the life that you were made for. You need to pray and ask that he would be Lord and Saviour.

One last thing to say about the new birth. And it's this, that God's power is experienced, not simply observed in our lives.

Now, I think we know that there is a world of difference between being a spectator and being a participant. Think about dinner time. You may or may not have had your dinner yet, but you go to the dinner table if you're fortunate enough that someone else prepares a meal for you.

So there's a plate of food there on the table, but at that point you're simply a spectator. You're savouring the smell, you're enjoying the sight. But it doesn't become good to you.

[21 : 40] It doesn't make a difference until you become a participant, until you eat and enjoy. Just like there's a huge difference between watching a game being played and actually playing the game yourself.

Now, Nicodemus, up until this point in his story, he is a spectator. He is observing Jesus on the sidelines. He's seen Jesus' miracles.

He hears Jesus' teaching. He is seeing, but not fully seeing. And he is not participating, enjoying the life in the kingdom of God.

That will change for him, we discover. But not yet. But here's what Jesus says. The new birth, as it were, changes our point of view.

So that we move from the outside to being on the inside. We move from being spectators to being participants in the kingdom of God. So that now we are able to believe and receive Jesus and his good news.

[22 : 39] And again, how does that change happen? It comes through the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit that transforms us. So in verse 8, Jesus draws a comparison.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

So we can see, can't we, the power of the wind. So when I look out the window, I can see the tree. The leaves on the trees are blowing. The washing line is billowing.

Our little tennis net is falling over. Because it's fairly windy at the moment. But we cannot control or direct the wind. And then we apply that to the new birth.

And it helps us to understand that the new birth, this gift of new light, is totally a gift of God. God is absolutely free in how he works and how he gives that gift.

[23 : 41] We cannot control or manipulate God. The power of the Holy Spirit is essential to this process. Now how does the Holy Spirit work? The Holy Spirit, through his word, through the Bible, that the Holy Spirit inspired.

He then opens our eyes so that we see the truth. The Holy Spirit invades our hearts. So he gives new sight and he gives new life to us.

So that we can see and understand. I am a great sinner. That by myself, I only deserve God's judgment.

But I can see Jesus is a great saviour. And God, in his love, has sent Jesus to rescue me and restore me to life with God.

The life I was made to enjoy. And it's the power of the Holy Spirit that transforms us. So that from beginning to end of the Christian life, we are depending on God's powerful Holy Spirit, uniting us to Jesus, who is for us true life.

[24 : 56] So this is good news. And Jesus is reminding us again that on the one hand, salvation is narrow. Salvation is only by faith in Jesus.

And it's only by grace. It's not something we work for. But salvation is also broad. You see, if Jesus told Nicodemus, well, all you need to do is complete these two other tests and you'll be accepted.

Then we would have a message that faith in God, knowing God, was just for the super moral or super religious. But that's not what Jesus says.

The gift of grace is open to anyone. Because salvation is based entirely on the work of Christ, his completed work in his perfectly obedient life, his perfect sacrifice on the cross and his perfect resurrection victory.

We can have security and peace when we are in Jesus, whoever we are, whatever our paths. That's good news.

[26 : 12] It's good news to recognise God, by his Spirit, can do what you and I can't. Left to ourselves, we would always be in a hopeless condition.

But God, in his love and his power, secures our place in God's kingdom. Secures our place in God's heart.

As the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus, the Son that God the Father loves. And that just as Jesus died to sin, so we are dead to sin.

Just as Jesus was raised to new life, so we too are raised to new life. And then just as every birth in the world is entry into a family.

So the gift of new birth brings us, by faith, into God's family.

[27 : 14] A place of belonging. A place of love and acceptance and welcome. Where God, Father, Son and Spirit are now yours.

They are now for you and for you forever. So how do we respond to this? Maybe today is the day you need to ask God that you would be born again.

That you would get this new sight. That you would get this new life by faith in Jesus. And if you're already a Christian, that you and I, that we would thank God.

And we would enjoy life today and this week. Knowing that we are children of God. Knowing that the Spirit continues to be at work in us.

Uniting us to Jesus, our life.