

AM John 3:1-21 "You must be born again"

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Date: 23 January 2022

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- [0 : 0 0] So let's now turn together to the Word of God, and the reading this morning is from the Gospel of John, chapter 3. We're going to read through from verses 1 through to 21.
- So the Gospel of John, chapter 3, and from verse 1. A very well known, a very well beloved chapter, I'm sure. So from the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 1.
- And Jesus answered him, And Nicodemus said to him, And 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. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.
- [1 : 4 5] Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be? And 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 you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.
- And 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 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 the darkness rather than light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.
- [3 : 1 3] 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. Amen. Amen.
- We ask God to bestow his rich blessings upon the reading of his word to us here this morning. Friends, if you have your Bibles with you, it would be helpful to have them open at John chapter 3, as we look at what this chapter has to say to us this morning.
- I'm sure it's a very familiar chapter to many of you. I'm sure you've read it many times, or you have studied it maybe, or you've heard it preached before. It's a very well-known passage, and yet sometimes the well-known things are the things we need to go over again, because we can be a little bit too complacent sometimes when we think we know something well.

So we're really going to look together at the first half of the chapter as we consider what it means to be born again. So we're going to go back in time a little bit to the 18th century, and we're going to talk a little bit about a very famous preacher I'm sure many of you have heard of called George Whitefield.

If you like Banner of Truth books, he's on the spine of all their books. In fact, he's their main logo, so I'm sure you're very well aware of who he was. But he was, of course, a very famous preacher who lived during the 18th century, during a time known as the Great Awakening, which was a great revival which happened mostly in the American colonies, but also here in Europe, also during that time in history.

[4 : 52] Huge numbers of people were being moved powerfully by the Holy Spirit. They were being convicted of their sins, and then they were being filled with the joy of finding their salvation through Jesus Christ.

Whitefield was an Anglican cleric who travelled a lot during his ministry. He spent a lot of time in the colonies, in the Americas, preaching the gospel during this time of Great Awakening.

He was an amazingly gifted man, and it is estimated that over the course of his ministry, he preached at least 18,000 times to approximately 10 million people.

And he did all this in person. He often preached outside in the open. The crowds that gathered were too large often to fit indoors. So he would meet outside.

And at one event at Minchampton Common, down in Gloucestershire, it is estimated that 10,000 people had gathered to hear him preach. And of course, remember, these were the days before microphones, or megaphones, or sound systems, or hearing aid loop systems, any of these things.

[6 : 02] And yet his voice was so powerful that all these people who gathered could hear him preach. His friend, Benjamin Franklin, another famous character from history, once listened to him preach and estimated his voice was so powerful that 30,000 people would have been able to hear if they were gathered on a flat surface.

His voice was powerful, but even more powerful than his voice was the message that he preached. Time and time again, the gospel message rang out through this man's powerful voice, along with these words, you must be born again.

He preached this message so many times, but there's a famous story about a lady that comes up to him at one meeting asking him, why do you insist on preaching this message, on saying these words over and over again, you must be born again, to which Whitefield is supposed to have replied with simple phrase, because, madam, you must.

It's important to remember that, that we must be born again, because in our modern day, the phrase born again kind of has become a kind of cultural buzz phrase, hasn't it?

To be born again, to be a born again Christian means something slightly different than it maybe should mean. The outside world likes to categorize Christians.

[7 : 36] It has the born again Christians, the ones who are, maybe can be considered the zealots, the ones who are overly enthusiastic about their faith, who just love to share the gospel and get really excited about all matters of faith and religion.

They're also the ones who are more prone to be evangelistic, you know, to reach out into their communities. And then, they see the kind of normal Christians, you could say, the ones who keep to themselves, who don't do very much, who just, you know, they come to church on a Sunday and they just keep to themselves and they do their own thing and just try to be generally nice people.

But of course, the world is wrong. To be, there are no categories of Christian. There are just Christians and non-Christians. There's no stages of Christianity. There's no, like, different levels that you have to work towards.

It doesn't work like that. Because by definition, all Christians, all followers of Jesus are, of course, born again. We can't help it. It's just simply who we are.

Because becoming a Christian changes you. Something happens. You become different. You're not the same person you once were.

[8 : 51] Now, for some, that change is so intense, it's so powerful, that it's easily and quickly recognizable. And I think that's where the misconception comes from about when you're being born again as opposed to being a normal Christian.

But for others, the change can be slow, it can take time, maybe just little steps that are maybe hard to notice until you look back one day and consider many years and you think, goodness, how much I have changed over these years.

Whether the change is fast or slow, a change does occur. Think about your own experience of being born again, of becoming a Christian, if that indeed is where you're at.

What changes have you experienced in your life compared to how it was before you became a follower of Christ? Was your change a quick one? Or was it slow and steady?

Can you even see a change in your life? Can you even see a difference? Just consider that today as we consider what it means to be born again.

[10 : 11] So we're going to look at three things from John chapter 3. We're going to think of three statements. We're going to first as a question. That's how can these things be? Secondly, we're going to look at what it means to be born of the Spirit.

And thirdly, we're going to look at just simply the phrase, you must. So first then, how can these things be? Let's read from chapter 3, verse 1, where it reads, Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come 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? It's a very famous story, a very famous encounter, but it is, of course, not a chance encounter.

[11 : 26] Nicodemus, we are told, is a Pharisee. We know all about the Pharisees, we read them in the Gospels all the time. Ergo, he was an important man.

Nicodemus was an important man, he had high authority in the land in which he lived. He was a ruler of the Jewish people in some function or other.

He was a very important, a very important man indeed. He was a highly religious man, a highly powerful man. I'm sure he was a wealthy man too, we just don't know.

But, unlike many of his peers, he's different in some way. And he's different because he doesn't hate Jesus.

No, instead, he desired to speak with Jesus, perhaps to ask him questions, to learn from him. But, we wonder if he's still a little bit afraid.

[12 : 27] If he's concerned about what would happen to his reputation as a Pharisee, if his desire to talk to Jesus became public knowledge. So this is maybe one reason why he waited until the night to the darkness before he went out to see him.

Of course, darkness also has other connotations in John's writings. And often carries the idea of spiritual darkness or that of judgment.

So Nicodemus was currently in the darkness, both literally and also spiritually. His religious order, the Pharisees, sought to know God through the law and to keep themselves in his favour by their works.

But along the way, they had gotten lost and had fallen into darkness. But, Nicodemus is very different to many of his colleagues.

And it would appear also that he is not alone in this difference. Look at the words in which he says when he greets Jesus. He says, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.

[13 : 42] Interesting statement there. That one little word, we. It would appear that he wasn't alone amongst the Pharisees, that there were some others who didn't automatically hate Jesus and instead recognised his gifts and indeed his authority as a teacher.

Now, this is very evident by the way in which Nicodemus calls Jesus Rabbi. It was an important title. It was a, you know, it carried great honour along with it, this title.

But, it's interesting because I'm sure Nicodemus was very well aware that Jesus didn't have any formal training. You know, he didn't learn under a prestigious Rabbi, he didn't go to university and study how to be a teacher, any of these things, and yet, he recognises his authority as a teacher because of the things he had done, because of what he was doing.

And unlike his peers who often accused Jesus of having this power through Satan, being, you know, the evil powers and using that power to perform his acts, there were some among the Pharisees who apparently did indeed see the truth.

And there is, of course, an important lesson here for us this morning. Because we often are guilty of tarring people with the same brush. We see some bad Pharisees and there were bad ones, there were many bad ones, and we assume by that, that of course all of them were bad, that there couldn't have been a good one among them.

[15 : 18] Today, in our own context, we see some denominations and we see some clergy who are awful, and we think, goodness, that must mean that all of that denomination is the same, that they're all just as bad.

And people probably do the same with us, in our denomination or context as well, they probably look at us and go, goodness, I remember a bad minister from 30 years ago, they must all be like that.

It's just who we are in our fallen nature, isn't it, to make quick judgments like this. So just something to be aware of and for us to think about.

But Jesus' response is very odd to Nicodemus. Nicodemus has just given him high praise. Indeed, he's almost treating him as an equal, if not his superior.

But the way Jesus responds is very interesting and probably unexpected. We hear his response in verse 3, which reads, Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

[16 : 29] Jesus appears to be answering a question. He answered him, he replied. And the statement sounds like the answer to a question.

And yet, no question has been asked. Nicodemus hasn't asked anything yet. He simply walked up to Jesus, introduced himself, and given Jesus high praise. And yet, Jesus' first thing that he says is that you must be born again.

But let's just flick back quickly to the end of chapter 2 and read verses 23 to 25 through together where it reads, Now, when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.

but Jesus, on his part, did not entrust himself to them because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man for he himself knew what was in man.

Nicodemus didn't need to ask the question because Jesus, I'm sure, already knew what he was going to ask and he also knew what it was he needed to hear those powerful words.

[17 : 46] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Remember how Nicodemus began his statement in the plural saying, Jesus, we know.

Well, now Jesus is speaking in the singular. He's addressing Nicodemus personally. He's not saying, he's saying, I say to you directly in the singular to Nicodemus.

It's always worth mentioning that when you read the gospels and you read the words of Jesus, whenever he says the phrase truly, truly, or verily, verily, or whatever the translation you're reading says, it's worth paying attention to what follows because what he's about to say is going to be highly important.

It's like when you see those red weather alerts on the news that say, you know, don't go out in your cars unless you really need to because it's so dangerous that you might get killed. It's something you need to pay attention to.

It's potentially life or death. And in this case, it is very much a life or death situation. You must be born again.

[18 : 57] But of course, what does that mean? It's alright just saying it over and over again. But what does it mean? Of course, Nicodemus was confused and rightly so. We all would be, I think, in his situation.

How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? One thing that's interesting is the phrase born again.

When you translate it literally from the Greek, it actually reads born from above. And I think that is the key for us here.

every human being that has ever existed since Adam and Eve has been born naturally. That's a fact of life. We all have an earthly birth.

But in order for someone to see the kingdom of God, in order for him to enter it, in order to be saved from our sins, you must also have a heavenly birth. You must be born again.

[19 : 59] You must be born from above. That really is how this can be. Because it also has nothing to do with our own actions.

It comes from above. We are born again by the Spirit, which is our second heading then this morning. We read from verse 5.

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 flesh is flesh, 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 do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. In a sermon which he entitled on regeneration, which is based on 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 17, George Richfield began with these words.

[21 : 09] He said, The doctrine of our regeneration or new birth in Jesus Christ is one of the most fundamental doctrines of our holy religion.

And he was of course very right when he said these words because without this doctrine, this new birth, this regeneration, none of us could have any hope. Now there is a degree of uncertainty amongst scholars about what Jesus meant when he said the words, by water and the Spirit.

Now it's unlikely that he was talking about baptism because Nicodemus wouldn't have understood what that was all about. And this would also suggest that baptism was 100% required, was 100% necessary in order for someone to be saved.

But we of course know that is not the case because of the example of the thief on the cross. So what exactly is Jesus talking about? Well several scholars have concluded that because of the context of the conversation, because of who Nicodemus was, Jesus was probably referring to the ritual cleansing that Jews were required to perform as a part of the law.

Because the people were unclean and needed cleansing. And they were also spiritually dead and needed resurrecting. Nicodemus would have been familiar with these ideas.

[22 : 36] If you read the account of Ezekiel and the dry bones in the valley, that famous story, he would have been familiar with the concept. Jesus is saying that being born of the Spirit, born from above, fixes these two problems.

It is one event which both cleanses us from our uncleanness and also gives us new life as it resurrects us. Because without it, we are dead.

Spurgeon, when he preached on this passage, said this, he said, When men are perishing all around you, it would be cruel to waste time in attempting to interest their minds or to amuse their fancies.

We must do something more practical and give earnest heed to their pressing necessities. Is it famine which slays them? Then let us feed them. Is it cold?

Then let us supply them with covering. Is it disease? Let us administer medicine. When the case is urgent, we confine ourselves to necessities and attend with our whole heart to that which must have our attention.

[23 : 46] That which maybe can wait, but that which must he demands our immediate care. Now the spiritual needs of man are urgent and among them the most pressing is their regeneration for they must be born again or they are lost.

It's an urgent issue which we do need to face. Even if it were possible for someone to be born again physically in an earthly sense, it wouldn't solve the problems of our first birth.

we would still be dead in our sins and trespasses. We would still be lost. We would still be separated from God and all the good deeds we did, all the religion we performed, all the scriptures we memorized would do nothing for all these things are no good for the dead.

Let's read a bit of that famous passage from Ezekiel 37 which we just talked about in verse 1 where it reads, The hand of the Lord was upon me and he brought me out in the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley.

It was full of bones and he led me around among them and behold there were very many on the surface of the valley and behold they were very dry.

[25 : 02] And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, you know. Of course the answer is no, these bones cannot live.

They are dead, they are very dry, they were scattered in the valley. There was no hope of them living unless God intervened and raised them up which as you read the passage, he indeed does.

But this passage was describing the state of ancient Israel. They were dead, they were lost, they were dry bones, there was no hope for them. It's also describing the state of our nation today in Scotland and indeed of the world.

We are in a valley of dry bones. So how then is one born again? That is of course the pressing question, how is one born again?

Well John again gives us the answer. In chapter 3 verse 6 which reads, That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.

[26 : 03] Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes. You hear its sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. First thing to note from this is we have no more control over being born again in the spirit as we do with our real physical births from our mothers.

We have no, nothing to say in it. We don't decide the moment we're going to be born. It just happens. We're just along for the ride and it happens in both contexts too. Secondly, the text tells us that being born again is like the wind.

It's an interesting metaphor to use because the Hebrew word for wind is also the same word for spirit and the same word for breath. It's the word ruach if you want a little bit of Hebrew for your less selves this morning.

It can also mean breath as we heard. It's the word used in Genesis chapter 2 when God breathed life into Adam. being born of the spirit is like the wind.

[27 : 14] The wind blows where it may. We've had a couple of big storms over the last few months. We've seen the power that the wind can have. We've seen how it cannot be controlled, that we cannot always predict where it's going to go.

We can neither see it when it does come. We can simply see the consequences of it. In the case of high winds and storms, we see the damage it causes.

We see the destruction it reaps. But when the wind comes from God, when the breath of God enters us, when the spirit brings about new birth in us, when it gives us life, the consequences aren't destruction or damage, but instead life, rebirth, and a changed heart.

We become, in a sense, a new creation. We're no longer the same person we were as before. That person is gone. The new person is alive in the spirit of God and is forever united together with Jesus.

We are born again, and it's all from God. As he guides the winds, he also guides his spirit. So trust in God for your salvation this morning.

[28 : 36] Trust in him, because through Jesus Christ he did what we could not, and he dealt with that sin through Jesus on the cross. Jesus faced the judgment that was due for us all.

Jesus made redemption for us. The gift of God is his grace, salvation in Jesus.

Being born again doesn't instantly make you perfect. It doesn't make you sinless. It is just the beginning of your journey towards that time, which will come, but not for a while yet.

It's not here yet. F.B. Meyer once said that when we are born again, a new life, the life of God, is put into us by the Holy Spirit.

But the old self-life, which in the scripture is called the flesh, is not taken away straight away. The two may coexist together in the same heart.

[29 : 39] The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. That is the struggle that we face if you are born again. Those two natures, the old and the new, fighting it out within us.

And sometimes one will win out over the other. But ultimately, the new creation will have the victory. And of course, remember that when we do face struggles and temptations and trials, that we are not alone in it.

Though it may seem sometimes that we are alone, that our suffering goes unnoticed, it doesn't. Because remember, if you're born again, Jesus is living within you.

He is united with you. His spirit is in you. And he will help you through it all. There's a misconception about what regeneration or sanctification is, I think, as well in the Christian too.

I don't know if you like your superhero movies, but sometimes you get your superhero origin stories where you've got a regular person who's maybe quite weak or sickly or who doesn't get on very well in life.

[30 : 46] And then all of a sudden something happens to him, whether it's a spider-man or whatever. And he all of a sudden becomes a super version of himself with these new amazing powers.

You know, some people think the new birth is like this, where you are slowly turning into a superhuman you, that you're going to become the best you you can be during your time of sanctification.

Whereas the reality is we are not becoming the best us we can be. We're not going to become a super person. We're going to become instead more and more like Christ.

Because it is Christ that lives in us through the Holy Spirit who is shaping us not to be the best you, but to be more like Christ.

Those famous words from Galatians 2 20, I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

[31 : 50] and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. So that important line is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Because becoming sanctified, the idea that we're being made better, means that we are being made more like Christ. Not into a clone of him, it's important to mention that.

We still keep our individualities, we still keep our personalities, but more than that, we will become more Christ-like than we would be more, you know, you like, so to speak.

We will become like Christ. And indeed, in order to be saved, that must be the case, which is our final heading then, simply that you must.

As we end, I want to briefly suggest that there are two things that must be today. First, is that we must be born again.

[32 : 59] Which is something, again, we can't do ourselves, but comes from God above. Being born again is essential if you want to be saved from death, judgment, and damnation.

That's the first thing we must be. The second thing we must do is that we must warn others that they must be born again too.

We've looked at Ezekiel a bit today. Let's look a little bit more this time from chapter 3, with these quite challenging words. In verse 18, where it reads, If I say to the wicked, you shall surely die, and give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.

But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die from his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

We need to be both warned, and we need to warn others. If you have faith in Jesus today, if you are born again, then you should rejoice.

[34 : 14] It's something we take for granted, I think, sometimes, or we forget about it over time, but we should rejoice in it every day, because that faith we have is the evidence that we are indeed born again.

It's not the cause of it, it's there because of it. If you have faith in Christ, then you are born again, and you should be filled with joy from this, because you will see the kingdom of God, you will be a part of it.

It will be a great joy to you. You will enjoy everlasting life, the resurrection that will come when Christ returns, and being in the physical presence of God for all time, worshipping him perfectly.

Then you will be sinless and perfect, everything unclean, washed away. But if you're not, then you must heed this warning.

You must be born again. You must. It's not optional. It has to be. So now is the time to reach out to our God in prayer.

[35 : 28] I don't know you, I don't know your situations, most of you, but you do, and God does. So make this a priority in your own life today.

And if you are born again, then give thanks, and praise God for what he's done to you. But reach out to God in prayer, ask him for a new heart, ask for your old self to die, for Christ to come and live in your heart.

Ask the spirit to work in you, to become more like Christ. God will hear you if you say these things sincerely.

But don't waste any time. Now is the time. What was it? 11.58 on Sunday, the 23rd of January, 2022. Now is the time. For you must be born.

Again, it's the only way that you can deal with your sin. The thing that separates you from God and that promise of everlasting life. The spirit of God is the only way you can be born again.

[36 : 37] As one commentator wrote, the new birth is more fundamental, more important, more life transforming, and more God-pleasing than anything you have experienced or ever heard about.

That is the simple truth this morning. I'm just going to finish by saying it one more time. Because it is that important that we do need to hear it.

That's simply that you must be born again. And it is Jesus Christ who makes this possible for you. Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank you.

God bless the