

New Beginning, New Birth (audio missing)

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[0 : 00] How many times have you been born? Might seem a silly question. What's he on about? Well, it wasn't a silly question as far as Jesus was concerned.

Look at verse 3 of the passage we just read. In reply, Jesus declared, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again, unless he has a second birth.

Now, like us, Nicodemus thought that was the strangest and the oddest thing to have said. Look at verse 4. How can a man be born when he is old?

Nicodemus asked. Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born. I mean, Jesus, can you be serious about this?

Have you seen the size of my mother? She's only four foot and look at me. Do you expect me to get inside her and be born again? What a daft thing to be saying.

[1 : 16] We all know we're only born once. But, according to Jesus, there are two kinds of birth. The first birth we all know about.

It's physical birth. And if you're a mother, you really do know what it's all about. That's what we've been celebrating this morning, isn't it? The physical birth of baby Elaine.

On the 31st of March this year, Elaine was born to Connor and Sarah. And so we've been giving thanks to God for this amazing and wonderful gift of life.

And all of us here, I hope, have a birthday that we remember. Mine was the 14th of December, so presents are still welcome.

Leave them at the door. But the point is simple. We all have had a physical birth. Otherwise, we wouldn't be sitting here right now.

[2 : 15] If you're in doubt about that, give yourself a little pinch. The second birth is a little different. It's spiritual birth.

And that's what we have been praying for Elaine. Elaine, that she would experience a second kind of birth. A spiritual birth. And that's the kind of birth Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about here.

And this new birth that we have been praying for Elaine is not just something for Elaine. I want us to see this morning how we can all experience new births, whoever we are and whatever age we are.

So, how can we be born a second time? What does it mean to be born again? Well, we must be born into the kingdom.

You see, we've got to understand what Nicodemus was on the search for. Like lots of people in life, he was searching for something. And he wanted to experience the kingdom of God.

[3 : 31] Look at verse 3 again. Jesus said, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Well, the kingdom of God, if that's a strange or a new phrase to you, it's the kind of world that we all long for.

We all long for a world of peace and justice. A world without sickness and suffering. A world where nobody dies anymore. Where there's no more hospitals.

No need of funeral homes. A life marked by love and kindness. Where there is the absence of all evil. Where everything is good and life is perfect.

And it's not just for a little time, but it's for all eternity. And everybody longs for that kind of world. That's the kingdom of God.

And that's what Jesus came into the world to establish. That's what we're celebrating at Christmas time. The reason Jesus came. So look at verse 2.

[4 : 38] Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night and he said, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.

You see, Nicodemus had been watching Jesus' life very closely. And he had seen Jesus do these amazing miracles. He had seen him heal the sick with just a touch. Controlling nature with just a word. Defeating satanic forces. And every time Jesus did one of these amazing miracles, he was giving everybody a little glimpse, a little picture of what life would be like inside his kingdom.

Where nature wouldn't go all wrong with tornadoes and earthquakes. Where nobody did get sick. And where there was no evil forces.

He was giving a picture into what life could be like. The kingdom that he came to create. Now Jesus says to Nicodemus in verse 3, If you want to see this kingdom, if you want to enter this kingdom and to have it for yourself, you must be born again.

[6 : 06] You've got to have a second birth. Now Nicodemus, as I've said, was really pretty much like us. He wanted to enter the kingdom.

And I'm sure if I asked each one of you, none of you would be saying, I don't want that. Bah humbug. No, of course you want it. We all want the kingdom of God.

And he thought he was going to get in. Because, look at verse 1, we're told he was a Pharisee. A member of the Jewish ruling council.

He was a very religious man. He read his Bible, always praying, always went to church, following God's rules very carefully, and on the lookout to make sure everybody else was doing the same. So if there was anybody who was going to enter the kingdom of God, well Nicodemus would, because he was a good religious guy. But, says Jesus, look what verse 3 says again.

[7 : 11] No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. And we're no different.

We all want this kingdom. In fact, we're so desperate for something that's different to this life, that we'll do all kinds of things to make sure we'll qualify.

Even if we're not religious at all, we'll try to live a good life and do good things. Just in case, somehow, it all adds up and it will help me to get to something better.

Or maybe we are religious. And maybe going to church, or to confession, or getting baptised, whether as a little person or a big person, or taking communion, or making our communion, whatever it may be, somehow, all of these things, God will look and say, hey, you're really good.

Come into my kingdom. But that's not what Jesus is saying. He says, none of these things, none of our self-effort, will get you into the kingdom.

[8 : 19] It's only by being born again. You've got to have a second birth. You see, Jesus is not talking about something natural. He's talking about something supernatural.

This isn't a physical birth. He's saying you need to have a spiritual birth. And he explains what that is in verse 5.

Look at the text in verse 5. Jesus said, or answered, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

That's the spiritual birth he's talking about. It's strange words. It's a bit foreign to us. He's saying we need to be born of water and the Spirit.

Well, what does that mean, to be born of water and the Spirit? I understand being born by my mother, but what does it mean to be born by water and the Spirit? Well, we're going to look at two passages in the Old Testament to help us understand it.

[9 : 28] It's really talking about us being made spiritually clean. So go back in your Bibles to Ezekiel. The page number is there. 868.

Ezekiel was a prophet who looked forward.

And in this section, well, in the two that we're going to look at, he's talking about the work of the Spirit of God, what he's going to do in people's lives, which ultimately brings about this spiritual birth.

So we're going to read chapter 36, verse 25. So here God promises what he will do when the Spirit comes.

Verse 25, he says, 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.

[10 : 39] And remember, an idol is anyone or anything that we make more important than God.

Verse 26, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from 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.

Verse 29, I will save you from all your uncleanness. So do you see what this new spiritual life is about?

God is promising that he is going to come to wash us, to clean us, and to purify us by, look at verse 25, by sprinkling clean water on you.

Now that doesn't mean your baptism will clean you. That doesn't mean that a shower is going to clean you. Well, it will clean you on the outside. No, this is talking about a deep inner cleaning on the inside.

[11 : 53] You see, the water is a symbol of the Spirit's cleansing power in our lives. That's why Jesus said to Nicodemus, you must be born of water and the Spirit.

You see, there's something that keeps us all out of God's kingdom. It's our sin. It's our failure. It's our mess. It makes us unclean and makes us impure.

And they keep us from entering into God's pure and perfect kingdom. You can't have something that's dirty and messy into something that's pure. But he says the Spirit will come.

And he's going to wash us and clean us and purify us on the inside so that we might be able to enter the kingdom of God.

So that's the first thing about being born spiritually. The second is similar and it comes in the next chapter of Ezekiel.

[12 : 58] You can see it there. Ezekiel 37, verses 4 to 6. Here we have an extraordinary picture, an amazing vision of a valley, a big, big valley, and it's covered in human bones, like an empty or an exposed graveyard.

And there's all these bones there. And Ezekiel, the prophet, is standing and God comes to him and we'll pick it up in verse 4. Then God said to Ezekiel, Prophecy to these bones and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones. I will make breath enter you and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin.

I will put breath in you and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord. Then down to verse 10.

So I prophesied as he commanded me and breath entered them. They came to life and they stood up on their feet a vast army.

[14 : 23] Now what an incredible picture. But you know what this picture is? It's a description of our life. We are those bones in the valley.

It's describing us as lifeless and as dead. And dead people can't make themselves alive again. And unless we are given spiritual life, we remain spiritually dead.

We remain people who are outside of God's kingdom. But what did we read here in this section? That God by his spirit would breathe life into these bones.

And they came to life. Now Connor and Sarah, you will well remember, and I'm sure many friends and family will remember those very first few days when Elaine was born.

She wasn't able to manage life by herself. Many people prayed for her. Elaine needed medical intervention.

[15 : 30] She needed to be placed in a special unit where she could get the oxygen that she needed. She needed that specialised care.

Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to live. Thankfully, she did. And we praise God for that. Well, just as Elaine needed medical intervention, what we need in our life is spiritual intervention.

We need God to breathe spiritual life into our lives. You see, without God, we are not able to make it on our own.

He's the one who resuscitates us. He's the one who gives us true life, spiritual life. And that happens when we hear God's word.

The Spirit of God takes God's word and he breathes life into us. Making us, as we said earlier, into a new creation.

[16 : 36] He makes us spiritually alive so that we can enter God's kingdom and enjoy God and live with him and be his children treasured and cared for by him.

So, if we are to enter the kingdom, we must be born into the kingdom. We must have a second birth.

We must be made spiritually clean and we must be made spiritually alive. Now, to bring this all together, we need to ask two big questions.

