

The necessity of new birth!

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[0:00] All right, we're in John chapter 3, verses 1 to 21 in our series in John's Gospel, and today we look at the necessity of new birth. When I was a youngster, I knew the difference between my father's you may and you must.

There was no negotiating with the you must. When my dad said, you have to do something, I knew I had to do it or there would be consequences.

You must be born again is not a divine suggestion of Jesus. It is an absolute necessity for us all. And this is the most vital question we have to deal with in life. Are you born again? Have you been born again of the Spirit of God? For without being born again of the Spirit of God, you cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven.

So that's our theme today. We're going to read chapter 3, verses 1 to 21. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

[1:12] 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 miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.

In reply, Jesus declared, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. 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. Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases.

You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. How can this be? Nicodemus asked.

[2:17] You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth. We speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

I have spoken to you of the things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever seen, no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, 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. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the Son of God.

This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

[3:40] But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be plainly seen that what has been done has been done through God. Amen, and the Lord will bless the reading of his holy word.

Next slide, please. In the evening, says John Wesley, I went very unwillingly to a religious meeting in Aldersgate Street.

So if you came a bit unwillingly this morning, don't feel too bad. You never know what God might do nonetheless. In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a religious meeting in Aldersgate Street where somebody was reading Martin Luther's article entitled Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. Sounds exciting. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, This was John Wesley's born-again experience.

John Wesley was a very religious man. He was brought up in a religious family. His father was a vicar. He was saved while a young boy from a fire that burned down the vicarage.

[5:12] And his brother described that as being saved as a bran plucked from the burning. His father encouraged him to enter into the ministry. He was reluctant to do so. But he did, and eventually he went to Georgia as a missionary with his brother to be a Christian missionary to save, as he called it, the savages in America.

But then he asked this question, Who will save me? He was a very devout man. He did all kinds of things. He fasted twice a week.

He attended church every day. He came back to Britain disillusioned because he spoke of something and someone he knew nothing of in his experience.

And then, in despair and in despondency, on May the 24th, 1738, he went reluctantly to this meeting. And he had an encounter with God, and he was born again.

To be born again is a transformative experience. And I want to set before you the scene that is found here, but I want to link it to chapter 2 and the last two verses of chapter 2, which says, after Jesus had cleansed the temple, now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name.

[6:40] But Jesus, don't be fooled, Jesus would not entrust himself to them. For he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in men.

There was something suspect about these people and their belief. On the surface, it looks great. They had seen miracles, and so they believed in Jesus.

But the belief was superficial. In many, many cases, it would not last any significant amount of time. The thing about observing miracles, of course, is that before long, cynical people can convince you that it was all a trick, that it wasn't genuine or real.

And we know in John's Gospel that by chapter 6, when Jesus began to teach on the bread of life, many people turned from him. They said, this is a hard teaching. Who can accept it? We also know, don't we, from the triumphal entry that the same people who cried out, Hosanna to the son of David, Hosanna to the king of Israel, many of those people, within a week, said away with him, crucify him, we will not have this man to rule over us.

belief in the Bible in the New Testament does not always mean that people have saving faith.

Simon Magus, in chapter 8 of Acts of the Apostles, saw the miracles that were taking place, and he believed and he was baptized.

[8:16] But then we discover he tried to buy the gift and power of the Holy Spirit with money. And Philip announced that he was a son of Satan. Satan. Belief does not necessarily mean saving faith has happened.

And the reason, John says, is because there's something in man that is not to be trusted, something in human nature that is fickle and is easily moved.

Man is capable of great good, but he is also capable of great evil. Man can split the atom and build a weapon that can destroy the world.

Scientists were able to concoct the most dreadful of weaponry to destroy millions of people in the Second World War.

Mark Twain famously said, of all the creatures that were made, he, man, is the most detestable. Of the entire brood, he is the only one, the solitary one, that possesses malice.

[9:28] That is the basest of all instincts, passions, and vices, the most hateful. He is the only creature that inflicts pain for sport, knowing it to be pain.

Also, in all the list, he is the only creature that has a nasty mind. Well, you might say he's a little bit hyperbolic, overstating his case.

Surely, you say, a man is capable of great good. Yes, absolutely. But equally, of great evil. He is not to be trusted. And if he is not to be trusted, in his nature, he needs to be changed.

Which is why when Nicodemus asks what a man must do to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus says, a man must be changed. He must be born again of water and the Spirit.

For a man, by nature, cannot enter the kingdom of heaven by his own efforts. If he could, John Wesley would have. He was a good man, a religious man, like Nicodemus, the best of men.

[10:39] But a man at best. And without the work, the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

You see the point of the connection. There was a man, chapter 3, verse 1 says, there was a man called, of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night.

Now, John's Gospel, I said this in chapter 1, John's Gospel, John is very fond of words, contrasting words, light and darkness, truth and lies, life and death, night and day.

When Judas, John says, went out to betray Jesus, he tells us very interestingly, and it was night. Why? Because the man had darkness in his soul.

There is something of the night in us that Jesus needs to drive out, and it is driven out by the Holy Spirit of God.

[11:43] Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He was the best of men, a Pharisee, pure ones, literally pure ones, the teacher of Israel. He had no peers.

He was the greatest of all of Israel's teachers. He was a devoutly religious man. He was man at his best, but still at night, still in darkness, still even man at his best, will not inherit the kingdom of God without a supernatural birth.

You get the point. Beautiful. This is just an amazing gospel. You know, if I did not believe in the inspiration of Scripture, I would believe in the inspiration of Scripture just by reading John's Gospel. It's so wonderfully put together. It's got layers, layers, you know, like Donkey said in Shrek. There are just layers and layers here that you've got to get hold of.

Man at his worst, but man at his best. Charles Coulson was involved in the Watergate scandal with President Nixon, and he wrote a book called Born Again to describe how he was converted in prison.

[12:50] He was one of Nixon's advisors, and in March 1973, for three weeks, they attempted to cover up a scandal in which President Nixon had lied to the American Congress.

They thought, yes, surely, these few, these inner circle, will be able to cover up for President Nixon. Political zealots all on his side, but then he said, we all began to crack.

The first to crack was John Dean. He told the President everything, and then, just two weeks later, he went to the prosecutors and offered to testify against the President.

His reason, he says, as he candidly admits, his reason was to save his own skin. After that, everyone, says Coulson, started a scramble to protect themselves.

What we know today as the great Watergate cover-up lasted only three weeks. Some of the most powerful politicians in the world, and we couldn't keep a lie for more than three weeks.

[13:52] And here's the point. He went to prison, and when he was in prison, he was reading Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis, and C.S. Lewis was arguing for the authenticity of the resurrection of Jesus on the basis that in 1 Corinthians 15, it says that over 500 witnesses saw this.

And then he thought about it, and he said to himself, why would anybody lie about the resurrection of Jesus if they knew they were going to die? We couldn't keep a secret for three weeks.

We were going to save our skin by not going to prison. These were people who were prepared to die. Months and years later, still prepared to die for something they knew that was true.

He thought the resurrection must be true, and he became a believer in Jesus. He was born again. And when he left prison, he set up a prison fellowship, and he visited people in prison.

I've got a picture of him here. Next slide. Born again. A very powerful and influential man. A very good man, but a liar.

[15:01] Man at his best, and man at his worst. But then transformed by the Spirit of God. And when I think about this, I think of the 18th of October, 1981, when I was born again.

When I encountered the living God, and when I knew a peace within. And I knew I was changed. I didn't know all that was to come, but I knew I was a different man.

Born again. We must all be born again. So Nicodemus, a man, but a man at best. As Rabbi Burns would say, it's been Burns night, hasn't it?

So there you go. The man is but a guinea stamp. The rank is but a guinea stamp. A man's a man for all, for all that, he says, for all that. No matter what his label.

We are men at best, in darkness, in night, and in need of light, in need of truth, in need of regeneration.

[16:09] You must be born again. So what do we learn about being born again? Next slide. We all need to be born again. Sorry, go back a slide. It's my fault.

Go back a slide. We all need to be born again. All of us. And then that slide. Being born again is not the same as having a religious belief or conviction or experience of religious phenomenon.

Lots of people have religious beliefs. Lots of people worship in churches and in mosques and in synagogues and in temples. Lots of people worship.

Lots of people have conviction. Some will even die for their convictions. Some will kill others in the name of their convictions. And lots of people have religious experiences.

They see things and they hear things that make them think that God is real. But none of that is enough to be born again. For to be born again is not simply to have an experience, not simply to have a belief, not simply to have a practice.

[17:18] To be born again is a spiritual and phenomenal transformation of the individual heart and mind.

Nicodemus came to Jesus and he said, verse 2, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. He had the knowledge. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.

Maybe he even had the experience. If you've watched The Chosen, and it's a wonderful episode in The Chosen when Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, the movie suggests or the TV show suggests that Nicodemus had seen the transformation of Mary Magdalene, the demons driven out from her, something that he could not do.

It's pure speculation. But there was a buzz around Jesus and there were Pharisees who knew that Jesus was genuine article. He was not like most of the Pharisees who said, this man is not from God.

He really believed that he was. He had the belief. He had the conviction. Maybe even had the experience. But he was not yet born again. So the next thing we learn, next slide, is to be born again is a work of God alone which starts with an inner regeneration that leads to an outer transformation of heart, mind, and behavior.

[18:39] That's a lengthy sentence, isn't it? But let me break it down for you. Jesus talks about water and blood.

So in verse 3, sorry, in verse 2, he says, 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.

And Jesus apparently ignores him at first and says, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. 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.

Nicodemus, in other words, says, none of this makes sense. I'm an old man. I just can't physically go back and start again.

And of course, that is to state the obvious. And Jesus says, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. So the question that is often asked is what does he mean?

[19:40] Why this mention of water and the Spirit? And there are various suggestions. So some people say water refers to natural childbirth and the Spirit refers to supernatural second birth.

And in the context, that does make sense. You might say the water refers to the amniotic fluid that surrounds the baby in the womb. So Jesus is saying, you must be born once, but then you must be born a second time in order to see the kingdom of heaven.

That makes sense. Some people say the water refers to baptism. That is a commonly held view among Roman Catholics. It refers to baptism and the Catholics even go on to say that unless you've been baptized, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.

But when you are baptized, even as a baby, you are born again. That doesn't seem to me to be what Jesus is saying here. For myself, I think Titus explains to us what it means.

For Titus talks about you have been born again with the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit, Titus 3, verse 5.

[20:57] The washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. So water refers to the cleansing that comes when a person believes in Jesus.

The cleansing of the precious blood of Christ and the renewal of the Holy Spirit refers to the transformation that takes place that shows itself in the life. So back to what we said.

To be born again is a work of God which starts with an inner regeneration. It starts on the inside and it leads to an outer transformation of heart. It shows itself on the outside in your mind and in your behavior.

The washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Now, Nicodemus does not understand this. He's all perplexed.

Jesus says in verse 7, you should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. I'll come back to that.

[21:59] So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. How can this be? Nicodemus has. And then Jesus says you are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things. Why?

The mild rebuke. Because Ezekiel should know chapter 36 and chapter, sorry, Nicodemus should know chapter 36 and 37 of Ezekiel that talks about God giving a new heart and a new spirit and then he took the prophet into the valley of dry bones where all of the bones were dry and all separated off one from another.

The scene of an ancient battlefield. All these spread out and the Holy Spirit says to Ezekiel, can these bones live? Can they be born again?

And Ezekiel very cleverly says, well, you know, Lord. It seems impossible to me, but you know, Lord. And then God says, prophesy to the breath, prophesy to the breath and say, come wind, come breath, blow upon these bones that they may live.

And the prophet sees a great army arises as bone comes to bone and flesh upon flesh and sinew upon sinew and a great army arises. They live again. They're born again.

[23:13] Nicodemus should have known what it means. To be born again is a radical transformation that starts on the inside and leads to a completely different person on the outside.

Only God can do that. No human. You alone, Lord, knows. And so Jesus makes it clear what new birth is.

It is, next slide, a supernatural birth. The birth of water and the Holy Spirit, a supernatural birth. Only God can do it, which is why John says in chapter 1, he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

But as many as received him, he gave right to become the children of God. Children born, not of natural desire, nor of a husband's will, but children born of God.

Yeah? Now, my children were born, I'll not go into detail, but my children were born of a natural desire and a husband's will and a wife's will.

[24:24] Very much of a wife's will. Equally loved, I should say, Sophie, just in case you're shocked. But when I was born again, when we are born again, it is the Father's will.

It is a supernatural birth. And it is a sovereign work of God. Jesus says, think about the wind. Listen to it.

See what it does. But where does it come from? Where is it going? You don't know. How did it arise? You don't know. But that doesn't matter. What you see is what happens when it comes.

What you hear is the phenomena. What you see is the impact it has. You don't know the origins.

You don't know the intent. But you do know what it does. And so it is of everyone born of the Spirit

of God, he says.

It is not for you to ask, why me? It is for you to experience that and say, look at the difference it has made. you cannot control the wind and you cannot control God's will.

[25:40] It is a sovereign work of God and it is a radical work of God because if you think of the wind and its impact, you see what it does, how powerful the wind is at times, how it can destroy buildings and literally move land and completely change and transform the environment.

When the work of God is done in the life of a believer, who knows what it can produce. And sometimes the wind's effects can be very, very dramatic and we can see it immediately when a person is born again and sometimes it just gently blows.

But transformation is always the result of that. You must be born again. Supernatural birth, a sovereign work of God and a radical work of God, it changes us.

It's not enough to say I believe in God. It's not enough to say I believe the Bible and I read it. It's not enough to say I worship in church. You must be able to say I have been born again by the Spirit of God and I am not what I was.

I am changed by the power of the Spirit at work in me and look at the evidence in my life. Do you often look back and say, I always, always when I think about this, look back and say, wow, I can't believe how much I've changed.

[27:15] since 1981, I can't believe how much I've changed. But I don't praise myself for that. It is a work of the Spirit of God.

I am what I am by the grace of God. And so, next slide. New birth is possible because of the incarnational work of Jesus Christ upon the cross.

In these last few verses from verse 13 onwards, Jesus speaks of earthly things, he says in verse 12, to help us understand why we must depend upon the incarnational work of Jesus.

Incarnation means of the flesh. And chapter 1 was all about how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And then, Jesus did certain things on earth that we must heed and must respond to in order to receive this born-again life.

in verses 13 and 14, 13 to 15 rather, he says, no one has gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man. And again, you might remember in John chapter 1, Jesus talks about the angels of God ascending and descended upon the Son of Man.

[28:26] So here he's saying, I came down from heaven, as it were, on Jacob's ladder. I came down from heaven and there were certain things that I did. And I want you to link it to what happened before.

So he says, just as Moses lifted up the serpent or the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.

He's taking them back to Numbers 21, when the children of Israel were rebelled against God and they were bitten by venomous snakes as an act of judgment.

And then Moses said, oh, what's going to happen? They're all going to die. So God said to him, I want you to make a brass snake and I want you to put it up in the middle of the camp and I want you to tell everyone who's dying, look at the snake and you will live.

Look and live. That's the next slide. Look and live. And this is the first thing Jesus is saying to us. If you want to be born again, because you must be born again, you must look and live.

[29:30] Well, you see, there is no snake in the wilderness that I can look upon. Well, the next slide. Believe and receive. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, 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. In other words, if you're going to look and live, if you're going to be born again, you must look to Jesus upon the cross.

The cross represents for you the symbol that you look at and believe in and trust in for your salvation. Nothing in my hands I bring.

Simply to thy cross I cling. I wear the cross to remind myself every day that upon this I hope for all eternity.

You don't have to wear a cross, by the way, but you have to have the cross in your heart and mind always. For I have been crucified with Christ as Paul, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

[30:46] And the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me. It's not just a historical event of something that happened 2,000 years ago.

It is something that is in my heart. When I look upon the cross, I say, He loved me and gave Himself for me. It's as if I were the only one, He died for me.

It is personal. It is mine. How marvelous. How wonderful. And a person who can say that is a born-again person. I look.

I live. I believe. I receive. And the next slide. I heed. And I hear. Not quite finished yet.

Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict.

[31:48] Notice that. You're taken into the law court. This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Remember what I was saying? A man at night. A man at best. This is a man at best. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done in God.

Here we are by nature. Little Nicodemus is at best. But look at what we can become by the Spirit of God. John says, I'm going to take you into the law court.

I'm going to tell you the verdict. The verdict is this. If you believe, you will be saved. And saved for all eternity.

[32:52] If you reject, you will be condemned. And condemned for all eternity. And here is your choice. Here is your choice.

Will you walk out of this place this day rejecting? Or will you walk out of this place this day believing?

Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling. Jesus, lover of my soul.

It's up to you. I'm going to slide it out Thank you.