

Born Again

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[0 : 00] It's good to see you all here this morning, both in person and on the live stream. This morning we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper at the end of the service.

If you're in the pews and you don't have one of these little packages of the elements, you can go back to the back and the ushers would be happy to serve you with those.

And for those of you at home, this is just a heads up. We'll transition from the sermon right into the Lord's Supper. So that's where we're going for the rest of our time. So the snow is falling, but we have a rich text for us to look at this morning.

So we will endeavor to get out of here in a timely manner, but we will linger now over the Word of God for a few minutes. So going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes you a hamburger.

So I heard from Keith Green a long time ago, and Keith Green was a Christian musician. The logic of this is not very strong, so the philosophers out there don't put too much weight in this.

[1 : 14] It's a poor analogy, but the question that it's raising is a good one. What is being a Christian really about? It's easy for us to think about all sorts of reasons why or what being a Christian is really about.

For some of us, it may be something that we've grown up with, a family or a social identity. For some of us, it may be that we love the aesthetics and the beauty of the gospel and the sense of transcendence in worship.

Some of us may love the ethics, the call to righteousness and justice in a better world and a better society. Some of us may love the morals and family values that shape and are espoused by the church.

Some of us may love the ritual, the music, the comfort of the familiar and the regular. Some of us may love the community and people who love us.

Some of us may love the system and the logic of doctrine that makes sense of our world. And all of these things are beautiful and wonderful things and aspects of what true Christianity is about.

[2 : 28] But when we come to our text this morning, which is in John 3, Jesus is going to help us understand the very heart of what being a Christian is really about.

And remember that this is now, if you want to turn in your Bibles to John 3, that's where we'll be.

The context, the gospel of John is shaped to help us see Jesus, to lift up Jesus and the person of who he is and the work that he did while he was here on earth.

And it's shaped, if you remember, Pastor Nick opened by preaching this grand prologue about the word became flesh, how God came to earth and incarnated himself, took on flesh and blood so that we might know God and so that we might have life in him.

And we've seen in the chapters unfolding and continuing throughout this, John is slowly peeling back the onion, giving us layer after layer of who Jesus is.

And this brings us to our chapter. We're actually going to begin, if you're going to read along with me, at the end of chapter 2. The end of chapter 2 is verse 23 will actually be the beginning of our passage this morning.

[3 : 46] So we're going to read and look at this. This is the first of three encounters with individuals where Jesus clarifies who he is more and more.

And as we go, Kevin, are we using the... Can I get rid of this or... What are we using? All right.

Good. All right. So we're going to read John and then pray and then we'll dive in.

John 2 verse 23. Now when he, that is Jesus, was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his names 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 knew, for he himself knew what was in man.

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 the signs that you do unless God is with him.

[4 : 56] 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? 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. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel when 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. 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.

[6 : 12] If I had told you earthly things, and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you of heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And as 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.

God, this is the judgment. Light has come into the world, and people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

[7 : 24] But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God. Let's pray together.

Lord, thank you for your word. Lord, we thank you for this passage that so beautifully reveals to us, Lord, the greatness of Jesus and his work for us.

Lord, I pray this morning that your Spirit would enable us to hear your word, and Lord, that you would apply it by your Spirit to our hearts. Lord, that we would know the greatness of your power, the depth of your love, and the wonder and amazing grace that you have shown us in Jesus Christ. Lord, be with us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Friends, here is the good news. We can be born again.

We can be changed from the inside out, not because we are good enough, but because God is gracious and powerful enough to work in us. This is the big idea that John wants us to get from this picture this morning, that through Jesus, we can be made new and transformed.

[8 : 43] What does this mean? Well, let's look at it. Let's think about this and explore this passage together. We're going to ask three questions. One, of the new birth. One, what is the new birth?

Two, how can it happen to us? And three, will you respond? So the first one. What is the new birth? Verses 1 through 8 tells us this well-known story of Nicodemus the Pharisee, a law-abiding citizen, a law-abiding citizen, one who would be a faithful member of the Jewish ruling class.

He would know the law and keep it carefully. He would be an upstanding man of character. He'd be the guy that you would trust to mow your lawn, put your mail in, and watch your pets while you went away for two weeks.

He would be someone who would be trustworthy. And he was trusting in the religion that he knew and the practices that he knew to know God. And he knew a lot about God because he knew the Old Testament Scriptures.

[9 : 44] And he comes to Jesus and he says, I've seen the signs. And this is a theme we've already talked about a little bit. It's why I read the very end of chapter 2 because John recounts that many people saw these signs and believed in Jesus because of the signs that they saw.

And Nicodemus comes and says, you must have come from God because of the things that you're doing, because of the things that we have seen you do.

You've got a good thing going, and I want to know more. I might even want in on whatever it is you've brought. I think that's the heart of Nicodemus coming to Jesus.

He comes at night, maybe because he was afraid, but I think probably more symbolically, he comes at night because he comes as a figure, as a type of one who doesn't fully understand who Jesus is yet.

And he comes and he asks these questions. And Jesus, as he is so prone to do, here's a question, and then he turns it back and he reframes the question.

[10:52] And he restates it to say, you know what, what you're bringing to me is helpful. Okay, you think I'm from God. That's good. You want in on this. I'm actually going to push this into a place you never thought it was going to happen.

Jesus changes the question. He says, you know what? If you want to see the kingdom of God, you want to be a full participant of all the promises that God has given to Israel. You want to know that God the way you think you do, you must be born again.

If you look at your footnote, it might say born from above. The word there could mean either of these things. Born again or born from above.

And Nicodemus responds by taking the first part, the being born again idea, and he says, Jesus, that's the craziest thing I ever heard.

His questions reveal his incredulity. You mean I, a grown man, have to go back into my mother's womb? That's crazy. I've been studying and knowing God for 70 years.

[11:53] You want me to now start over like a baby? He doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about. And so Jesus, in verse 5, begins to clarify.

What does Jesus mean by being born again or born from above? He means, he says, it means being born of water and the Spirit. Okay, what does that mean?

Well, there's been lots of conversation in the church about this. Some people seem to think that it was, that Jesus was referring to the baptism of John in the river Jordan and then the baptism of the Spirit.

Some people think that it might be referring to our physical birth because we're born in water, because we swim in a uterus that has amniotic fluid. And so that's the water and then we're born in the Spirit because we have, along with that physical birth, we have a spiritual birth that comes later. Some people seem to think it relates to baptism in the church and how the church is, brings, or is a part of baptism by water and by the Spirit.

[12:59] All of these things are relatively possible, but I don't think that they're the easiest way to do it, easiest way to understand it.

Jesus is not referring to two things when he says born of water and the Spirit. He's referring to one thing. This is why I say that. First of all, because the grammar tells us that. If you look very carefully in the ESV, it's helpful because it points it out.

It says, unless one is born of water and the Spirit. He doesn't say of water and of the Spirit, which would have one preposition for each element.

It's one preposition that then encompasses both of the two things afterwards. The second reason why I think it's one thing is because it's parallel to being born again in verse above.

And then in verse 8, he says being born of the Spirit without clarifying more, I think Jesus is just talking about one thing. He's being, he's talking about this work of God that renews us, makes us alive again spiritually.

[14:13] And the reason why I think Jesus did that is because I think Jesus had in his mind the passage from Ezekiel that was read earlier in the service.

I'm going to read again the passage, verses 25 and 26 from Ezekiel 36. This is the promise of God to his people of the coming new covenant promise and the coming new age that will happen.

He says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses. And from your idols, I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you.

And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. You see, Jesus talking to this Old Testament scholar says, this is what it's about.

This is the promise from the Old Testament. You must be born again, which means being cleansed from your sin, being freed from your idolatry and being given a new heart.

[15 : 24] That sin has made our hearts hard like a stone. And that by God's spirit, he's going to take that heart out and give us a new one that's made alive by his spirit.

And this is the picture. These are two elements of this one work that the Bible calls regeneration. An internal transformation whereby we are transferred from darkness or from death to life.

And remember, in Ezekiel, maybe you don't remember, in Ezekiel 37, there's this famous vision that God gives to Ezekiel where he takes him to a valley and this valley is filled with dry, desiccated bones.

There's nothing but just skeletons lying around. And God says, Son of man, can these bones live? Ezekiel says, only you know.

He says, prophesy and pray. And the spirit, the wind of the spirit of God blows over these skeletons. And they are regenerated.

[16 : 29] They are brought back to life. And not like zombie, scary horror film, but they're actually brought back to full human health as if they had not died.

They were resurrected. The spirit of God comes and brings life into these skeletons.

And Jesus says, this is what it means to know God. That God is able to breathe a spiritual life into us. I wonder, as you're sitting here, if you know this experience.

Some of us experience this in maybe a more dramatic way, and some of us experience it in a more gradual way. But the signs of being born again are very clear. I can remember distinctly, I grew up going to church, I read the Bible, I heard about Jesus, and it didn't mean anything to me.

And then, as God began to work in my heart, He began to pull me towards Himself. And I have a moment, but some of you may have a process, where, like C.S. Lewis, at one point you knew you didn't believe in God, and then at the end you knew that you did.

[17 : 43] And at one point you know you didn't trust in Jesus, and then further on you did. But you know what comes with that? A new spiritual life. A hunger to know God.

An ability to read His Word with greater clarity and understanding. A desire to love God and to order your life in a way to worship Him.

This is the fruit of a new life where God becomes the center and we are unseated. And this is what God promises us when He gives us a new heart, when He cleanses us from our sin.

This is the new birth that Jesus says we need. He looks at Nicodemus and He says, it's not enough for you to be good on the outside or to try to reform yourself to be a little better than you used to be. It's not enough for you to simply keep the law and to keep your hands clean and think, I've done enough. Jesus says, no, you must be born again, made new by God's Spirit and power.

[18 : 52] Friends, this is the power that turns a political hatchet man like Chuck Colson into a prison minister for the gospel. This is what turns a bitter and depressed paraplegic woman like Johnny Erickson Tata into a joyful artist and minister of hope to many as she ministers to the disabled.

And with Nicodemus, it's what turns a fervently zealous religious leader into a humble follower of Jesus. You can be born again, Jesus says to Nicodemus and to us.

And Nicodemus then asks the question that leads us to our next section of the text. And the question that maybe is in all of our hearts, which is, well, how can this happen to us? How is it that we get to be born again?

Again, verses 9 through 15, I think, help us see this. Jesus rebukes Nicodemus saying, you should know these things.

You should know the story of Ezekiel. You should know these promises from the Old Testament. He rebukes him for not knowing them and he rebukes him for not listening to Jesus. Think about it.

[20 : 12] Nicodemus in the very beginning said, hey, you've done all these great signs. You come from God. And then Jesus says something that he doesn't understand and Nicodemus is incredulous. Why won't you listen to my testimony?

You want a sign? You're looking for some reason to believe my authority about this? And this is kind of the flow. The passage is not simple to work through, but the flow is that Jesus is leading up to verses 14 and 15.

Jesus is saying, if you want a sign, to know why you should listen to me, if you want to know how this happens in your life, verse 14, as 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.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. Now, how many people know that one from their Sunday school? I didn't. I mean, I knew it. Jack Lauer knows it. So, yeah, there we go.

Praise God. We have a great children's ministry. We're doing well. So, but this is not, this is in Numbers chapter 21, and I'm going to read this to you really quickly because it's a really helpful passage.

[21 : 36] passage. The people of Israel have been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, and now God is moving them again towards entering into the promised land after a whole generation has died in the wilderness, not experiencing the fullness of the promise because of their disobedience and grumbling and doubting of God.

And this is what happens from Mount Hor. They were set out by the way to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, and the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, saying, Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. Then God sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died.

And the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned, for we had spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord that he might take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people.

And the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

[23 : 02] in light of the disobedience, the grumbling and complaining. Think about it. This generation had seen God provide for them for 40 years, and then he moves them along and they're like, Ah, we don't like the burgers.

We'd like Chick-fil-A instead. Grumbling and complaining and doubting God's goodness to them. God sends a judgment.

He sends poisonous snakes. And the people, they cry out, God, save us. Help us. God tells Moses to make a metal snake, an image, and to put it on a wooden pole and to lift it up among the gathering of God's people.

And everyone who was bitten and poisoned who saw that snake, who saw that it was a symbol of God's saving presence among them, would not die because of the poison in them, but would live. It is a picture of a gracious salvation for people who can't save themselves. And friends, this is what Jesus wants us to know about being born again.

[24 : 17] We are born again because just like that serpent was lifted up in the wilderness for a disobedient people so that they could look on it in faith and be saved.

So the Son of Man will be lifted up on a wooden cross among people who are dying because of their sin, people who are helpless to save themselves.

When the Son of Man is lifted up in the Gospel of John, it is always lifted up on the cross of Christ. Lifted up on the cross where Jesus died.

You see, here's the logic that undergirds us. You see this played out and fulfilled in the apostles. We are spiritually dead and under judgment for our sin.

All of us, every one of us, and all of us need salvation without exception. Just like Nicodemus, we may be a very good man, but it's not enough.

[25 : 25] We could not overcome our sin on our own. What we see is that the only hope that we have is to look outside of ourselves for a Savior.

And Jesus, being lifted up, takes the sin, takes our sin and the punishment for our sin of death, God's judgment and condemnation on our sin.

Jesus bears all of that for Himself so that we might be saved. It is not our work. It cannot be our work. It must be His work that is able to save us.

So Jesus is saying, how does this happen? Look. Look at the Son of Man. Lift it up. Look at Him in faith. Believe and trust. and you will have eternal life.

And eternal life here is connected to this idea of being born again. We often think of eternal life as being some future thing. And in fact, if we're honest, many of us think eternal life sounds boring.

[26 : 28] It sounds like eternally sitting in a pillow soft, you know, sort of commercial where it's clouds and sunlight and nothing very interesting happens.

But instead, what He is saying is, no, this eternal life is something that can happen now, that begins now, and will continue for eternity. And it does have to do with us being caught up in the life of God and all of the richness of this world that we live in and all the signs of the goodness of life that we see throughout this, even this fallen world.

We get to take hold of that life. Jesus said, I have come that they might have life and that they might have it abundantly, overflowing, richly, with joy and peace and patience, with celebration, with mission, with purpose, with creativity, with beauty, all of these things.

And Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to us, look, look at the Son of Man, lift it up and take hold of this life. You can be born again.

And with that, Jesus' sermon is ended. His message and his interaction with Nicodemus is ended. There's a footnote in your ESV.

[27 : 46] I think John then steps in in verse 16. The apostle steps in and says, this is commentary now on what Jesus has just said. He says, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.

That whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life. One of the most famous verses in all of the Bible. And now you've seen some of the run-up to it and what the context of it is.

John is saying, do you see God has loved this world? And we need to be clear on the grammar. It's true that God loves us hugely and abundantly and overwhelmingly, but it's not that God loved this world so much.

It's actually saying God loved this world in this particular way. God loved the world thus, by sending his Son to be our Savior.

He sent his Son to rescue us and God loved not just nice people who are trying to get to him and are a little confused, but God loved the world which in the Gospel of John means a place of rebellion, a place of rejection against God.

[29 : 00] The systems of our world that are fallen and broken and dishonor and refuse to acknowledge or submit to God. God loved the world not because it was a nice place he was trying to fix up, but because it was a place of brokenness and rebellion that he was trying to rescue.

And God's intent throughout this is so clear. He came to save people. That's what verse 17 says, that though he is the judge and rightfully will judge the whole world, his heart and his intent in the coming of Jesus is that people would be saved, not that they would be condemned.

What a terrible thing it is that in our culture today people believe that the church is all about condemning sinners. When Jesus Christ said, I do not come to condemn them but to save them by offering this invitation, come, will you believe?

The final verses, 18 through 21, may feel very deterministic. May feel like, well, it says if I believe then I'm in, but if I don't believe then I'm already condemned and what's the hope?

I think that's a misreading of this text. John is trying to help us see clearly. Here's the thing. If the problem that we've diagnosed is right, that all people are under sin and the solution is presented as the only one, Jesus, because only Jesus has died on the cross for our sin.

[30 : 32] Only Jesus could do what he did. Because of his sinless life he could take our place. Because of his humanity he could die for us. Because of his resurrection he shows that he in the, by dint of his indestructible power, indestructible life, is able to have victory over sin and death because he is a risen savior.

He alone is the one that can save us. Christians are not exclusive because we think everyone else is stupid or we just want our tribe to win. Christianity is exclusive because there's only one solution and it's Jesus.

Only he has done what we need to be saved. John acknowledges that some of us don't turn to Jesus.

Some of us continue to love the darkness instead of the light. Some of us are ashamed. Some of us are clinging desperately to our own lives apart from him hoping that we can make it on our own. But as commentator D.A. Carson who by the way if you haven't read his commentary it's the best commentary on John. D.A. Carson he summarizes this passage like this.

[31 : 50] John expresses these points in the hope that his readers will beseech God that all that they do might be done through him. That is in short that they will turn to the lifted up son of man with

the same desperate unqualified faith as the Israelites displayed who turned to the bronze snake in the desert.

By such faith and such faith alone can anyone experience the new birth and thereby gain eternal life. friends will you respond to this call?

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus then turns into a sermon and a call by the apostle John. Will you respond to this call today? Maybe you're one of those people who loves church because of the beauty and the aesthetics or because you love the community and the love for one another. but when you hear me talk about being born again it feels foreign it feels alien it's something you've never really considered before. Maybe you've grown up in church and it's because of your family because of your background because of your community it's just kind of who you are but you've never actually known what it's like to experience this new power this new life in you.

Jesus says come come and believe put your faith and trust in me and you will be born again. We're about to go to the Lord's table we're going to celebrate communion what communion is is a celebration of these things is a celebration of what Jesus has done for us and for those of us who have trusted in Jesus who know that we are born again through faith in him then the table is a place of remembering and a place of celebrating together the new and eternal life that we have in him.

[33 : 55] It is always a sobering reminder of the reality of our sin and that it cost his death for our salvation. Our table is open to all who've placed their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior but I wonder if there are those this morning who are wondering who are hearing about this new life and going that's not me I've never I don't know what that is.

I pray that you would take this time as we celebrate this don't eat the bread and cup as you're wondering because it's an act of faith it's an expression of trust in Jesus but instead take Jesus take Jesus into your heart I'm going to pray just a minute and I'm going to pray a prayer that maybe some of you want to pray with me as we go to the table I'm going to pray that some of us may invite Jesus into our hearts that we might trust him and be born again today.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus we thank you for what a great Savior you are. Lord we thank you for your love that you have shown us Lord we thank you for the salvation that has worked at the cost of the life of the very Son of God Lord we thank you for the hope that we have that we can't be born again that it doesn't depend on our work but Lord that you have done the work needed for us to be truly yours.

Lord for those of us this morning who may sense your spirit calling us to place our faith in you. Lord I pray that we might pray these things Lord that we confess our sins to you that our sins are have made us Lord unworthy to be in your presence and under your condemnation but that we can trust Lord we put our trust this morning in Jesus in his life and in his death for us and his resurrection from the dead Lord we trust him for the forgiveness of our sins we trust him to be brought from spiritual death to spiritual life that we might be born again Lord we pray that you might lead us as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together in Jesus name Amen