



You Must Be Born Again

Series: John – That You May Believe

John 3:1-8

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“You must be born again.” That phrase “born again” was all the rage in Christian circles in the 1970’s and into the early ‘80’s. You could hardly turn around without someone asking you if you were born again. But over time, that phrase has largely disappeared from the Christian cultural lexicon. Few people talk about this very much anymore. There are a variety of reasons – confusion about what the phrase “born again” means, the excesses, open sin and fall from ministry of many of the people who threw the phrase around without any sense of reverence or understanding, but I think the main reason is that this statement just doesn’t seem relevant anymore. It seems unimportant and in age driven by 21 or 40 day fad cycle, it just doesn’t have the pull that therapeutic self-improvement does. But I will tell you this morning that it is of ultimate relevance and importance. It is the first thing that Jesus spoke about with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and paragon of religious perfection.

Nicodemus – The Paragon of Religious Perfection (1-2) Let’s look at the first two verses of this text together. We read, **“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.””** (John 3:1–2, ESV) Now if you have been in a faithful, Bible preaching church for any period of time, most likely you have been conditioned that when you hear the word, “Pharisee” you are immediately conditioned to think, “bad guy.” But that is not the way that Pharisees were regarded in Jesus’ day. The Pharisees were highly regarded. They were a select group – never more than 6,000 of them – each one having taken a solemn vow before three witnesses that he would devote every moment of his entire life to obeying the Ten Commandments and their traditions and version of God’s Law as a way of pleasing God and earning salvation. They were regarded as superior to every other man in spiritual status before God due to their total dedication. Moreover, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, a group of 70 men which had spiritual authority over every Jew in every nation. On top of that, as we see in Jesus’s words in verse 10, Nicodemus was THE teacher in Israel. He was one of the top teachers, one of the top Rabbis in all of the nation.

In other words, Jesus was dealing with the quintessential religious man, the paragon of religious perfection, the very best that Judaism had to offer. He was the religious cream of the crop in Israel. He was a man who took his religion, his morality, and his reputation very seriously. Every descriptor of Nicodemus sets him apart as a man of distinction and honor, a man of misguided sincerity and conviction...but a man who is thoroughly lost, darkened in his understanding, lacking in true discernment and ignorant of spiritual truth.

And listen, it is not incidental that John uses the phraseology that he does to introduce us to Nicodemus. He calls him **a man of the Pharisees**. He could have just as easily called him a Pharisee, right? But he adds this extra layer of description, calling him a man. Here's why that's important. It points back to the end of chapter 2, where we read that Jesus **"needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."** (John 2:25, ESV) Jesus knew what was in man, knew his heart, and that explains why Jesus is able to speak so clearly and directly to Nicodemus.

Most likely, having seen some of the works of Christ, maybe having been in the crowd when He cleansed the Temple, he comes to Jesus at night. Why? Probably because it was the one time that he could speak to Jesus privately and, of course, the darkness of night is reflective of His spiritual condition. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and opens the conversation, saying, **"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."** What do we make of this?

First, Nicodemus seems respectful in his approach to Jesus. He calls him "rabbi" and that is a big deal coming from one of the religious elite. Remember that Jesus was not formally trained, so for Nicodemus to approach Him in this way shows that he knows there is something about Jesus, something about his authority and power that sets Him apart. But second, we have to wonder a little at Nicodemus' motive. Let me explain. It may be that he is there looking to engage Jesus in philosophical, religious instruction, but from what he says and the way that he speaks in the plural, there seems to be more afoot. It sounds like he is acting as a representative of some others as well as himself and the implication is that he is looking to establish himself as the authority in this conversation. He speaks for himself and for others who have considerable religious leverage, position and resources who have examined and observed Jesus and who are willing to give him a favorable evaluation. **You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.** But Jesus would need to have proper representation, proper credentialing, proper

advice, handlers and support in order for His ministry to be most effective. He presents himself as the established spiritual authority.

He's there because of Jesus' signs and he is willing to acknowledge him as a rabbi, but that is as far as it goes and that, beloved, is one of the dangers if signs and wonders apart from understanding the truth behind them. You don't need a new heart, don't need to be born again, to be amazed by them. Seeing miracles and giving the miracle worker credit for them, that he is from God, saves nobody. Nicodemus, for all of his apparent standing and religious prominence, is spiritually blind and he is lost. And Jesus makes that clear in His response.

A Revealing Response – You Must Be Born Again (3-7) Look at this, starting in verse 3, ***“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” (John 3:3, ESV)*** Jesus responds to Nicodemus, but not in the way that we would expect. He doesn't gush over Nicodemus approval, doesn't say “thank you,” nor does He say, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Instead, using the phrase, “Truly, truly” – and when you see that “amen, amen” it signifies that what follows is vitally important truth – Jesus says, ***“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*** Jesus states rather bluntly that Nicodemus doesn't know what he is talking about, nor could he. No one who is not born again can see, can even understand, the kingdom of God.

Now this needs some explanation. Nicodemus is taken aback and part of the reason for that is because he had no clue about the kingdom of God. From Nicodemus' perspective, the kingdom of God was all in the future – a future resurrection, a future reign of God, a future new world, a future with God's will fully manifested and he thought that his membership in that future kingdom was a lock. After all, he was a Jew, serious about the law and the traditions, exemplary in his conduct, and respected by everyone. He failed to see that the Kingdom of God is not some far off thing. It is now, right now, in Jesus Christ. He failed to see the true nature, the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God in the personal reign and rule of Jesus Christ. For him the Kingdom of God was about a future place but Jesus taught the Kingdom of God as a present spiritual reality that could be seen only through faith in Him. Jesus was speaking of the kingdom of salvation, the spiritual realm where those who have been born again by God's power and truly trust in Christ live under the rule of God mediated by His Son. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of salvation, is here and membership in the kingdom is a matter of faith in Christ. But Nicodemus could not see that. He was spiritually dead and blind.

And as a result, Nicodemus was tragically wrong in his approach and understanding. He thought his religion made him in right standing with God and in that, he is very much like the religious lost in our day, many of them in churches, even some in our own. In one sentence, Jesus wrecks everything, and I mean everything, the Nicodemus believed. Do you see that? Entry into the Kingdom of God, the ability to understand spiritual truth, true salvation can only come as a result of the new birth. Nicodemus must be remade by the power of God.

Look, Nicodemus understands that what Jesus is saying to Him is radical and shocking and he responds in verse 4, **“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?””** (John 3:4, ESV) Now let’s give Nicodemus some credit here. He isn’t an idiot. When he says these words, Nicodemus is not suggesting some crude reproductive miracle. This concept of being reborn, at least a faint understanding of this concept, is something with which he was familiar. The rabbis had a saying, “A proselyte who embraces Judaism is like a newborn child.” It was an acknowledgement that a proselyte to Judaism made a radical break with their old way of living and their old religion, almost like becoming a new born. The new birth is a radical thing but Nicodemus had no idea how radical.

So, what was Jesus talking about? What does it mean to be born again? The word that is translated as “again” is the Greek word, “anothen.” The word has three meanings. First, it means again to do something a second time; it also means to begin, radically and completely, a new beginning; and it also means from above, in other words, from outside of you, from above, from God. God must do this in you. So to be “born again” speaks of something radical, a new beginning. It is a second birth, but it comes from above. It is God that does it, not man; and it results in a new creation, a new beginning.

Nicodemus was a teacher of the law. He had spent his life teaching others what the law required. To have a part in the kingdom of God, when it finally appeared – Nicodemus had taught multitudes of people this – one must keep the commandments. And he taught them in great detail what precisely was required by each of the commandments. Do those things and you will live. That had been his message for years now. And it has been the message of most religious teachers ever since, including a very large number of those who called themselves Christians.

And, now here was Jesus, another rabbi, a rabbi whose credentials seem to have been sent down from heaven, who was performing miraculous signs that took one’s breath away, and he was saying that entering the kingdom of God required a new birth, a completely new

beginning, and, what is more, that this beginning did not lie within man's power to effect. Only God and the Spirit could bring it to pass. This stood Nicodemus' entire theology of salvation on its head. He had always talked of what men and women should *do*; Jesus talked of what had to *be done* for them and in them by God himself. No one sees the kingdom of God, no one gains heaven, no-one is saved unless they are born again. We must be made a new creation in Christ. He is speaking of what theologians call regeneration. Regeneration, the new birth, is the work of God in which He imparts new spiritual life to someone who is spiritually dead.

To Nicodemus this was a completely foreign concept. When he asks the question, ***“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”***, what Nicodemus is asking is “What do I have to do? How do I need to improve my religion?” But Nicodemus is missing the point. He doesn't need a new, improved religion, not to be jumpstarted spiritually, not to rededicate himself, not some superficial change, not to grasp some new religious idea, not some temporary religious excitement, no religious improvement program. He needed to be born again. He needed life that only God could give to him.

Tragically, there are many in churches today who see the kingdom of God, who understand salvation in exactly the same way as Nicodemus, in religious terms. They think of the kingdom of God, of forgiveness and salvation, in future terms, as just simply getting into heaven when you die and the way you get into heaven is by religious down-payments and deposits along the way. How many times have we heard it or said it. “I just need to get in church. That person just needs to get in church,” as if what we need is a little spiritual renovation, a little reformation of our lives, to do better and to try harder, to clean up our act a little and start being nicer to our spouse or significant other, to stop drinking so much, to quit looking at pornography, to watch our mouths, to stop being sexually immoral, to stop being so jealous, to stop being so materialistic, to stop being so angry, to stop using drugs, to stop eating so badly, to stop lying... and, of course, to go to church. We just need to live better and get in church. That is a religious, works oriented, what-can-I-do-to-save-myself, Nicodemian mindset. No, what we need is to be born again.

Now listen, I am not saying that morality is a bad thing and I am definitely not banging on being in church – you need to be in a faithful church with faithful preaching of the gospel and the whole counsel of God. But listen to me, those are external things. What you and I need is a radically internal transformation, a new life, and only God can give you that. Only God can work that in you. You cannot change yourself. You do not have the power and Jesus makes that so clear in what He says next.

Look at verses 5-7. ***“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.’” (John 3:5-7, ESV)*** Jesus is telling Nicodemus and us – there is nothing you can do. Take verse 6 first. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the

Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is spirit. That is true of every one of us. When Jesus speaks of being born of the flesh, He is talking about our natural birth, our natural condition. Our human birth gave us physical life, but because we are born in the line of fallen Adam, we are naturally spiritually dead and we can do nothing to fix that.

The solemn reality is this – we are naturally, spiritually dead. That is why we need a new life from God. In our natural state, even our religious natural state, we are lost and in rebellion against the true God and separated from Him because of our sinfulness. We aren't just ignorant and need instruction, not just weak and need reviving, not just sickly and need doctoring. We are dead. Listen to these words from Paul, ***“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”*** (Ephesians 2:1–3, ESV) We are naturally dead, unfeeling, unresponsive to the truth of the gospel, unresponsive to God. That's no poetic figure of speech. That is reality. We are naturally spiritually lifeless and we need to be made alive. We are spiritual corpses, and need bringing from death unto life. We need God to do something. We need radical transformation. We need something that we cannot produce. There is no evolution from flesh to Spirit.

So how can we be changed? How can we be born again? ***“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?”*** (Jeremiah 13:23, ESV) The answer, of course, is no...but God can change us. Look back at verse 5. Jesus says, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*** What does Jesus mean here? Remember who He is talking to. Nicodemus is a master of the Scriptures, the Old Testament. When Jesus speaks of being born of the water and Spirit, he is referring to the passages in the Old Testament that speak of God's giving of a new life to His people. Isaiah had spoken about a new life from God; Jeremiah had predicted a new creation that would be given, but the one that Jesus speaks from is found in Ezekiel 36. Listen to these words, ***“I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all 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. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”*** (Ezekiel 36:24–28, ESV)

This is a rebirth that a teacher like Nicodemus should have known, a rebirth involving cleansing from sin as by water, giving us a new and righteous standing with God, and the

transforming of the heart by God's Spirit, giving us a new life to live with and for God. This is what the new birth is all about. And this new birth is the very source of our faith in Christ. Think back to what we saw in chapter 1. ***“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.”*** (John 1:12–13, ESV) Who receives Jesus, who believes in Him? Those who have been born of God, those who have been born again. You simply cannot have one without the other. There is no new birth without faith and there is no saving faith without the new birth.

It is not that you are cleansed of your sin and saved by regeneration, but that the new birth is intimately connected with faith in Christ and His work on the cross to save you through His sacrificial death and His blood shed for your forgiveness and cleansing. The new birth is the catalyst, along with the Word of God, of saving faith in Christ. That is why Peter says in 1 Peter 1:23-25, ***“since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”*** (1 Peter 1:23–25, ESV) "You have been born again . . . through the living and abiding word of God . . . through the good news, the gospel, which was preached to you." The word of God through the Spirit of God makes dead people to live and brings dead souls to life. You must be born again.

In fact, we see this perfectly illustrated, interestingly enough, in Ezekiel 37, in his vision of the valley of dry bones. ***“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus, says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So***

I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.” (Ezekiel 37:1–10, ESV) God makes dead men and women alive – by His Word and by His Spirit. The new birth is a sovereign work of God.

The New Birth is the Sovereign Work of God (8) Look at verse 8, ***“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.”” (John 3:8, ESV)*** Here is what Jesus is saying. The new birth is not your own doing. It is the sovereign, free, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit moving as Creator over your soul, raising you from the dead, making you a new creature, with a heart that trusts and loves Jesus. You do not initiate your new birth any more than you initiated your natural birth. You cannot make it happen. Being born again is not a decision that you make any more than being born is a decision you make. Whoever you are, however you came to faith, it is God who made you alive from the dead to believe. He must do it. God is the author of salvation and except he makes your soul to live, you perish.

The new birth is a mysterious miracle. We may not even be able to say when it happened. But we do know this: Before that moment we did not trust Christ, we did not treasure Christ as Savior, we did not regard the cross as glorious, we did not believe with all of our hearts and rest all of our hopes on Christ, but something changed – something happened in my heart and now Christ is the greatest treasure of my soul, the testimony of the Word of God makes sense, the Scripture comes alive and we see the gospel as true. God makes us alive. But ultimately, it not just a matter of understanding the need for the new birth; it must be experienced. So how do you know if you have been born again? Just like you can see the effects of the wind, you can see in the life of someone that has been born again, the effects of regeneration.

The Effects of the New Birth John describes for us in his first letter, very clearly, the effects and the evidences of the new birth.

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.” (1 John 5:1, ESV) The one who is born again, believes that Jesus Christ is the only Savior who can save his soul and beside Him there is no Savior at all. In himself he sees nothing but unworthiness. But he has full confidence in Christ, and trusting in Him, he believes that his sins are all forgiven. His hope of eternal life rests not in his own goodness, his own works, his prayers, his minister, or his church, but in

Christ alone. **Faith in the living God and his Son Jesus Christ is always the result of the new birth, and can never exist except in the regenerate. Whoever has faith is a saved man.** (Charles Spurgeon) And the one who is born again loves God – loves His word, loves to pray, loves to worship Him, loves to make Him known.

“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.” (1 John 3:9, ESV) A person who has been born again does not habitually commit sin. He cannot live in sin as he once did, does not see sin as he once did, cannot find pleasure in sin anymore. He groans over, he hates, he does not want to continue in sin. He hates it, flees from it and fights it. He is quick to repent and determined to overcome temptation by the power of God.

Instead, John says, **“If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.”** (1 John 2:29, ESV) The one who has been born again has a life that is characterized by holiness, by righteousness, by living according to God's will, doing the things that please God and avoiding the things that God hates because He loves God.

John says, **“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.”** (1 John 3:14, ESV) Someone who is born again has a special love for all true disciples of Christ. He is at home when he is in their company. They are all members of the same family. They are his fellow soldiers, fighting against the same enemy. They are his fellow pilgrims, journeying along the same road. He understands them, and they understand him. They may be very different from himself in many ways – but that does not matter. They are his Father's sons and daughters and he cannot help loving them.

John goes on, **“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”** (1 John 5:4, ESV) He that is born of God is born for God, and consequently for another world. A man who is born again rejects the world's opinions, the world's ways, ideas and customs. He has overcome, by faith in Christ, the god of the world, Satan; the lusts which are in the world; false prophets gone forth into the world; and the wicked men of the world, who by temptations, snares, evil doctrines, threats, promises, and ill examples, would turn aside children of God from pursuing God. He

loves God's praise more than man's praise. He fears offending God more than offending man.

The results of regeneration are unmistakable – a heartfelt trusting in Christ for salvation, an assurance of sins forgiven, a desire to read the Bible and pray, a delight in worship, a desire for Christian fellowship, a sincere desire to be obedient to God's Word, and desire to tell others about Christ. There may be a great difference in the depth and distinctness of these marks in different people, but they are there and growing.

So the question, are you religious or are you born again? Perhaps you've gone along all these years believing that entry into heaven is a matter of simply "growing" or "maturing" into it. Perhaps you've gone along believing that if you just do the right things long enough - and stay away from doing the wrong things long enough as well - that God will find you acceptable, and you'll "qualify" for heaven. Jesus' words to Nicodemus teach us otherwise. A moral life is not enough. Coming to church is not enough. No one can ever simply "grow" into heaven. You've been born into the human family as a sinner; and you'll never be able to outgrow the condition that you've been born into. You must be born all over again.

It is true that you cannot make yourself to be born again. You cannot make God bring you to life. If you are to be born again, it must be by the power of God. God does not command you to be born again, to make yourself to be born again, but he does command you to repent of your sin and believe the gospel. Believe that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, that He came into this world to save sinners, that you are a sinner, that Jesus saves sinners from their guilt and from the wrath of God by taking upon Himself all of the guilt and shame of sin and paying for it all in your place, as the sinless substitute, that He shed His blood and gave up His life in your place to pay your penalty, and that He rose again on the third day and commands you to surrender your life to Him as Lord and Master. If you hear this gospel and desire Jesus Christ, you see the rebellion of your heart and you grieve over it and over the judgment of God that it deserves, believe in Jesus today, and you may know that you have been born again by His power.

What if you are unsure or if this seems unreal to you today? What do you do? What if you find yourself "just not feeling it"? What then? Do you just let it slide or ignore your uncertainty? No. You cry out to God and plead with Him for His mercy to open the eyes of your heart, to change your heart, to show you the true condition of your soul and to cry out for His grace. Don't just let this slide.

And if you have been born again, these words ought to bring forth in us a deep humility, gratitude, and worship – a deep humbling of ourselves. Think hard about what was done in you by the power of God Himself and be shaken by the thought of what you would never have believed, whom you would never have known – Jesus, and how you would all your life have loved darkness rather than light had the Spirit never come to you and made you a new creature in Jesus Christ. Charles Spurgeon said, **“The gospel is preached in the ears of all; it only comes with power to some. The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher; otherwise men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher's learning; otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were mysterious power going with it - the Holy Ghost changing the will of man. O Sirs! We might as well preach to stone walls as to preach to humanity unless the Holy Ghost be with the Word, to give it power to convert the soul.”** Be grateful, worship God, that He has made the gospel to come to you in power.

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