

New Birth

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[0 : 00] Our gracious Father, we do thank you for your word, the Bible. We thank you that it is through it you speak to us and that it is still relevant for us today, that it is authoritative and gives us wisdom for life in Christ.

And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to understand your word this morning but also to live in light of it. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, there's an online news website called Weekly World News and on the next slide it claims at the top there to be the only reliable news source in the world.

And it posted an article entitled 12 Steps to Get to Heaven. So on the next slide is the article. A number of religious leaders got together and they said, if you follow these 12 steps, you can be certain of entering God's kingdom and receiving life eternal.

And so with a claim like that, I thought I'd check it out for myself. I'll just give you three of the top three steps. The first one is they say you need to pray often. The second one is you need to cherish all God's creatures.

And they suggest you should become vegetarian to avoid hurting any of them, which immediately means I'm out of God's kingdom because I like my steak. And thirdly, wear religious symbols.

[1 : 22] Covering your body in jewelry calls attention to God's glory. And on it goes. And they say you follow these 12 steps, you will earn God's forgiveness and it will make you good enough to enter God's kingdom.

Now, what do you think about that? Rubbish. Yeah. Yeah. Now, just in case you're not sure what to think, let me show you another article on the same reliable news website.

On the next slide, I think it is. It's aliens attack in December. I kid you not. It's seriously, it's a real website with a real alien spaceships to attack in December, apparently. So that should tell you just how reliable this world's only reliable news website actually is.

It is rubbish. But today, Jesus himself will tell us how to enter God's kingdom, how to receive life eternal. And in verse 13, we're told that because he is from heaven, then he ought to know of all people, oughtn't he?

So how do we enter life in God's kingdom? Well, we must be born again. Point one in your outline, verse one in your Bible. Now, there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

[2 : 36] He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.

Now, here we meet Nicodemus. It's a famous encounter. And this man, Nicodemus, has all the right credentials, doesn't he? He is a Pharisee.

And Pharisees in Jesus' day were regarded as good people. They were the ones who took God's law seriously. So seriously, they invented other laws to help them keep God's law.

Of course, they then got so obsessed with laws, they forgot God behind the laws. But the point is, Pharisees were regarded as good people. What's more, Nicodemus was also part of the ruling council, verse one.

He was part of the elite, if you like. In Jesus' day, there were about 6,000 Pharisees, and only 71 of them were part of this ruling council, who ruled just below the Romans.

[3 : 36] And so, old Nicodemus, he's one of the top dogs. He's got all the credentials. In fact, in verse 10, he's also called Israel's teacher. He's the guy people looked up to, who came to for answers, and he thinks he has an answer about who Jesus is.

He says in verse 2, We know, Jesus, that you are from God. And yet, his comment in verse 2 suggests that he doesn't know as much as he thinks he knows.

For what does he call Jesus in verse 2? Rabbi, which means teacher. And yet, Jesus is much, much more than that, isn't he?

And secondly, when does he come to Jesus? At night, doesn't he? And now, it could be he just doesn't want to be seen meeting with Jesus, particularly after, you know, Jesus lost his cool at the temple, like we saw last week.

But in John's Gospel, night is also a sign for spiritual darkness, blindness. In fact, in chapter 1, verse 5, we're told that the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness has not mastered it, in a sense, has not overcome it or understood it.

[4 : 54] So, it seems Nick doesn't quite understand Jesus as well as he thinks he does. But Jesus knows Nicodemus. As we saw at the end of chapter 2, our last week, Jesus knows what is in a person.

He knows that despite all Nicodemus' credentials, his heart is not right. And so, he's not in the kingdom. And so, Jesus says to Nicodemus in verse 3, Well, let me tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

We've actually had a number of new births at our church recently. And Michelle and I were visiting one family, and Michelle got to hold the little baby. And as she did, she kind of turned to me, and her face lit up, and she smiled as if to say, Maybe we could.

My face went in a completely different shape. I said, Maybe we should go and give you some rest. But is this the kind of new birth that Jesus is talking about? You know, being physically born again. Nicodemus seems to think so. Do you see verse 4? How can someone be born when they are old? Nicodemus asked. Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born.

[6 : 08] And much to the relief of every mother here, Nicodemus is right. We cannot be physically born again. But he is wrong to think that that's what Jesus is talking about.

Rather, Jesus is talking about spiritual birth. In fact, in verse 3, there is a footnote in your Bible next to the word again. And the footnote tells us that the word again in the Greek language that the New Testament was written in can also mean from above.

And so Jesus is saying to enter life in the kingdom of God, Nicodemus needs to be born from above. That is, he needs to be born by God, and in particular by God's spirit.

And so to help Nicodemus see this, Jesus puts it differently in verse 5. He says, Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit.

To be born of water and spirit means to be cleansed from sin and given new spiritual life by God's spirit.

[7 : 15] And this is what God promised he would do for his people in the Old Testament. And so on the next slide, I think, from Ezekiel chapter 36, God says, I will sprinkle clean water.

There's the water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities. It's forgiveness. And from all your idols. And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. In other words, he'll give them new life. I will remove from your heart a stone, remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

And he goes on in chapter 37, I will put my spirit in you and you will live. To be born of water and spirit is to be cleansed from sin and given a new heart.

It's to be given new spiritual life by God's spirit. Now, I realize that particularly in America, there are groups of Christians who call themselves born-again Christians, and they use that as a kind of badge of honor.

[8 : 23] And really, they kind of act in a very extreme and unloving way. And so we've kind of gone off the phrase born again. But every Christian is born again.

They've been given new spiritual life. And this is something that every person needs. Because without it, we are spiritually dead in sin.

Paul puts it like this on the next slide in Ephesians chapter 2, verse 1. He says, As for you, you are dead in your transgressions and sins. You see, our natural tendency is to ignore God and live our way.

As I've said before, you never have to teach children to do the wrong thing, do you? It comes naturally. And one of their first five words is the word, No. Is it not?

You see, our natural tendency is to live our way and to ignore God in His way, because our hearts are spiritually dead. The other day, I rang Michelle while she was driving our youngest to dancing.

[9 : 25] Michelle's car has a hands-free phone system. And as we were finishing the conversation, my youngest hung up on me before I could say goodbye, the little rotter. Apparently, I was talking too much.

She said, Dad, it's not a sermon. Boom. I hung up on me. I'd only ask two questions. But the point is, because our hearts are spiritually dead, then our natural disposition is to hang up on God, to ignore Him in our lives, to sin.

And this was true for Nicodemus, who, like the other Pharisees, got so caught up with their man-made laws that they ended up ignoring God behind the laws. And if this is true for Nicodemus, who had all the right credentials, who was one of the elite amongst God's people, if this is true for Him, it's certainly true for you and me.

We all need to be born. And not physically, that's already happened, because we're all here.

Rather, we need to be born again, spiritually. Given you spiritual life by God's Spirit.

So, verse 6, flesh gives birth to flesh, that's physical birth, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again, says Jesus.

[10 : 52] In fact, he's saying it's almost logical. I mean, just as flesh gives birth to flesh, just as physical parents give physical birth to children, to this world, well, of course, the Spirit gives spiritual birth into God's kingdom.

And Nicodemus shouldn't really be surprised at this. It's kind of logical. Of course, for us who are Christians, the work of the Spirit can seem a bit mysterious, can't it? We cannot see Him, nor control Him, nor predict how He'll work in people's lives, or even ours.

As the hymn writer writes on the next slide, he says, I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin, revealing Jesus through the Word, creating faith in Him.

He doesn't know, but he sees the evidence. And for those who aren't Christians, this is even harder to understand. The Spirit can seem like a bizarre Disney fairy tale, like Casper the Ghost or something.

And yet, we can know the Spirit is real, because we can see His effects. We can see people coming to faith in Christ. That's Jesus' point in verse 8.

[12 : 05] He says, 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.

He's saying the Spirit is like the wind. In fact, in the Greek language, the word for Spirit and wind is the one word. Nuba means both things. And we cannot control the wind.

It simply seems to appear from nowhere and blows wherever it likes. Even the weather people cannot get it right, can they? And so we say, Oh, where did that wind come from? I thought they say it was supposed to be sunny and still today.

Nor can we see the wind. And yet we know it exists, don't we? We hear its whoosh. We feel it on our face. We see it in the leaves of the trees. Well, so too with the Spirit.

We cannot control Him, nor see Him, nor predict which person He'll give new birth to. But we can still know He is real. Because we can see His effects in the lives of people who have been born again, who have come to faith in Christ.

[13 : 13] I mean, what is it that makes two people listening to the gospel, one believes it and the other doesn't? And what makes two billion rational people in the world believe in Jesus?

What makes Christians who are persecuted keep following Jesus, despite their suffering? What makes you come along each Sunday to hear what God says in this, well, really old book?

And what makes some of you here this morning interested in what Jesus says, and some of you wish I'd just stop talking? Well, it's not a what, it's a who. It's God's Spirit.

We and two billion other Christians are proof that He exists. And the way we live is evidence that we have been born of Him. But in verse 9, this is still all too much for Nicodemus.

So he asks, how can this be, or how can this happen? And for Nicodemus, and no doubt all the other Pharisees, entering God's kingdom was about obeying God's law.

[14 : 20] It was about being a good Jew and making sacrifices for your sins. And so how can the Spirit simply cleanse us from sin and give us a new birth?

Who pays for our sins now? How does this all work? Well, Jesus' response brings us to point two, and it's in three parts. Firstly, in verse 10, he basically has a go at Nicodemus.

He says, you are Israel's teacher, and you do not understand these things. In fact, in verse 10, Jesus literally says, you are the teacher of Israel, and you don't understand these things.

And Nicodemus is like the reverend, doctor, professor, bishop of Israel, if you like. And so he should know how all this can happen from his Old Testament. But he doesn't.

The second part of Jesus' answer is that Nicodemus should have accepted what Jesus is saying because Jesus is from God. You see verse 11? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen.

[15:23] But still, you people do not accept our testimony. I've 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.

In other words, Jesus and his Father know what they're talking about. We may have all sorts of ideas about things in this world, about how we should live and different preferences and different likes and so on.

But when it comes to spiritual matters, when it comes to life after death, when it comes to entering God's kingdom, we are not free to choose any way we like. There is one right way.

And Jesus tells us because he knows it. He's from heaven. And he's come down to tell us which way is the right way.

I mean, even Nicodemus said Jesus was from God, that the signs prove that. And yet, people still don't accept his testimony. People still don't believe Jesus' words.

[16:30] And third thing that Jesus says to Nicodemus in response to how can all this happen is to tell him a bit more about how this new birth happens. It happens not just by God's spirit, but through God's son.

You see verse 14? Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the son of man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Now verse 14 here refers to our first reading where Israel sinned against God in the desert and so God sent snakes amongst them. Now I realise that sounds a bit harsh, like we might think that's a bit of an overreaction by God here, yet we often think that because we, well, quite frankly, underestimate how serious sin is.

And yet God also gave them a way to be saved from the snake bites. Do you remember? As we heard before in our reading, I've got it on the slide actually, the Lord said to Moses, make a snake and put it on a pole.

Anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. And so Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

[17:49] On the next slide, I think, is an artist's kind of interpretation of what it may have looked like. But the point is, just as the snake was lifted up on the pole, so Jesus will be lifted up on the cross.

Just as the bronze snake, we're told, has, bronze has this reddish in colour that would atone for their sins, so Jesus' blood would atone for our sins.

And just as those who looked at the snake and lived physically, so too, those who look to the sun will live spiritually. In other words, the spirit is able to cleanse us from sin and give us new birth because Jesus pays for our sins at the cross.

Our new life comes by the spirit, yes, but it also comes through the son who pays for our sins.

When my daughter hung up on me that day, there was a consequence.

I said to her when she got home, well, because you hung up on me and didn't listen to me, then you won't get to hear what I have to say about dessert tonight. At which she very quickly changed her tune and tried to atone for her sin by saying, Dad, have you had a haircut?

[19:05] You're looking sharp. But there was a consequence, a punishment for ignoring me which was missing out on dessert. And yet, I think I've said this story before.

Tim has done this before. He did it again. He said, don't worry, I'll miss out instead. She can have mine. The last time, which is the story I've told you before, I think, it was because he didn't like the dessert we're having that night.

At this time, it was just as bad. He was off to youth group, so he wasn't going to get any anyway. But the point is there are consequences or punishment for our sins, which the Bible says is death eternal, in hell.

But Jesus has taken it for us in our place. At the cross, he suffered hell in our place so that we don't have to. Instead, we can be forgiven. And we can be given new spiritual life by the Spirit.

You see, as I said before, the new life comes by the Spirit, yes, but it comes through the Son, who pays for our sins, who makes it possible. And so that's why we are to believe in the Son.

[20 : 14] that's why verse 15 goes on to say that whoever believes in him, the in him in our Bibles is in the wrong spot, whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

But what makes God do all this for us? What moves God to give his one and only Son to pay for our sins in our place? Well, John explains for us in verse 16.

Verse 16 starts with the word for or because. He says, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.

That's why he did it. That whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.

On the next slide, an eight-year-old man wrote a prayer to God about his love and it says, I bet it's very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in my family and I can never do it.

[21 : 18] It's true, isn't it? But God does love the whole world and he showed it by giving his one and only Son to die for us in order to save us from the judgment we deserve.

That's extraordinary when you think about it. I don't know if you heard about this but just a few months ago in November last year there was the worst church shooting in American history.

A gunman burst into a small Baptist church in Texas opened fire and killed 26 people and as he opened fire Peggy Warden who's on the next slide just that one there used her body to shield her grandson Zach taking the bullets in her back in order to save him from them.

Why did she do that? It's obvious isn't it? Because she loved her grandson. But imagine Peggy doing the same for the shooter.

How great would her love have to be for all people to shield the shooter from the police bullets that came? It's a different kind of love isn't it?

[22 : 33] And yet that's the kind of love God has shown for us. For he gave his one and only son what was most precious to him to die for us who didn't deserve it.

For us who didn't want anything to do with God who hang up the phone on him, ignored him. I mean I have an only son and although we can drive each other crazy sometimes I wouldn't give him up to die for others especially not those who didn't want anything to do with me.

And yet that's what God does for us. It's not as though God doesn't love his own son. Verse 35 tells us he does but it's just that God loves us just as much as Jesus.

That's extraordinary in itself such that he would give Jesus to die for us and save us. Our new spiritual birth comes by the spirit yes but it is through the son and because of God's love.

That's all God's work isn't it? even our ability to believe is because he has turned our dead heart into a living one and yet he still calls us to look to Christ and believe.

[23 : 46] Point three. This is our responsibility to believe. I mean did you notice how many times the word believe comes up here? Verse 12 verse 15 verse 16 and now three times in verse 18.

Do you see there? Whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son.

So we have to believe in Jesus and those who believe, those who trust, put their faith, all the same thing, in him are not condemned. We are saved not from the bullets but from the punishment our sins deserve.

But those who do not believe, well they remain spiritually dead in sin which means they continue to remain already condemned and in danger of hell.

Now sadly many will refuse to believe. Why? Well verse 19 gives us one reason. John actually goes on to say this is the verdict. Light has come into the world but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

[25 : 03] Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. While God loves the world, the world loves evil.

And they don't want to come to Jesus, the light, because it will mean their evil is exposed. It will mean admitting that they are sinners who need being saved. It will mean admitting that they have been living the wrong way.

It will mean having to change things in their life. No one likes having to admit they're wrong. No one likes having to change things in their life.

It's so much easier for people to just avoid the light of Christ and keep living in the spiritual darkness. God wants us to believe in him, that we might enter his kingdom and have life. That's the big application to put your trust in the son. For then you will know you have been born again and free to enter God's kingdom now spiritually and later physically in the new creation where there will be no more suffering or pain.

[26 : 16] And so do you believe in the son? have you been born again? Because without these things you cannot enter God's kingdom.

And for those who have, then we are to keep believing or trusting in Jesus and live out our new spiritual life with God's help.

And that's what verse 21 seems to be getting at I think. It's better translated up there on the screen there. Those who walk in the truth, that is Christians, come to the light, to Jesus, to hear his word and to follow him.

And as we do, it will be made clear that what we do is done in God. That is in God's strength. You see, God's spirit not only brings us new spiritual life, he also helps us to live out that new life as we listen to Christ's word in the Bible. And so again, we are to keep trusting in Jesus, and live out our new life with God's strength.

[27 : 24] People come up with all sorts of acronyms these days, like FYI. Do you know what that one is? FYI, for your information. I learned a new one. This is the younger generations.

Starbo, subject to a better offer, so they don't commit to anything. But we Christians do the same thing. one that's been around for a little while is FROG, F-R-O-G, fully rely on God.

It's easier said than done though, isn't it? We're brought up to be independent, and sometimes think that includes being independent from God. Or we're often so busy we let a whole week go, forgetting to make time to pray.

Or we do the pillow prayer, you know, where you remember at the last minute, start to pray, then fall asleep on God. Or when something goes wrong, we try and fix it without asking for help.

But we're not meant to live our Christian life alone. God gives us each other and his spirit. Just as God's spirit has worked in our life to give us new birth, so God promises his spirit will continue to work in our lives as we follow Christ and read his word.

[28 : 35] That last bit is important. Some people think the spirit works mainly apart from the Bible, but no, no, he works primarily through the Bible. But the point is we're to live out a new life in God's strength.

And so do you read God's word and pray for God's strength? We need to, you ought to, for he does give help in our time of need.

Just ask our persecuted brothers and sisters overseas. Well, it was the 1970s and a father watched through the kitchen window, one Saturday morning as his small son attempted to lift a large stone out of his sandbox.

The boy was frustrated as he wrestled with the heavy object because he couldn't get enough leverage underneath it to kind of flip it over the side of his sandbox. Finally, the boy gave up and sat down on the side of the sandbox, head in hands, feeling dejected.

The father went outside and asked, what's wrong son? Can't you lift that rock? No sir, the boy said sir, I live in the 1970s, I can't do it.

[29 : 48] Have you used all the strength that's available to you? The father asked. Yes sir, said the boy. No you haven't, the father replied, you haven't asked me for my help.

Do you get the point? We're to ask our heavenly father for help, for strength to keep living the Christian life. Well, to enter the kingdom of God is not about doing a 12 step program, it's about being given new spiritual birth by God's spirit through God's son because of God's love.

And we know we have been given new birth if we believe in Jesus. So, believe in Jesus, live out your new life and rely on God for strength to do it.