



The Prerequisite for the Mission: You Must Be Born Again

Behold Our God – Read the Bible for Life Series #43

John 2:23-3:10

Pastor David Sunday

September 2, 2012

God, we praise You for welcoming us in all our desperate need, in all our brokenness with our guilt and sin. You are all we need and we thank You that You take us just as we are, and that You don't leave us but conform us into the image of Your Son until we see Him face to face and *"we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."* We pray that now, by Your Spirit, You would enable us to behold Christ in Your Word and be transformed evermore by Your Spirit into His image. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of John. We're going to be reading from John 2:23-3:10. It was a year ago Labor Day weekend that we began our 15-month journey through the Bible—beholding God, seeing the centrality of Christ and His redeeming work in all the Scriptures. Last Sunday, we began in the New Testament with Jesus' call to His disciples: *"Follow Me."* We continue now in the New Testament with Jesus' Word to Nicodemus: *"You must be born again."* Hear the Word of the Living God as we read beginning at John 2:23.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. 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.

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? 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?"

May the Lord open our eyes to behold wonderful things in His Word.

When my children were young, as a dad one of the things I really enjoyed was seeing them open gifts. But I have to confess that when someone else gave them a gift and I didn't know what was in the package (especially a large box) there were two words I dreaded seeing at the top of that package: assembly required. (I know that Kate is thinking, "When have you ever assembled anything?") I am pretty challenged when it comes to putting things together. I always worry that I will get the whole thing together and it won't work.

Have you ever wondered that about your life? What if you get your whole life put together spiritually and it doesn't work? God sent His Son into our world to be our Savior because He knew we couldn't put our lives together spiritually. In fact, we're so desperate that we don't even realize we need a Savior. With the package of salvation comes a label on top of it that reads, "Regeneration required." In order to open the gift of God's salvation, regeneration is required.

What is regeneration? At birth, we're born dead in sin, unable to respond to God, unable to see, love and obey God. Regeneration is the work of God the Holy Spirit by which He takes those who are dead in their trespasses and sins—which Ephesians 2 says is everyone by nature—and makes them spiritually alive. Regeneration is what Jesus is referring to in this passage when He says to Nicodemus and us, *"You must be born again."*

Regeneration is required. You cannot experience the power of God's salvation and the goodness of God's Kingdom without the supernatural working of God's Spirit on your life, on your heart. He raises you from the deadness of your sins and makes you alive through Jesus Christ. Regeneration is required and is the prerequisite to embracing the mission that God came into the world to do. It's the prerequisite to experiencing His saving grace and power in our lives. We're going to look at this story in three parts: the introduction, the interruption and the invitation.

1. **The Introduction** (verses 1-2)

We meet Nicodemus and discover that he is a lot like us in verse one. *"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus."* I don't know what comes into your mind when you hear the word, "Pharisee," but probably negative thoughts because they were

often confronted by Jesus. But we too easily forget that the Pharisees were a lot like us. In fact, if most of us were living in the 1st Century I would imagine that we would have been very attracted to the Pharisees. They were conservative, Bible-believing and moral. They were the very-serious-about-religion party within Judaism. No one was as serious or as careful about following God than the Pharisees. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews (verse one), meaning he was part of the Sanhedrin—the highest ruling council in the Jewish culture. They were delegated by Rome to handle much of the civil affairs of the Jewish people and were highly regarded in society. You didn't get any higher than a member of the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus was also a serious biblical scholar. In verse ten, Jesus calls him, *“the teacher of Israel.”* He was a theologian—“the Reverend Dr. Nicodemus, Ph.D. in Hebrew Scriptures.” If he were giving a lecture down the street on Hebrew Scriptures, we would put it in the church bulletin. “You need to go hear Nicodemus teach.” This man knew his Bible well and had a high opinion of Jesus even though Jesus didn't have the formal education that Nicodemus had and was from the north country—the backwoods of Israel. When Nicodemus approaches Him at night, he says in verse two, *“Rabbi...”* (a term of respect—“Teacher”). Then he says, *“...we know that you are a teacher come from God.”* “You're no ordinary Man. You're someone to be reckoned with, listened to. You are clearly from God,” he says, *“for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”* “You have wisdom and power from God. Your miracles are authentic. Your teaching is compelling.” Jesus is highly regarded in Nicodemus' mind.

So what do you think of this man, Nicodemus? If you had a son who grew up to be like Nicodemus—very moral, taking religion very seriously, studying the Bible, a high view of Jesus—wouldn't you be proud? This is what we want our boys to be like! If Nicodemus lived in the 21st Century and came to New Covenant Bible Church and applied for membership, we might be tempted to welcome him with open arms. He's a lot like us. But we don't see what Jesus sees and Jesus is the One Who does the membership interviews for God's Kingdom. You need to understand the connection between what we read at the end of chapter two and what we read at the beginning of chapter three.

In John 2:23, we saw that many Jews were believing in Jesus' name when they saw the signs that Jesus was doing. But the most important thing is not what we believe about Jesus but what does Jesus believe about us? Though they were believing in Him, Jesus wasn't believing in them yet. Verse 24 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.” Jesus knows what’s in the heart of every man. He knows what is in my heart and your heart. To prove that He Himself knew what was in man, we come to John 3:1 and read, *“Now there was a man...”* a particular man that Jesus knew. Jesus knows what is in Nicodemus.

2. The Interruption (verse 3)

This introduction of Nicodemus to Jesus very quickly turns into an interruption in verse three. I like the way verse three begins. *“Jesus answered him...”* Did I miss something here? Was Nicodemus asking a question? If he was, I didn’t hear it. I heard him telling Jesus wonderful things; praising Jesus. I didn’t hear a question, but Jesus knows what’s in a man and searches Nicodemus’ heart. I don’t know if Nicodemus was looking at the signs Jesus was doing and wondering, “Is this the Promised King? Is He going to bring the Kingdom?” I don’t know if Nicodemus’ mind was on lofty, political types of things at this moment but Jesus knows what’s in a man and says, “Nicodemus, whatever is on your mind right now is not what I want to deal with. You might be thinking about the Kingdom in grand and lofty terms but I want to go more probing and personal. I want to get to your heart, Nicodemus. Something needs to happen in you, Nicodemus, or you will never see the Kingdom yourself.”

He interrupts him in the middle of his words. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, “What the world needs more than anything today is to be interrupted by God.” We need to be silenced. We think we have it all figured out and know about everything. We know how to get into the Kingdom of God. Lloyd-Jones says, “We need God’s Word to come with an interruption to interrupt the program of our lives and we need to hear the Word of the Living God.” In His grace and mercy, Jesus says to Nicodemus, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* This is serious, urgent, solemn and significant.

Jesus doesn’t just say, “Nicodemus, there’s something missing in your life.” That would make sense. Many of us have successful lives, good relationships and are highly regarded in society. We have things pretty well put together. We’re even pretty serious about religion, but we know there’s something missing. We’ve made some mistakes and there are things we need to be forgiven of. If Jesus would have come to Nicodemus and said, “Nicodemus, you’re doing well but you need to add on a little extra. You’re missing

something. You need Me to help you out a little bit” that would make sense but that’s not what Jesus says to Nicodemus.

He doesn’t say, “You’ve got a God-shaped hole that I’ve come to fill; you need a little bit of improvement; you need to get serious about religion.” He says, “*You must be born again*. You need a new foundation. More than that, you need a new creation—a new birth. You’re dead! You’re like a block of stone! You need to be born! You need new life!”

I read an illustration from Colin Smith that I thought was good. He said,

“Imagine you spend your whole life building a house. That house is a life project for you. You build it from the foundation up—every nail and screw. You go for quality in everything you choose—fixtures, fittings, draperies. Everything in that house is a reflection of you and your commitment to excellence. The house is your joy. It reflects your craftsmanship, style and values. It’s the fruit of your labor over years and you’ve continued to make improvements, incorporating new ideas. One day you meet a master builder. You’ve read about his work in magazines so you invite him to come over and look at your house. You want to know if there’s anything he would do differently—change fittings, move the deck, open up a wall? What would he suggest to make your house even better? He comes in, is quiet, looks around, shakes his head and he says, ‘This is a tear-down.’ That’s devastating! You’ve put your whole life into this! That house is your pride and joy! He says, ‘It needs to be demolished.’”

That’s what Jesus says to us. You’ve put your whole life into putting yourself together spiritually but before you can ever see or enter God’s Kingdom, before you could ever have a clue about what God’s doing in this world, everything you’ve held dear and built your life upon needs to be demolished—torn down. You need a new birth—a new creation. If you don’t have that, you cannot see.

John, in his Gospel, loves and is known for symbolism—one of the literary features of the Gospel of John. And this story is very symbolic when John says in verse two, “*This man came to Jesus by night...*” He’s reminding us of what he said about Jesus in chapter one. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness. When Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, it’s a sign, a symbol that he is still in the dark when it comes to the Kingdom of God. He doesn’t see. He’s in the darkness. And Nicodemus proves Jesus’ point by how he responds in verse four. “*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?’*”

Surely Nicodemus has heard of a metaphor before but he’s confused—perplexed. He doesn’t see! Jesus says, “Unless you are born again, you cannot see.” Nicodemus answers back, “I cannot see how this can be! This makes no sense to me! I’m blind. I cannot see.”

Later on in verse ten, Jesus says that Nicodemus should have been able to see. *“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”* “Have you not read Ezekiel 36 where God says,

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.

“Nicodemus, don’t you understand that the whole Old Testament is talking not just about a King coming into the world and changing all the institutions, laws and big structures of society, but this King is going to come and absolutely change your heart. He’s going to circumcise your hearts, cleanse you from all your uncleannesses and make you a new creature. He’s going to give you a new heart. How could you have read your Old Testament and not seen this amazing promise—this truth?”

Jesus says to him in verse five, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water...”* That’s not referring to baptism or physical birth but to the work of the Spirit cleansing us from all our uncleannesses. Unless you experience that Spirit-cleansing and you’re born of the Spirit—that’s the new birth, new creation—unless the Spirit cleanses you and makes a new creation out of you, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God. And that’s what God came into the world to do.

Alfred Lord Tennyson longed for this. He said, “Ah, for a man to arise in me that the man I am may no longer be.” That’s what we realize in the dark nights of our souls when we contemplate our failures. Maybe you’re in the middle of life now and you’re looking at all the things you’ve failed to do. You wonder, “Can God make me new?” Christianity is not about adding a little religion onto your life—it’s about a new creation as new as what God did at the beginning in Genesis 1 when He spoke light out of darkness and created the universe by the power of His Word! A Christian is someone who has experienced that new birth—that miracle of new creation. Jesus is saying that’s what the Spirit of God is able to do and that’s what we need the Spirit of God to do. We need a change that’s much more radical than we’ve ever imagined and it’s utterly beyond our power to accomplish it.

He uses an illustration in verses seven and eight. After he says flesh can only give birth to flesh, it’s the Spirit that gives birth to the spirit. Jesus says, “It’s like the wind.” Let’s read verse seven. *“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.”

The Spirit’s work is unseen. You can hear the sound of the wind through the wind chimes. You can see its effects breaking the waves, filling the sails, but you still don’t see the wind. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is almighty but He is unseen. The Spirit’s work is sovereign. Jesus says, *“The wind blows where it wishes...”* We’re all hung up on the free will of man. Jesus is magnifying the free will of the Holy Spirit here. We’re responsible for our spiritual deadness. God is responsible for our spiritual re-creation at salvation. He is sovereign over this so that He gets all the glory for it. The Spirit’s work is certifiable. You can see the effects of the wind and you can see the effects of the Spirit’s regenerating work. If I want to prove that I’m alive today, I don’t need to drive to Kenosha County Courthouse and get my birth certificate to show you I was born. All I need to do is move around and speak and you’ll believe that I was born—alive.

Likewise, it’s very evident when the work of the Spirit makes someone a new creation. They start to bear evidence of it in their lives. They now have a heart that wants to obey God. It’s not a burden to obey but a delight! They start to want to do good works to bring glory to Jesus Christ. They start to experience freedom from slavery to sin. Sin no longer rules their lives like it used to. When we’re born of the Spirit, we have an appreciation for gospel truth. When we sing, the words resonate in our hearts. And when we say, “All I have is Christ,” we love to say such things because the Spirit has given us life in Christ.

We see and savor the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ when we’re born of the Spirit. We have a new appetite for spiritual things and for the truth of God’s Word. We’re like newborn babies, longing for the milk of the Word of God, crying out for God to feed and satisfy us. These are certifiable evidences of the Spirit’s work in our lives—an inner delight in God’s Law; a personal knowledge of God.

Jesus said, *“And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”*(John 17:3). Hating sin, loving believers, believing that Jesus is the Christ—these are signs that the Spirit is at work giving new life. A person who has been born again becomes addicted with God. He longs to be with God. We’ve died to this world. The things of this world don’t hold their grip on us. We’ve been weaned from the love of this world and we long to be with God, to do the will of God and to experience the presence

of God even as we serve Him in this world. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (verse 8).

I want to personalize this. I believe Jesus is interrupting the program schedule of your life and my life today with an urgent message. He's saying to you today, "You must be born again." This applies to everyone individually. Every single person in the world — Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Baptists, Catholics, Presbyterians and New Covenant Bible Church members—needs to be born again. We must be born again! This is something that must personally happen to each one of us. Pastors need to be born again!

Have you ever heard a story of a pastor who preached the Word, knew all the truths, had it all put together and all of a sudden denied the faith and walked away from it all? You can have all of these things—all this knowledge—but if you don't have the life of the Spirit. The spiritual life that you're trying to put together will fall apart on you and not work because regeneration is required. It takes a miracle of God's grace in your life.

"You must be born again", Jesus says. This is an authoritative word. There's no other way around it. You can't get into the Kingdom of God without this new birth. You cannot evade that requirement. You must be born again. That's passive. I had nothing to do with my first birth. I was totally the recipient of that gift of life. Likewise, something must be done for us by God the Spirit. We need this miracle deep within us. We need God to create in us a clean heart, giving us new tastes, desires and new appetites for holiness. We need the miracle of new birth.

That's the interruption. I think it hung heavily over Nicodemus' mind and heart that night. I think it should rest heavily upon us today. I think we need to stop from time to time in the middle of our comfortable religious routines and ask, "Have I experienced this new birth that the Spirit gives? Do I have life in Christ? Have I been born again?" Let me be clear. *"You must be born again"* is not the gospel—the good news. That's the diagnosis—the doctor's assessment of our condition. It's the truth. It's reality. It's the prelude to the gospel. Jesus has been like a doctor giving Nicodemus the diagnosis of his condition. He's doing what hospitals call a "workup," looking at the whole situation, saying, "Here it is. This is your issue. This is your problem." It's clear this problem is more radical than Nicodemus ever thought and is beyond his power to cure. But the doctor doesn't just give a diagnosis. A good doctor gives a prescription and a cure.

Jesus has made it very clear to Nicodemus that he can't do this for himself. But I want you to see that Jesus doesn't say, "Nicodemus, you're going to have to wait and see if

you're one of the elect. You'll have to see if God has chosen you. If He has, you'll be born again. If He hasn't, I'm sorry." Jesus believes in election but He doesn't use it that way.

3. The Invitation (verse 10)

Notice what Jesus does as we begin reading in verse ten. These verses are some of the most famous and most precious verses in the whole Bible. These verses are so well known that you see them at football games. "John 3:16." A lot of people know John 3:16. Did you know that Jesus was saying these words? These words were spoken to a man who had just realized how desperate his condition was, who had just realized, "I don't just need a renovation or a face lift. I need a total re-creation of my life." Then Jesus says, "Nicodemus, there is good news here."

As we read these verses, Nicodemus has been introduced to Jesus, interrupted by Jesus and now he's going to be invited to look to Jesus and live. I want you to put yourself in Nicodemus' shoes and ask yourself, "Have I looked to Jesus? Do I have life in Him?"

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 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. 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."

"Nicodemus, you cannot save yourself. Regeneration is required. You need to be born again. But Nicodemus, God has sent Me into the world on a mission. Look at what I've done. First of all, I am the One Who has come down from Heaven on this mission of love to save a wretched world from the consequences of its sin (verse 13). I have come down from

Heaven so the world might not be condemned but be saved. And having come down from Heaven, then I was lifted up on the cross.”

Do you remember the story in the Old Testament when the children of Israel in their wilderness wanderings became embittered toward the God Who would redeem them from slavery in Egypt and how they grumbled and murmured to such an extent that God said they needed to be chastised for their sins? He sent serpents into the camp and the people were bit. Many of them died or were dying. Then they went to Moses, who took a bronze serpent, impaled it on a staff and he lifted up that serpent and said to the people of Israel, “Come and look upon the serpent and you will be healed.” How repulsive that must have been for them to look upon the one that had bitten and poisoned them. But he said, “Look at that staff, that serpent. That serpent is lifted up. If you look to it, you will be healed and will live.”

Jesus says, “That was referring to Me. I was lifted up on a cross and on that cross I swallowed the venom of your sin and drank the poison of your judgment. Now look to Me, and you will see the ugliness of your sin, the dreadfulness of your judgment and the source of your salvation. Look to Me,” Jesus says, “and you will live. I’m the miracle worker. I’m the One Who gives everlasting life. So look to Me.”

That’s the gospel. We have a mission—to give this gospel to all. As we go forth on this mission and even speak to our children, we need to realize what we’re up against. We’re not in the business of being able to change people’s hearts—only God can do that. We’re up against people who need to be born again and who need their hearts to be changed. But the message of the gospel is that God is able and willing to do that. He has come into the world to make it possible for dead sinners to receive everlasting life. We can’t give the new birth, but let’s not let that stop us from preaching the gospel. Jesus preached the gospel after He diagnosed the condition.

I want to read a word from John Piper. As you think about your children, realize that they don’t just need a little improvement or a little extra. They need to be born again. As you think about the nations, realize the mission we’re called to do is to bring people who are dead in trespasses and sins into life everlasting and only God can do that. John Piper says,

“Don’t stop preaching because you can’t do it. Of course you can’t! The fact that you can’t make electricity or create light never stops you from flipping light switches. The fact that you can’t create fire in cylinders never stops you from turning the car key. The fact that you can’t create cell tissue never stops you from eating your meals. So don’t let the fact

that you can't cause the new birth stop you from telling the gospel. That is how people are born again—through the living and abiding Word, the good news of Jesus Christ.”

I like that! The prerequisite is people must be born again. But let's tell the gospel because through the gospel God brings new birth—new life—to sinners.

As we come to the end of this story, we ask this question: did Nicodemus ever come out of the night into the light? Did he ever believe? Did he ever look to Jesus and live? We don't know. He shows up two other times in John's Gospel and the last is at the burial of Jesus. He's very tenderly assisting in Jesus' burial. But we don't know if he ever came out of the night and into the light. We wonder if John, in leaving us wondering, is pressing deeply into us. Through the Holy Spirit, he's interrupting the scheduled programming of our lives and saying, “The most vital question for you today is not whether or not Nicodemus came out of the night into the light, but have you looked on Jesus Christ and found life in Him? Have you been born again?”

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, Your Word interrupts all our notions of how to be right with God and tells us that we need a miracle from You. We need that miracle today. There are people right now, Lord, who need to be born again. There are many others who have loved ones who need to be born again. Lord, You've called us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations. They need to be born again. As we sing now about the miracle of Your grace, as we say to You, Lord, those of us who have looked to Jesus and live, we remember how we were blinded by our sins, how we had no ears to hear your voice, how we did not know of your love within and had no taste for Heaven's joys. But how Your Spirit gave us life and opened up Your Word to us through the gospel of Your Son. God, as we remember that miracle, we pray that You would embolden us to tell the good news to others, for we were born again through the Word of Truth, the gospel of our Salvation, the living and abiding Word. May we be diligent, passionate and eager to make that Word known. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

I was blinded by my sin
Had no ears to hear Your voice
Did not know Your love within
Had no taste for heaven's joys
Then Your Spirit gave me life
Opened up Your Word to me

Through the gospel of Your Son
Gave me endless hope and peace

(O Great God by Bob Kaufflin)

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