

Born Again

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Date: 10 December 2023

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[0 : 00] My name is Ray Burbank. If I haven't met you yet, I serve as one of the elders at Charlotte Chapel in the City Center. And it's great to be back with you again this morning as we worship our Lord Jesus Christ.

If you would, turn in your Bible. We're going to be looking in the New Testament this morning in the Gospel of John, chapter 3. John, chapter 3, and we'll be looking at verses 1 to 21.

So John, chapter 3, starting in verse 1. 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?

[1 : 12] Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? 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, 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? 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 we bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

If I have told you earthly things, and 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.

[2 : 21] 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. And this is the judgment.

The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the 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.

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. Let's pray.

[3 : 26] Father, would you help us now as we look here in your word? God, give us eyes to see. Give us ears to hear.

Give us a heart to believe, to receive what you have to say to us this morning. Would you help us by your Spirit, God, to change us, to make us more like Jesus.

Help us, we pray in his name. Amen. So, my wife and I sometimes struggle to agree on what we're going to watch on a TV show or a movie sometimes.

Maybe some of you have this same challenge. Especially, for some reason, during Christmas time. I don't know if any of you are familiar with Hallmark Christmas movies. But my wife, Lauren, loves them.

And it's just, you know, really predictable love stories. Really kind of cheesy. But sometimes I just have to suffer through them. There is one show, actually, that we do agree on.

[4 : 28] It's not really a Christmas show. But it's called The Midwife. You know, it's this show that depicts midwives in East London in the 1950s and 60s.

And I think one of the things that makes this show so appealing to so many people is it really brings out the kind of wonder it is when a new baby is born. When a new life is right there before your eyes and you get to hold that little baby.

You know, it's something that many of us are familiar with. But it's still kind of this mystery almost. This wonderful thing. How this human being comes together in its mother's womb.

And now we get to hold him or her. You know, I've known some of the most kind of macho men in the world who never really understand what's the big deal with having a baby until they have their own baby for the first time.

And they hold that little baby and they just can't take their eyes off that baby. It's a wonderful thing. We can be almost kind of speechless when we encounter a new birth like that.

[5 : 34] Well, the wonder of a new birth is what Jesus uses here in John chapter 3 to describe what it's like when a person receives eternal life with God.

You know, as Christians, we might be familiar with this phrase, born again, right? That's what he says. He must be born again. Or we often, as Christians, often talk about how we've been saved by Jesus.

But what does that really mean? Or what is this event that Christians call conversion? Well, it's not something that missionaries do to other people or that something that any one person can do to themselves.

Instead, to receive eternal life with God, Jesus says, you must be born again. What this passage is teaching us this morning is that salvation is caused by a supernatural new birth and that it's only in Jesus.

So let's look through this passage this morning. And I want us to see here that from this, you know, the greatest evangelist of all time, Jesus Christ, he's going to show us three aspects of this new birth.

[6 : 55] Even though this might be a familiar passage to many of you, I do trust that for you Christians in the room, that you will find from this passage an assurance in what it means to be saved.

You will find helpful instruction in how to share this good news of Jesus with your neighbor. And maybe if you're here this morning, and maybe you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, or maybe you're unsure if you are, well, you will also find some incredible truths in this passage.

You know, we're celebrating Christmas this month, right? Well, why is Christmas, why is the birth of Jesus such great news? Well, in this passage, Jesus is going to explain for us why he came into the world.

So the first aspect of the new birth that Jesus talks about is that the new birth is necessary. The new birth is necessary.

This is what we see in verses 1 through 3. So we see here a man named Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee. He was a ruler of the Jews.

[8 : 01] He was part of what they called the Jewish ruling council. You know, we see that Nicodemus, he's kind of a big deal in the eyes of the Jewish public. He was like an elite religious teacher.

He was a member of the Pharisees, this group who was known to be the strictest keepers of the Jewish law. You know, if anybody knew the scriptures, if anybody knew how to be right with God, it would be Nicodemus, right?

And it says this Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. At night. Either maybe hoping to not be seen, talking to this controversial teacher, Jesus, or maybe just to be able to have an uninterrupted conversation with Jesus, apart from all the crowds that have been following him.

And he says, look there in verse 2, Nicodemus says to Jesus, 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.

So Nicodemus kind of has this positive response to Jesus. And it says because he noticed these signs that Jesus had been doing. Well, what are these signs? Well, if you look just a few verses earlier at the end of chapter 2, the end of chapter 2 in verse 23, it says, the author John writes that, Now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.

[9 : 32] These were signs that Jesus was performing. These were acts that demonstrated his identity as the promised Messiah, the rescuer for Israel, for God's people, who was promised in the Old Testament prophets.

He was doing these actions that were demonstrating that he is this promised Messiah who has come. We were told that his first sign earlier there in chapter 2 was that he changed water into wine at a wedding.

There were others that we'll see in the Gospel of John, like giving sight to the blind, raising a man from the dead even. So these were signs trying to help people see who Jesus really is, the promised Savior.

But look what it says in verse 24 there at the end of chapter 2. In verse 24 it says, 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.

So many believed, but Jesus knew that not all were genuinely believing in him. There was something missing which he knew about, something that was necessary for someone to truly believe and receive Jesus.

[10 : 52] And you see how that last verse ended there in chapter 2. It says, He himself knew what was in man. And what does verse 1 say of chapter 3?

Now there was a man, Nicodemus. So the author here, John, he's trying to show us, here's an example now of a person, even a religiously elite person, who was responding to Jesus, but was missing something essential.

So look down there in chapter 3. In verse 3, Jesus replies to Nicodemus. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

So Jesus is revealing the true issue here. He's getting to the point. He goes beyond, you know, Nicodemus' kind of affirmation of him to show a deeper issue that Nicodemus and all who are seeing Jesus' signs need to understand.

A person cannot enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Another way of translating born again is born from above. He says to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born again.

[12 : 08] Entering the kingdom of God, that's something that all Jewish people at this time would have been central to their thinking about what it means, what salvation means, what being in relationship with God, that's what that means, is to be part of his people, part of his eternal kingdom.

You know, the prophet Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 9, spoke of this future kingdom in the last days when God's Messiah will sit on King David's throne forever.

He will establish righteousness righteousness and justice in the earth, what we're all longing for. You know, another way that the author here, John, communicates entering the kingdom of God is he uses this phrase, eternal life.

Eternal life. To enter the kingdom of God is to enter eternal life. Eternal life in the last days, for forever, and even something that you can know today in relationship with God.

To be a citizen in God's eternal kingdom. To be a citizen in God's kingdom. Jesus says, the most important thing a person needs is not knowledge, not social status, not even a positive affinity for Jesus.

[13 : 27] What is necessary is a new creation. A new birth. So, in summary, Nicodemus is saying, Jesus, we know.

But Jesus says, actually, you don't know. What about us? You know, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, you would say that Jesus has changed your life and you have entrusted yourself to him.

Well, this text is reminding us that just as we've experienced that transformation that Christ brings when we turn from our sin and we entrust ourselves to him and follow him.

Well, for our friends who are not believers in Jesus, even if they are maybe the most nicest, most moral people that we know, they must be born again.

Even if they're friendly towards your faith in Christ, when you speak to them about Jesus, even if that, you know, positive attitude that they have towards religious things, that's not what is most needed.

[14 : 36] They must be born again. You know, I lived, Lauren and I lived in South Asia for a number of years. We had many friends who were Hindus, who were Muslims, and many of them

had a much more positive, you know, affinity towards Jesus, even a more biblically kind of aligned moral convictions, even more than our secular friends in America or even in Scotland do.

But is that what is necessary for entering the kingdom of God? No. No, friends, we can't forget what is most important for our neighbor's eternal well-being.

If we truly love our neighbor, we will not gloss over what is most important for them. Maybe for others of you, you need to consider, has Jesus encountered you this way?

Have you ever thought, hey, Jesus, I know. And Jesus, through the Bible and the Spirit of God, respond, actually, you don't know.

You're missing something that is necessary. You know, it's easy to view the Christian life in kind of a superficial way. You know, it's easy to think that a Christian is just someone who goes to church on Sunday, maybe wears Christian jewelry because they said a certain prayer at age nine or because they were sprinkled with water as an infant, but that means that they are a Christian.

[16:09] But my friend, you know, even for some that may be thinking, you know, Ray, I do want to follow Jesus. I do want to have eternal life with God, but I just, I need to clean up my life before I can do that.

Well, it's, friend, it's not that your view of God's standard is too big. Actually, it's that it's too small. You need way more than a cleaned up life to be right with God.

You need a new creation. Wow, so what do we do? What do we do, friends? I mean, how do we make sense of this necessary thing called the new birth?

All that we know so far is that it's necessary. Well, we need to keep reading to see what Jesus says, but let me say this for now. Salvation always entails a transformation, a transformation from death to life.

It is not superficial. It is supernatural. It is a new life coming in to being. So, friends, let's not settle for a superficial vision of conversion.

[17:24] When you think about your own testimony of how you came to know Christ or when you consider the spiritual state of your neighbor in love. So, we've seen that the new birth is necessary and I'm reminded of Ephesians chapter 2 where it says, you know, that without Christ we were spiritually dead because our sin and rebellion against God caused us to be just spiritually dead.

We were living the life the way we wanted to. But then it says in Ephesians 2 verse 4, the greatest conjunction in the whole Bible, but God.

But God made us alive with Christ. And that's the next aspect of the new birth we see is that the new birth is God's work.

The new birth is God's work. This is what we see in verses 4 to 8. If you look at verse 4, you know, Nicodemus is confused. He says, how can a man be born when he is old?

You know, he's wondering that, Jesus, this is impossible. He's thinking about a physical kind of human birth. But in verses 5 to 8, we see Jesus explain the nature of this new birth that he's talking about.

[18:39] Jesus says in verse 5, 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, of the flesh, is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit, is Spirit.

So to be born again is to be born of water and the Spirit. You know, some see here in the word water maybe a possible reference to baptism. But it seems best to read it actually in accordance with some Old Testament scripture.

If you look in Ezekiel chapter 36, I'll just read a couple of verses from that. In Ezekiel chapter 36, this is where the Lord is assuring his people that he will rescue them from exile.

He will atone for their sin. In Ezekiel 36, verse 25, the Lord says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean.

I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

[19:49] And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. This is what it means to be born again.

To be born of water and the spirit. It's this simultaneous event where God comes in and cleanses us of the filth of our bad deeds. He removes that hard heart of stone that resists God and gives us a new heart that desires the things of God.

In Titus chapter 3, Paul, the apostle Paul calls this the washing of rebirth. It's God who does this by his Holy Spirit who will come and dwell inside of us.

This is where new life comes from. From the Holy Spirit of God. This is what we call spiritual regeneration. To be made alive by the Holy Spirit.

this is what it looks like to be born again. So Jesus tells Nicodemus and he tells him in verse 7, right? Do not marvel that I said to you you must be born again.

[21 : 05] He's saying don't be surprised at me saying this, Nicodemus. You know, Nicodemus would have been familiar with Ezekiel and other passages in the Old Testament which speak about this.

But Nicodemus is surprised. He's taken back by Jesus' words. He can't get past this idea of physical birth. But Jesus says that which is flesh gives birth to flesh.

This is not a physical action that we accomplish ourselves. Jesus is talking about being born again into the kingdom of God.

You know, Nicodemus is thinking about being born in the kingdom of God. No, no, no, no. Jesus says you must be born again into the kingdom of God. It's like the wind he says in verse 8, right? The wind blows where it wishes but you don't have any control of it. It's out of your control. It is God's work not a human's work.

[22 : 04] You know, it says one of my former pastors used to say a lot of people think you know about Christians like this. You know, oh you Christians you know, God is just a crutch.

For you. You know, to help you get through life. But I say well, you don't know the half of it. God is not a crutch. He's the stretcher you know, that carries me to life.

I mean, I was dead in the ambulance. I didn't need you know, just a some medicine or a wheelchair or a better diet. I needed the basic necessities of air in my lungs, blood, in my veins.

I needed life. And that's what the Spirit of God does in the new birth. So for us, friends, this leads us to pray. Because it's ultimately out of our hands in the end.

Pray and ask God to do what only God can do in your neighbor's heart, in your children's heart, in your grandchildren's heart.

[23 : 05] Don't put your hope just in reason or eloquent speech to lead someone to faith in Jesus. I mean, those things are important, but only God can give them this new birth that they require.

So pray for transformation. So we see the new birth is necessary. This new birth is God's work, right? But Nicodemus still doesn't understand.

He still doesn't understand. Verse 9, he says, you know, how can this, how can these things be? How is this possible? Friends, here's the heart of our passage this morning.

We're going to see that the new birth is possible because of Jesus. This is our final aspect we'll think about this morning. The new birth is possible because of Jesus.

You know, as we see, Nicodemus still doesn't understand, but we shouldn't blame him as far as his abilities, his intellectual abilities. He's obviously probably a very smart guy. it's not due to just being unintelligent or being unable to think logically.

[24 : 15] He's one of the most qualified of all the religious teachers. And Jesus points this out. Look at verse 10. He says, are you not the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?

How is it that even you, Nicodemus, don't understand this new birth? Well, the answer is that Nicodemus and his Pharisee friends. They have not received Jesus himself.

Jesus says in verse 11, you know, truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you, plural, you, Nicodemus and the Pharisees, do not receive our testimony.

If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? they have rejected Jesus, the only one who can truly teach them this truth.

He says in verse 13, no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the son of man. That son of man, Jesus is talking about himself there. In the Old Testament prophet Daniel, he spoke of this son of man who would be the Messiah, the one who would come and rescue God's people.

[25 : 29] Jesus is saying that only he is the true teacher of Israel. And then he says in verse 12, or sorry, verse 14, verse 14, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up, and whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

And this is a passage Jesus is referring to in the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, chapter 21, where God provided the people of Israel when they were in the desert, and they had been bitten by venomous snakes.

God provided a way of rescue where he had Moses create a bronze sculpture of a snake, attach it to a pole, and hold it up, lift it up.

And he said that if any of the people who were bitten by the snakes look to God's means of rescue, look to that snake, they would be saved. They would not die.

So it was by looking to the object which God had provided, lifted up on a pole, that's how they would be healed. Think about it.

[26 : 40] It's not, it wasn't by being in close proximity to the pole. It wasn't by just being aware of its existence, or being in favor of the idea of a snake on a pole.

No, it was when they entrusted themselves to God's means of salvation, by looking to it as their only hope of rescue.

And so it is with Jesus Christ. Jesus was lifted up on the cross to atone for the sins of many, bearing the wrath of God against sin, to take it away.

And he's lifted up to the highest seat of authority in heaven now. He has authority in heaven and on earth. And he is the king of kings. He is lifted up and through receiving him, looking to him and believing in his name, we can be born again.

We can have eternal life. We can enter God's kingdom. In verse 16, I'm sure you could quote it to me. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.

[27 : 57] Whoever believes in him should not perish, but will have eternal life. And you know, John references this in another way at the beginning of his gospel.

In chapter 1, in verses 12 and 13, he says, Yet to all who did receive him, that is Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. Wow. You see, the problem with Nicodemus and the Pharisees is that they were not looking to Jesus.

They did not look to him as God's chosen Messiah. But you know what, friends? It's not just a problem the Pharisees had. It's a problem all of us have today.

That apart from God's grace, none of us would look to Jesus. And many still today do not look to him. Now, you might say to me, come on, Ray, you just told me earlier that we need a bigger view of God's standard, what it means to enter the kingdom of God, like a new creation, right?

[29 : 15] And now you're telling me all that's necessary is just to look to Jesus? Just look, really? Yes. Look. Look. Look and live.

It's not in your human action of looking or believing that saves you, but the object that you're looking at. God in Jesus Christ. You know, the prophet Isaiah said that the Messiah, when he comes, he will be like one from whom people turn their faces away.

Like the homeless guy outside Tesco when we try not to make eye contact, that kind of feeling. People will turn their faces away. You don't want to look to him.

You want to look to yourself, right? Your own will for your life. You don't want a suffering, crucified, and exalted king. You want a healthy, applaudable, and safer you.

And that's why it says in verse 19, this is the verdict. That life, that light has come into the world, but people love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

[30 : 35] Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. See, Jesus has come into the world, but we have rejected him because when we come to him, we know that our own evil hearts will be exposed.

We know those things that we have done in our life that we should receive God's just condemnation will be exposed. But Jesus says, friends, the good news is that God so loved the world that he made it possible for us to be forgiven.

That those things we're ashamed of that we will be condemned for, he can take that away. So there may be some here this morning, listen to me right now, and you've never entrusted your life to Christ.

You've never known this new birth. And I want to tell you, friends, Jesus is lifted up in front of you right now in this scripture. Look to him.

Don't look away. Look and believe in the name of Jesus. Jesus. And that doesn't just mean that you acknowledge he truly exists. I mean, even the demons of Satan believe that.

[31 : 44] Instead, it means that you believe he is the son of God who came to rescue sinners like you and me. Acknowledge your need for him. Acknowledge that new creation, that new heart that you know only he can give you.

And he will save you. You can tell God right now, this morning, God, I entrust my life to Jesus Christ today as my only rescuer.

And I believe that through him you will make me your child. And he will. And maybe for you who are believers, my brothers and sisters in Christ, I have a question for you.

Are you still looking at Jesus? Are you looking to Jesus as your lifted up Savior and lifted up King? have you traded him for lesser saviors or lesser kings in your life?

Well, this text teaches us to center our lives on Jesus in our families, in our occupation, in our finances, in all of life because we owe all to the grace of God.

[32 : 53] It also teaches us to center our evangelism, how we share about Jesus with others, to center it on the person of Jesus. don't be ashamed to present Jesus as the only way to be right with God.

If people are rejecting Jesus, well, that's to be expected and we should pray. Pray for your children, pray for your colleagues, pray and ask God to do what only he can do in their heart.

This is the new birth, friends, and I started off with that example of call the midwife, and I was just reminded this week of a Christmas movie, actually, that I think in some ways depicts somewhat of what we've seen about the new birth, and it's a wonderful life movie.

It's probably my all-time favorite Christmas movie. But we see this story of George who becomes just at rock bottom at one point.

He's really struggling and he realizes there's this trauma, there's this kind of chaos going on, and he just wants to give up. But then he has this experience where this angel comes and shows him what life would be like if he weren't around, and basically as a dead man, and he's trying to go around and fix it and try to convince everybody, no, no, that's not the problem, let's remember who I am, you know, but he's dead, right?

[34 : 19] And then at the end here, there's this great scene where he's sitting there praying, all he can do is pray, and he asks God, God, I want to live again, please let me live again, and then like the wind, right, the wind comes in, you know, and everything changes, and he's different, right, after that, he goes back and he's, he just feels like the richest man in town, and in some ways, that shows us a little bit of what we've been thinking about, that new life in Christ, new birth, like the wind, it's God's work, and it's through Jesus, friends, he truly transforms lives, so friends, before I pray, we're, oh, oh, great God of highest heaven, and it has this great