

“Born Again”

I always enjoy watching the effects of the wind. Flags flutter in the breeze; trees sway, leaves are swept up and blown around. You hear the sound of the wind. The wind is forceful and yet invisible. Jesus said the wind gives us an idea of the way God’s Spirit works in us. He used that analogy in one of his most famous teachings when he said you must be born again by the Spirit, and the Spirit works like the wind.

This famous nighttime interview with Nicodemus in **John 3** comes fairly soon after the temptation of Jesus. After his temptation, he returns from the desert to the river Jordon where John repeats his testimony about Jesus as the Lamb of God. As we saw in an earlier message, the first disciples begin to follow him. He leaves the Jordan goes north up into Cana in the region of Galilee. **John 2** tells how he performs his first miracle at a wedding in Cana. He turns water into wine. It seems beautifully symbolic of what he will later make explicit: he comes to give life and to give it more fully. Then, as the Jewish Passover festivals are at hand, he makes his way South again about eighty miles to Jerusalem. He discovers the moneychangers ripping off the worshippers in the temple. He is outraged. He makes a whip and drives them out of the temple. He chastises them for making his Father’s house a house of trade. At the end of **John 2**, there is a curious statement. We’re told that many people believed in Jesus when they saw the signs he was doing. But he, for his part, did not entrust himself to them for he knew what was in man. It’s immediately after this, here in **John 3** that we have the story of Nicodemus in which Jesus tells this very upstanding man that he must be born again

He explains why. He says,

I. THE ONLY WAY TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS TO BE BORN AGAIN THROUGH THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

John 3:7, *“You must be born again.” And notice that twice, Jesus says Truly truly I say to you. It’s as if He is saying, “Are you hearing this?”*

A. You have to be born again to see the kingdom of God.

John 3:3 *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again^l he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* Jesus stresses a familiar biblical teaching.

It is one that is humbling for people who like to think they are smart. He says we humans are all born spiritual blind. Unless God gives us sight we will not see our need for God or value Jesus, his kingdom. This truth is of tremendous importance for understanding our world. It's stressed throughout the gospels and in the rest of Scripture **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.*

You have to be born again to see the kingdom of God. And
B. You have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God.

John 3:5 *I tell you the truth no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.*

What is the kingdom of God? It's both a future promise and a present reality. It's the future promise of when God rules over a new heavens and a new earth, and his people live in his place enjoying his presence, and every tear is wiped away. If you are born again you will see that. If you aren't you will not. It's also a present reality in that to the degree to which the God of love and light is acknowledged as Lord and King in our lives; we experience the joy of his presence and the hope of his promises now. Paul talks about this beautifully. In **Romans 14:17**, he says, *the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.* There is a reality that cannot be accessed with physical senses or physical perception. Unless you are born again, you won't see or value it much less experience it or enjoy it. *You must be born again.*

C. Everyone needs to be born again.

This story of Nicodemus at the very early stages of Jesus' ministry makes an important point. You see a lot of people think the idea of being "born again" is a deep emotional experience that is important for dysfunctional, broken people like drug addicts and sex addicts and alcoholics, and neurotics and criminals. The fact that Jesus tells this man Nicodemus that he needs to be born again is significant because of who he is. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. This means this man is a member of one of the strictest religious groups in his day. He was moral and respectable, successful, wealthy, and well educated. He is the opposite of an obviously broken person in distress, but Jesus tells him he must be born again. So when Jesus says, *You must be born again*, he's not calling you to be religious or moral.

He's challenging people who are religious and moral with the fact that religion and morality aren't enough. He's talking to a moral, religious, successful man saying, "all of that stuff you think you have going for you. It is not enough. You need to be born again." He's taking away every excuse. He's saying everyone needs to be born again.

How can you know if you are born again? There are two diagnostic questions suggested by the book of John.

1st. The first question is, "Have I received Christ?" The importance of this question is suggested by something that appears toward the beginning of the gospel of John. In **John 1:12-13** there is a concise summary introduction to the story line of Jesus' whole life. It says, *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.* To receive him you must believe in his name, which means you trust in him as your Savior. So the question is *have I received Christ as my Lord and Savior.* The new birth isn't something you cause or create any more than a baby gives birth to itself. The new birth is something God does but it is closely connected to the experience of turning to Christ and trusting him.

2nd. The second question then is this: "Is there evidence of the Spirit's presence at work in my life?" In **John 3:8**, Jesus says: *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.*" There both mystery and manifestation to the work of the Spirit. While the wind itself is invisible, its effects can be discerned, seen, felt, heard. Jesus says that is the way it is with the Spirit. You see the effects of the Spirit's working when he breathes new life into your soul. So the second question is: *Do I see evidence that an invisible, spiritual breath of grace and of life has come into my soul?*

II. THERE IS A MYSTERIOUS QUALITY TO THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, BUT THE IMPACT IN OUR LIVES IS PROFOUND.

A. The new birth brings a new kind of life.

John 3:5 *I tell you the truth no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.* When Jesus says, you have to be born of water and the Spirit; he is not talking about water baptism. He is referring to the prophecy of Ezekiel.

That's why in **verse 10** he says Nicodemus should understand all this because he is a teacher in Israel. **Ezekiel 36:25-27**, *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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* Jesus is saying we need both the cleansing of forgiveness and a new birth from the Spirit. Forgiveness and rebirth.

Verses 6-7 *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' There are different kinds of life. There is vegetable life, and animal life. My plants don't interact with me the way my dog does. And then there is human life. Jesus says there are different kinds of human life. There is a kind of human life that is alive to God and his Spirit, and it only comes about through a new birth. So this is not just an improvement or reformation of the old life, it's a new quality of life that is added, it's created. It's spiritual.*

The new birth brings a new kind of life but

B. The new birth is the beginning of the new life.

We are misinformed if we think a new birth leads to instantaneous change. It does not. There is a growth process. Every now and then, you hear the stories of someone who lit up a joint, opened a bottle of *whiskey*, and started planning how to cause trouble. But then they watched a church live feed on Facebook and invited Jesus into their life. Then from that moment could not stand the smell of smoke, the taste of alcohol or the thought of bad behavior. Those stories, even when credible, are unusual. The new birth is a life-changing beginning, but it is only the *beginning* of a new spiritual life.

Sometimes people bring up this question: If Christians are born again, why is it that some non-Christians are nicer than some Christians? Someone says, "My step father, who is not a Christian is a nicer guy than my Dad who's always at church!" Or, "My last boyfriend was a Christians but hurt me deeply. The guy I'm seeing now claims no faith but he's a great guy. What's with that?"

The person who claims to be a Christian but isn't very appealing as a person may be like Nicodemus, religious and moral but not born again. Or it may be there is new life but a lot of growth is needed.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis has a chapter on this titled, "Nice People Or New Men." He says: If Christianity is true (if a person is born again) then it ought to follow that such a person 1.) will be nicer than the same person would have been if they were not a Christian and 2.) that they will grow to be better than they were before. 3.) It does not necessarily follow that they will be nicer than some other person if that person were not a Christian. Imagine that at your workplace, there is a man who is an outspoken Christian, but he is easily offended, sometimes moody and short with those who work with him. Then there is a woman who doesn't claim to believe in God at all, but she is gentle and very quiet. Someone says, See if Christ changes lives, why isn't the Christian nicer than the non-Christian. But think about it, that by itself doesn't tell you whether the Christian faith changes lives or if the new birth is real. The question is, what would that Christian man be like if he were not a Christian? Maybe he would not only be easily hurt, but maybe he would be an embezzler or a predator. And what would that non-believing woman be like if she were a Christian? Maybe she would be just as gentle but also stronger. You see, both of these individuals have a temperament; they have certain genetics, a background, and the family environment in which they were raised. The new birth imparts new life into those temperaments and places them under new management. But the background and the base temperament do not just disappear. God goes to work to change you from the inside, and it is a process.

C. If the new birth is the beginning of a new life what should born again believers do with their new life?

I once read about a man who had orange trees on his property, but they bore mostly sour fruit. So he cut them off low and grafted a new variety of orange into the stumps of the old trees. This is apparently a pretty common practice with citrus trees. That new stock grafted into the old tree allowed it to begin to bear sweeter fruit. But the grafting is just the beginning. The man who grafted the sweet citrus into the sour root-stock said after the new growth was grafted in, he had to really watch those trees. He had to care for them, fertilize them, and prune them. There would constantly be branches cropping out from below the line where the new stock was grafted in. He had to consistently watch for that and cut it off. That's a helpful image for what we need to do.

In the new birth the Holy Spirit grafts new life into your soul that can bear better fruit. But now you have to nourish that new life. You nourish spiritual growth through worship, prayer, service, scripture and

Christian community. Let the Scriptures go deep and change forever, not only what you think, but also what you treasure. Reflect on its teachings, take it to heart, memorize its promises, and live by its wisdom and precepts. Pray it into your life. Be responsive and receptive to the Holy Spirit's convicting, comforting, enlightening and leading you deeper into relationship with Jesus. Do the hard work of pruning back, cutting away, all the old growth whenever it shows up.

CONCLUSION

What Jesus says about the new birth makes you humble because you realize that even if you are accomplished as Nicodemus, you are absolutely indebted to God's grace if you have received His life. It makes you hopeful because you see that if the new birth is an act of God, any life can be changed, and every one of us can change. It makes you thankful because if you have the life of God in you, you know it is only because of His grace. It inspires devotion because if you know you have this gift of life from God, you want it to develop and dominate every part of your existence and experience. You want the old life to diminish and the new life to flourish.

Amen.