

You Must Be Born Again: John 3:1-8
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“You Must Be Born Again” is the title of the sermon this morning as we move into John chapter 3 in our study through the 4th Gospel. This is a well-known passage of Scripture for those who are familiar with the Bible. This is Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus. And this passage contains one of the most well-known verses in all the Bible. John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

That verse, and this passage as a whole, is well-known for good reason. It is such a glorious truth that God so loved the world that He sent His own beloved Son to die for us such that anyone who believes in Him will be forgiven, will not face the punishment of hell, but instead will inherit eternal life. That is very, very Good News!

What we have leading up to that famous verse is this very significant interaction between Jesus and this inquisitive and confused Pharisee. The focus of their conversation is what Jesus has to say about the necessity of being born again.

If you’ve grown up in the church, if you’re familiar with the Bible and have been around evangelical churches that use this phrase a lot, you probably miss the shock value of that imagery—being born again. But if you put yourself in the place Nicodemus, maybe you can see why he would be scratching his head, wondering what Jesus was talking about. I hope today we’ll understand what Jesus was talking about, and why it’s so important.

Jesus is the master teacher. Interestingly, here He’s talking to Nicodemus, who apparently was a very influential teacher himself. But Jesus is on a whole different level. And the Teacher of all Teachers, in these verses uses this illustration of being born again in order to teach us a crucial spiritual lesson.

In these verses we’ll consider our need for regeneration and then reflect on the divine miracle of regeneration. And then at the end of the sermon we’ll look briefly at James 1:18 and see the origin of regeneration and the means of regeneration.

Our Need for Regeneration

In verses 1-2 we’re introduced to Nicodemus. And the first thing we need to notice is the connection with the previous paragraph. The last verse in chapter 2 tells us that Jesus “needed no one to bear witness about *man*, for he himself knew what was in *man*.” And the first verse in chapter 3 introduces Nicodemus by

saying, “Now there was a *man* of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.”

Do you remember the sermon from last Sunday? Jesus knows. Jesus can see through superficial faith. He can tell the difference between those who are truly trusting in Him and willing to follow Him and submit to Him, on the one hand, and those who are merely enamored by His power, on the other hand. The crowds who were simply impressed by His miracles, Jesus didn’t entrust Himself to them, because He knew all people. He knows.

It seems that John is introducing Nicodemus to us as a representative of that group. Here’s someone who is intrigued by the signs Jesus has performed. In fact, Nicodemus mentions that in verse 2 as he gives this very cordial and affirming greeting, “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.” Nicodemus recognizes how unique Jesus is, that He must have some special connection with God. And yet, it seems that Nicodemus, at least at this point, sees Jesus *merely* as a gifted teacher and miracle-worker.

Jesus cuts to the chase in verse 3. I spent some time this week reflecting on the way this conversation begins. And it’s so interesting to me that Jesus doesn’t even really respond to Nicodemus’s statement. There are a lot of things Jesus could have said in response to that. But it’s like He ignores it and cuts right to the heart of what Nicodemus needs, what every person needs.

Jesus states it very emphatically. He uses this phrase, “truly, truly.” The Greek is “amen, amen.” He uses it here and in verse 5.

In verse 3, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” And 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.” In other words, apart from this miraculous, spiritual rebirth, you have no hope of eternal life, you have no hope of going to heaven. Apart from being born again, you do not really belong to God, no matter how religious you may think you are.

Don Carson writes, “If Nicodemus, with his knowledge, gifts, understanding, position and integrity cannot enter the promised kingdom by virtue of his standing and works, what hope is there for anyone who seeks salvation along such lines? Even for a Nicodemus, there must be a radical transformation, the generation of new life, comparable with physical birth. Barrett (p. 206) finely cites Calvin: ‘by the term *born again* He means not the amendment of a part but the renewal of the whole nature. Hence it

follows that there is nothing in us that is not defective' (Calvin, 1. 63)."¹

Do you see how this teaching highlights our need, our depravity, our sinfulness? Here's the deal. And this is what makes Christianity such a radical thing. We don't just need some help. We don't merely need a bit of improvement here or there in our lives. We don't simply need a life coach to come in and tweak this or that about how we're going about things.

We need to be made anew. We need God to give us a brand new life. We need spiritual life. Do you see what Jesus is getting at? We don't need to be improved, merely. We need to be created anew.

And Nicodemus's question in verse 4 just highlights the need all the more. He stumbles over the analogy. He isn't getting it. Like the Jews in chapter 2, when Jesus made that statement about the temple, and they didn't get it. Jesus said in 2:19, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." And they responded, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" They didn't get it.

And it seems that Nicodemus, likewise, is not catching on to the spiritual significance of what Jesus is saying about the new birth. Nicodemus asks, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

This reveals the spiritual blindness that is part of our need for regeneration. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." We're not going to figure this out on our own. We need new life. We need spiritual eyes to see this. We're spiritually ignorant. We're spiritually unable to take any step toward God. We're completely bankrupt of any resources that could get us into a real relationship with God.

Can you see the predicament we're in? We're hopeless on our own. And yet we try so hard, in so many ways, to improve our lives on our own, in our own strength. The Pharisees, the group Nicodemus was part of, were masters at this. They had their rules and lists, and they were doing their best to keep in line so they could have something to commend them to God. Jesus cuts right through all of that and says, what you really need is to be born again.

James Montgomery Boice, who was a preacher in Philadelphia, used an analogy of painting the pump. Many people

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 190). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

will spend a lot of energy trying to improve themselves in various ways. And that may make life more bearable for the person and those around them. But, Boice says, “from God’s point of view it is a bit like painting a pump that is over a well of bad water. It is true that a painted pump looks better than an old rusty pump. It is true that the pump can be elevated. It can be given a gold handle. A person can write poems about it, even construct a monument to it. But nothing that is done to the pump will change the fact that it is over bad water. No embellishment will change the fact that bad water comes from it.”²

My goal in this first part of the sermon is to help you see your need for regeneration. You and I need more than a fresh coat of paint. We need more than some new hardware. We need more than some superficial improvements, some cosmetic changes. We need to be completely changed from the inside out.

Charles Spurgeon put it this way: “The process of the new birth is so thorough that it is a great deal more than an alteration of a man’s way of thinking, even upon the best of topics. A man may now think it his duty to be religious, whereas once he was debauched: he may now conceive it to be his duty to be sober, whereas before he was drunken: he may feel it his duty now to be diligent, whereas before he was a sluggard: but all these put together would not amount to a new birth.”³

You must be born again!

The Divine Miracle of Regeneration

Well, now let’s talk about the divine miracle of regeneration. And we’ll start with a definition of what this is. What does it mean to be born again, to be regenerated. Those are synonyms, by the way. To be re-born, re-generated.

Here’s what our Statement of Faith says about regeneration. The Abstract of Principles says, “Regeneration is a change of heart, wrought by the Holy Spirit, who quickeneth the dead in trespasses and sins enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the Word of God, and renewing their whole nature, so that they love and practice holiness. It is a work of God’s free and special grace alone.”

Regeneration is new birth. It’s being born again. It’s getting a new heart. It is new life. And it is something God does to a person’s heart to transform them from the inside out.

² Boice, *John*, page 179.

³ Spurgeon, C. H. (1879). Every Man’s Necessity. In *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (Vol. 25, p. 50). London: Passmore & Alabaster.

And that is a key point in understanding this. Being born again is not something you initiate. It's not something you can accomplish. In fact, you don't play any role in it whatsoever. Think about it. Think about the illustration Jesus, the master teacher, is using (and using very intentionally). What role does a baby have in being born? Nothing, really. The mom does all the work. A doctor helps out. The baby is passive. Being born is not something the baby does. It's something that happens to the baby.

That's consistent with Jesus' illustration here. Jesus is not telling us to make ourselves born again. That's impossible. He says, "You must be born again." These are passive verbs. There is someone else doing the action. This is not something that you do. It's something that happens to you.

It's striking, if you take the time to think about it. Jesus is declaring something that absolutely must happen in our lives if we are to enter the kingdom of God. But even in the way He declares the necessity of this, it's apparent that we can't make it happen. He's saying it to Nicodemus, and to us. But it's not actually something we can pull off. It's something that must happen to us. It's something that God, by His Spirit, must bring about.

Let me develop this point by making a more specific point. Regeneration comes before saving faith, not vice versa. A person doesn't first trust in Christ, and then they are born again. I think that's a common misperception of what the Bible teaches. Rather, a person is born again and then they believe. The two are almost simultaneous. There's not a gap between them. They happen basically in the same moment. But the point is that God's work of regeneration must come first, or else we would not believe. Until God initiates the new birth, we remain in our spiritual blindness and ignorance.

Let me read you a couple Old Testament passages that describe God's work of regeneration. Jeremiah 24:7 says, "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart." And Ezekiel 11:19-20, "And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." And Ezekiel 36:26-27 is very similar, "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. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

These are great pictures of what new birth is. It's a heart transplant. Before God regenerates us, we have hearts of stone.

Spiritually, we have cold, dead stone hearts. There is no spiritual life. No desire for God. No love for His glory. And as long as we have a cold, dead heart there will be no faith in God. But then God does this heart operation, removing the stone heart and giving us a heart of flesh. He gives us a heart that beats, and has life, and yearns for spiritual things, and loves Him, and trusts in Him. That's regeneration. It's a transformation from the inside out. And God initiates it. It's not something we do. We are entirely passive in regeneration.

In the New Testament we see this language of being "born" or "born of God," or "born again." For instance, John 1:12-13, which we studied several weeks ago, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." To become a Christian, one first has to experience this spiritual birth. One has to be born of God. This is something God does to us, not something we do ourselves. As the verse says, this birth is not of the will of man, but of God.

And then here in John 3 Jesus speaks of the necessity of being born again. The Greek word translated "again" can also mean "from above." Later in this same chapter, in 3:31 the same word is used. And in that context it clearly means "from above," being contrasted with "of the earth." And in that verse "from above" is parallel to coming "from heaven."

That same word that can mean either "from above" or "again." It's likely, in this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, that John intends for us to have in mind both of those meanings. Nicodemus obviously takes it simply as a reference to being born "again" physically. That's what he has in mind. But Jesus is thinking of being born "again," yes, but this second birth being "from above." It's not a second physical birth. That's an absurd thought. But a second birth, this time a spiritual birth.

In verse 5 Jesus describes it as being born "of water and the Spirit." That phrase is most likely a reference to Ezekiel 36:25ff. I read verses 26-27 a minute ago, but verse 25 says, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you." Then it goes on, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you." Those verses seem to be the background for Jesus' statement that one must be born "of water and the Spirit." It's this spiritual cleansing from sin that is connected with rebirth here.

In verse 6 we see the special role of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Flesh produces flesh, but the Spirit produces spirit. This is a different kind of birth. It's not just another physical birth,

as Nicodemus envisions. It's a spiritual birth that the Spirit brings about.

Verse 8 adds to the emphasis on God's initiative and our passivity in the miracle of regeneration. Because the Spirit is like the wind, and He blows where He wishes. His actions are not dependent on our actions. He is not waiting around to see who is going to exercise faith of their own free will, and then He will grant new birth. No, He works where He wishes. And we cannot fully understand the activities of the Spirit, and we cannot predict what He is going to do. But we can see the effects of what He does. Just like we can't see the wind but we can see the effects of the wind, neither can we see the Spirit, but we can see the effects of the Spirit. And the effects of the Spirit will be evident in those who have been born again.

In August when we were in John 1, I was talking about regeneration as we were covering John 1:12-13 and the reference there to being "born of God." In that sermon I spent some time going through some verses in the letter of 1 John, verses that describe some of the effects of regeneration. I'm not going to read all of those for you again, but I want to mention those evidences of being born again. If you're asking the question, How do I know if this miracle of God has happened in my life? How do I know if I'm born again? Here are some things you could look for in your life? Do you see these evidences of God's grace? Is He working on you, changing you in these ways?

Are you pursuing righteousness? Do you hate sin? Do you love others? Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? You could make a study of this by reading through the letter of 1 John.

In a sermon I read this week by Charles Spurgeon, he mentions three things that will be present in the lives of those who are born again. Very simply: repentance, faith, and prayer. "Every soul that is born again repents of its sin. . . . All the regenerate have faith: they all agree in finding all the sole ground of their hope in the blood and merit of Jesus. . . . In addition to this all that have passed from death unto life pray."⁴

Those are some good questions for us to ask. Very similar to what we were thinking about last Sunday in those verses at the end of John 2. Jesus knows where we're at. He knows if it's just an outward, on the surface faith, or if we've been inwardly transformed, spiritually reborn.

What I want to close with today is a verse in James 1 that mentions regeneration.

⁴ Spurgeon, C. H. (1879). Every Man's Necessity. In *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (Vol. 25, p. 56). London: Passmore & Alabaster.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” (James 1:17–18, ESV)

I want to point out here the origin of regeneration and the means of regeneration.

The Origin of Regeneration

Do you see what this verse very clearly says about the origin of regeneration? Where does this miraculous work originate? It originates in the will of God. The verse begins—“Of his own will he brought us forth . . .” [Combining this with John 3 we understand that the Father and the Spirit are each directly active in the miracle of rebirth. John 3:8 refers to being “born of the Spirit.” Here in James 1:17-18 it’s the Father of lights who has “brought us forth.”]

The thing I want to especially point out here is that it was not an act of our will that brought about regeneration. It was God’s sovereign will—His sovereign choice—that brought us forth. This reminds us again of John 1:12-13, which says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” When we look at our lives, and understand that we were once dead in our trespasses and sins and we are now alive in Christ—when we see that radical change that occurred in our hearts, we must attribute it wholly to God. It was not our doing. It did not originate in our will, but in God’s.

It is certainly true that the human will is active in conversion, but regeneration precedes conversion. Regeneration comes before conversion. God has to change our hearts before we will repent of our sin and trust in Jesus Christ. When we were dead in our sin, we were prisoners to our sinful desires. We would have never chosen to leave our sin and embrace Christ. That is how debilitating sin is. It keeps us from making any move toward God. But when God, of His own will, chooses to regenerate our hearts, we most definitely will respond in repentance and faith. We will certainly then choose to repent of our sin and put our faith in Jesus. God chooses us first, and changes our hearts and desires, and then we respond by choosing to repent, believe, and follow Him.

This means that God gets all the glory in our salvation. God did this sovereign work to break through our hard hearts and replace the heart of stone with a heart of flesh. Therefore we must not try to take any of the glory for ourselves. We must recognize

God's sovereign grace in causing us to be born again, and we must give Him all the credit.

The Means of Regeneration

We also see in this verse the means of regeneration. "Of his own will he brought us forth *by the word of truth* . . ." The word of truth is the means by which God causes us to be born again. The word of truth is the Gospel message.

Paul uses this phrase in Ephesians 1:13, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." Also in Colossians 1:5, "Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you . . ." The word of truth is the Gospel message, and it is by this word of truth that God changes hearts. Listen to how Peter makes the same connection between regeneration and the word. 1 Peter 1:23 says, "since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." Two verses later he writes, "And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (v. 25). Peter is saying the same thing that James is saying. We have been born again, and the means by which we were born again is the word of God—the Gospel.

God has done something spectacular for the glory of His Name and for the salvation of His people. He sent His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to live a perfect life on this earth and then to die on a cross as the substitute for sinners. On the cross Jesus "was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" as it says in Isaiah 53, the passage we studied in Sunday School last week. Jesus died for sinners, and the Gospel message is a call for sinners to repent of their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ—to love this news and delight in this news that Christ took our punishment so that we can be forgiven. This is the glorious Gospel, and it is God's plan and purpose to cause new birth *through* this message.

God chooses to glorify Himself and glorify His Son by regenerating hearts *through* the proclamation of this Gospel message. It may happen as a person sits alone reading the Bible. It may happen as a person listens to a Christian friend share their testimony. It could happen in the midst of a small group discussion, or a Sunday School lesson, or a sermon. It could be that a person randomly stumbles across a Gospel tract or some Gospel literature of some kind, or happens upon a church website. We don't know how or when God will choose to use these various methods of communicating the Good News, but what we know for

sure is that regeneration will always be connected somehow to the proclamation of this message.

This is such a powerful motivation for us to evangelize, to be tireless in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Pray for your unbelieving family members and neighbors and co-workers, and look for opportunities to talk with them about the Gospel. Encourage people to read the Bible. Give them Christian books, or Gospel tracts. Invite people to your small groups, bring people to Sunday School and our worship services, send friends links to sermons they can listen to or online Gospel presentations. Be creative. Be bold. Be diligent in prayer. And as we exalt Christ and the message of the cross, God will draw people to Himself and change their hearts. He will cause people to be born again through the word of truth.

I hope this morning you've seen how desperately each and every person needs to be born again. And I hope you can understand from Scripture that this is a miracle of God. It is something He does, something He initiates, something He accomplishes. The origin of regeneration is His sovereign will. And the means of regeneration is the message of the Gospel.

If you're not sure if you're born again, please don't leave here today without talking to one of us about this. There's nothing more important in your life than this. If you know that you are born again, give God all the praise and glory for what He's done for you. And get excited that He can use you to be a messenger of the Good News to others, and that through your witness God will cause others to be born again.