

The New Birth – Part 2
How does it happen?
John 3:4-8
The Gospel According to John
Series #14

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in John chapter 3, the Gospel of John, chapter 3.

Yesterday marked the 503rd anniversary of one of the most significant events in the history of humanity. On October 31st, 1517, a young monk in the Roman Catholic Church nailed a list of 95 theses, or proposition statements of truth on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The church door functioned much like a bulletin board for the university professors. They would post their invitations to dispute and debate theological matters, and that is what Martin Luther was seeking to do. Little did Luther know that this simple step of publicly questioning the traditions and the teachings of the church would light the fires of reformation that would spread throughout Europe. The truth of the matter is – God was at work to start a bunch of little fires of spiritual renewal and spiritual life in many sectors of the church and He used Luther's fiery personality as a flashpoint to bring these fires together and create a super cell fire that could not be contained. As the Protestant Reformation developed and these brave men and women confronted the errors and the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church there were a few things which coalesced as the nucleus of their message. They were concerned for the Church to return to the Scriptures as the sole and singular authority over all matters of faith – rather than having the church over the Bible, the Bible must be over the Church as its authority. They were concerned for the good news of the Gospel. As they themselves returned to the Scriptures they saw that mankind's only hope is found in Jesus Christ alone. The only way we as sinful mankind can ever be made right with the God of Heaven is by God's own initiative through the work of His Son to save us. And this work of Jesus on our behalf was not a work we had to earn through our good works or add to through our own human effort. It was a work that Christ alone completed which is applied to us by God's grace alone. It is His own goodness and lovingkindness which brings this salvation to us – it is by grace alone. And it is received through faith alone – not through any work done by us. And this is all to the glory of God alone. It is His work, and it should then be all to His praise alone! These are known as the 5 solas of the Reformation – Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, and Soli Deo Gloria.

At the heart of that nucleus of concern is the same issue that Jesus is addressing in John 3. Which simply proves that this message of the Gospel is never not needed. We will never move past the Gospel. We must always proclaim the clear truth of the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus, accomplished by Jesus, and entrusted to the Church. Jesus is engaged in a conversation in John 3 with a man who is steeped in religious accomplishments and family heritage as the basis for his salvation. And the response he receives from Jesus is as alarming and upsetting as the message of

the reformers to the established church of the 16th Century. Let's read that interaction again as we start this morning. We'll read John 3:1-8.

Nicodemus is the greatest of the great when it comes to human achievement and religious perfection. He was fully expecting entrance into the kingdom of God based upon his being an Israelite – a physical son of Abraham – and doubly sure based on his high achievement as a Pharisee. He was the teacher of Israel – the expert on the Scriptures. He was a member of the ruling council – the Sanhedrin. He was extremely wealthy and had more influence in Jerusalem than the Roman Governor Pilate. He heard of this Jesus and of his cleansing of the Temple and of his miraculous signs. And he must have wondered – is this the Messiah? Is this the Son of David who was promised by the Old Testament prophets? Is this the one who will finally free our people and overthrow our oppressors and establish God's kingdom on earth for all eternity?

Presumably, this is why he came to talk to Jesus under the cover of darkness. He had questions about Jesus and his ministry. He maybe had questions about the kingdom that the Messiah would rule over. He maybe wanted to make sure that if Jesus was the Messiah that he – as a leader in Jewish life – was in the know and could help him ascend to throne of David. Whatever it was that compelled Nicodemus to come see Jesus, we can be sure that he was not expecting the conversation that followed. In verse 7 he is described by Jesus as marveling at Jesus' statement that anyone who enters the kingdom of God must be born again. In verse 10 he is called the teacher of Israel by Jesus, and Jesus expected him to understand what he was talking about based on what he knew from the Old Testament. So, what was Jesus talking about? What is this being born again all about? What is the new birth?

Well, Jesus' message can be summarized by looking at the statements of verses 3 and 5. In verse 3 he says that unless one is born again, or born from above, they cannot see the kingdom of God. In verse 4, Nicodemus clearly doesn't understand Jesus and asks a question about how this could possibly be true on the physical and human level. And so, in verse 5, Jesus restates the same truth by saying that unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. We saw last week from the Old Testament that Jesus' statement in verse 5 is clearly referring back to Ezekiel 36, among other passages. And he is making the simple statement that the only hope anyone has of getting into the eternal kingdom of God is through a supernatural work of God in which we are spiritually cleansed from our sin and the Spirit of God implants life into our once dead souls. We need this spiritual re-birth because we are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are totally unable and unwilling and lacking any desire at all to seek God. We have no power or ability in ourselves to make ourselves right with God. We cannot earn this life, nor can we do anything which would cause it to come into our hearts. God must pour out his Spirit like the cleansing waters of the Old Testament sacrificial system and His Spirit must renew us and remake us. In other words, we must be completely reborn spiritually. But how does this happen? How is it that this new spiritual life is brought to us through this birth from above? I want to point you to 5 answers to that question this morning – how does the new birth happen? It happens supernaturally and mysteriously, Scripturally and mercifully, and through Christ.

I. Supernaturally – vs. 5-8

- a. So, you must be born from above if you are going to enter into God's kingdom. How is it that this happens? How are you born again? Well, first, it happens supernaturally. This is what is so confusing to Nicodemus in this interchange with Jesus. He is hard wired to think in natural terms, even about his relationship with God. He obviously knows there is a supernatural element and truth which is beyond him, but he still is hard-wired to think in human and natural terms about his entrance into the kingdom. And he represents all of us! So, he asks Jesus – how is this possible? And Jesus' answer points him to the spiritual and the supernatural – to the Divine. God must do this, Nicodemus cannot.
- b. Jesus makes that even clearer in verse 6 when he says, “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The flesh cannot produce spiritual life. And spiritual life is what none of us have and all of us need. We have been born physically, and we have physical life. But in our sin, we are spiritually dead. We are not really living then, we are walking through life spiritually dead. And we cannot change that. The only One who can do anything about that is the Spirit who brings spiritual life.
- c. One of the great principles of interpreting the Bible that was recovered during the Protestant Reformation is the principle of the analogy of Scripture. It simply states that Scripture is its own best interpreter. So, rather than the individual reader being the best interpreter of Scripture – like is so commonly thought today – and rather than the Church itself being the best interpreter of Scripture – like what was practiced in the church of Rome – each text is best understood as it is explained by the rest of Scripture. So, if a truth is true in one text, we can be sure it is true in several texts. And so, John 3 is ground zero for this truth about the New Birth, but there are many other texts which so helpfully shed light on these truths. For each of these points then about how the new birth happens, we will look to other texts in Scripture to see them proven true all the more.
- d. Last week we saw what the New birth was and why it was necessary from Ezekiel 36. If you were to keep reading on into chapter 37 you would read of Ezekiel being taken by the Spirit of the Lord into the middle of a valley that was filled with bones – very dry and very dead bones. And the Lord asks him a question – “Son of man, can these bones live?” From a human perspective the answer is obviously “no!” But Ezekiel was talking to the Lord and so he wisely answers, “O Lord God, you know.” And so the Lord said to Ezekiel, “Prophesy 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.” And so Ezekiel prophesied over the bones and indeed they came to life, just as the Lord said they would. Then in verses 11-14 the Lord interprets the vision for Ezekiel and tells him that it is pointing to what he will do with the whole house of Israel. They are saying, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.” They were in exile, out of the Promised Land and without hope. But the Lord told Ezekiel to prophesy to them

and tell them that he would raise them from their graves and put his Spirit within them and return them to their land. Obviously, this text is talking about a national restoration of Israel – both spiritually and physically. But what we see illustrated in God’s work in Israel is the basis for the teaching of the New Testament about our condition. We are spiritually dead like those really dry and dead bones. And the Spirit of God must come upon us and bring us to life. Those bones could do nothing, and no living man could make them live. The Lord had to do it. So, this birth from above is a supernatural birth.

- e. Isn’t this what we saw right away in John’s Gospel in John 1:12-13?
 - i. 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. (Jn. 1:12-13)
 - ii. Those who did receive him are those who were born and have become children of God. And how were they born? By bloodlines which proved through DNA that they were one of God’s chosen? No. By the will of the flesh – the physical desire to produce life through intimacy in marriage? No. By the will of man – the conscious decision of a man to make something happen that needs to happen? No! This is a birth which is of God – or as Jesus will say in John 3 – it is a birth from above – it is a birth of water and the Spirit.
- f. Jesus will say this again even more clearly in chapter 6:
 - i. It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. (Jn. 6:63)
- g. Your flesh is no help at all in bringing about the spiritual life you need to enter into the eternal kingdom of God. You cannot will it to happen. You cannot work hard enough to make it happen. You cannot demand it happen. This is a supernatural work of God. He must do it!
- h. We looked at this text last week, but consider again 2 Corinthians 4:3-6. And consider specifically how it teaches us about God’s supernatural work to shine this light of life into our sin-darkened hearts.
 - i. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:3-6)
- i. The only way Paul could proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord was because the light of the knowledge of the glory of God had shone in his heart in the face of Jesus Christ. And this was not a shining that he himself caused to happen. It was superintended by the God who supernaturally spoke all things into existence. The God who said, “Let there be light” and there was light, is the God who speaks into the spiritually dead heart and brings it to life.

- j. One more passage in the New Testament to drive the point home and make the truth clear. James 1:17-18 says this:
 - i. 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. ¹⁸ 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)
- k. When we talk about this text, we often focus on the first verse – that all good gifts come from above. But that first phrase in verse 18 is a clear statement of the sovereign initiative in bringing us into spiritual life. James says that it is of God's own will that he brought us forth by the word of truth. He who is the giver all every perfect gift displays his sovereign generosity in giving us eternal life in accordance with his own sovereign will.
- l. There is a reason that our Lord uses the idea of birth to communicate this spiritual truth to Nicodemus. A baby is completely helpless and without a say in its own birth. It does not determine when, or how, or if – it is simply brought to life. And this natural and physical phenomenon illustrated throughout the animal kingdom and in the pinnacle of God's creation – mankind – is a picture of this spiritual truth. It is brought about by the sovereign will of God.
- m. And in fact, the miraculous human births throughout the Scripture drive home the point even further. There is this thread of supernatural births in Scripture – births where it was obvious that man could not make it happen, like they normally can. Situations that were humanly hopeless and impossible – and God, according to his divine will and foreordained purposes supernaturally intervened and brought about the pregnancy and the child of his choosing.
 - i. The first is Sarah, in her 90th year – well past the age of childbearing and after years of complete barrenness – she conceives in keeping with the promise of God and Isaac is born.
 - ii. Isaac's own wife, Rebekah, was also barren for 20 years, but Isaac prayed, and the Lord showed mercy and Esau and Jacob were born.
 - iii. In the book of Judges, chapter 13, we read of Manoah and his wife who was barren. An angel appeared to her and then to Manoah to tell them that God would give them a child and he would be especially used by God and was to be a Nazirite. And his name was Samson.
 - iv. In 1 Samuel 1 we come across Hannah who is in the anguish of barrenness for many years. As she repeatedly cried out to the Lord in her anguish he finally answered and gave her a son and his name was Samuel – the first prophet in the Promised Land.
 - v. And then, a thousand years later in the book of Luke we read of a couple who had been barren their whole marriage and they are described as “advanced in years.” Zechariah was a priest and when he was serving in the Temple an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him that his wife, Elizabeth would conceive and bring forth a son. And they were to name him John and he would serve an incredibly important function in preparing the way for the Messiah.

- vi. Then, the most miraculous of them all – Elizabeth’s cousin also has an angel appear to her to tell her that she also will conceive and bear a son. But this is especially strange and alarming because she is not yet married, and therefore had no humanly possible way of conceiving. The 6 other births I mentioned are miraculous evidence of God’s intervention in the course of human events to bring about men for his specific purposes at his unique time for the sake of accomplishing His divine will. But they all pale in comparison to this conception and birth. Mary was the virgin’s name, and she was to call the name of her son – Jesus!
- n. This is the God who is sovereignly overseeing this birth from above. He is the God of supernatural births! He who brought Jesus into the womb of Mary is the God who brings life into the spiritually dead soul.

II. Mysteriously – vs. 8

- a. So, how does this new birth – this birth from above – happen? It happens supernaturally – God must do it! And it also happens mysteriously. If it is supernatural, then it is also mysterious by definition. If it is completely of God’s initiative and according to God’s will and by God’s directive and timing – then there will certainly be things about it which are mysterious to us. Jesus tells Nicodemus in verse 8 that this movement of the Spirit to bring new life into the spiritually dead soul is like the movement of the wind. The word in the original for wind is the same word for breath and for spirit. And so, this is a play on words here by Jesus. The wind blows wherever it wishes and accomplishes that which God has sent it to do, and the Spirit of God moves wherever he wishes to accomplish his divine purposes. But there is more than that. Remember that Nicodemus was an expert in the Old Testament. And so, Jesus uses this analogy because he is stirring Nicodemus’ mind with something that is familiar to him.
- b. In Ezekiel 37, in that valley of the dry bones, Ezekiel prophesies the first time over the dry bones and they come together to and are joined by sinews and muscle tissue and then skin is formed, but he says in verse 8 – but there was no breath in them. So the Lord told him to prophesy again in verse 9 he told Ezekiel: “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, 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.”
- c. So, when Jesus tells Nicodemus that this birth from above happens by the Spirit and is like the wind, blowing where it wishes – he is pointing his attention back to the vision of the valley of dry bones. This wind blows and brings breath into these lifeless bodies under the command of the Spirit of God. That is how the birth from above happens as well. The breath of God blows like the wind and brings the breath of spiritual life into a dead soul and it is born from above. Beloved, this is mysterious and gloriously good news. Without this movement of the Spirit, we would have no hope!
- d. Like the wind, the working of the Spirit is mysterious in 3 obvious ways.
 - i. *It is Independent*

1. Jesus says – the wind blows where it wishes. It is independent of human control or human management. It does its own thing in its own way in its own time. And this is mysterious. Amazingly we can better predict when the wind will be blowing and from which direction it will most likely come with our meteorological devices, but we have zero control over it. It is entirely independent. Jesus says, the same is true of the Spirit's activity in bringing about the new birth. The Spirit of God answers to no higher authority to receive his orders or to carry out someone else's will and wishes. He is entirely independent from outside control or manipulation. He moves in perfect concord with the divine decrees of the Triune Godhead. He carries out the elected purposes of the Father, and He applies the redemption won by the Son. But His movements and supernatural acts to bring about the new birth are completely independent of any other. He blows where He wishes to blow to bring life to whom he wishes to bring life.

ii. *It is Irresistible*

1. This work of the Spirit is also mysterious in that it is irresistible. This is the logical conclusion of it being independent. The wind is a force within God's creation that cannot be turned off and stopped. When God determines to blow his strongest natural winds, there is nothing which can stand in its way. It destroys manmade structures, moves massive storm systems, uproots trees, and drives us all to take cover. The wind cannot be stopped or contained or turned off. Its work is irresistible.
2. And just like this, so to the Spirit of God moves in mysterious ways to bring about his purposes in irresistible ways. The hardest of hearts can be strangely warmed and brought to life when the powerful and irresistible wind of the Spirit blows upon them.
3. After Walter Penner's graveside service yesterday afternoon, I was sitting at a table of folks who were sharing stories of God's amazing work in the past. Del and Lois shared the story of Lois' father, John Hiebert. And his story is a glorious example of the irresistible work of the Spirit of God. He grew up in a Christian home, but he was a very wicked young man. As soon as he could refuse going to church and his parents could no longer manage his decisions, he stopped going. As a teenager he joined a gang because he had the ambition of being the most successful bank robber in Oklahoma's history. Johnnie was so notorious that every Christian in the town was praying for his life to be changed, and if possible – for him to be saved from his sin. Well, Johnnie wanted nothing to do with that. As much as humanly possible, he resisted the truth of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. But then one day, in the midst of his running from God he was walking past the church

and they were having special meetings. And he was compelled to go in. He was drawn to this gathering like he had never been drawn before. And it was irresistible. Like metal to a magnet, he had to go. And he went in, heard the gospel truth he had heard so many times – and he turned from his unbelief and his sin and he ran to Jesus Christ in humble faith.

4. And his life was completely altered. We'll talk about this again in a few weeks, but when the Spirit moves to bring the new birth there are definable and obvious effects, just like when the strong winds in nature blow. And for Johnnie Hiebert it meant that he turned himself into the sheriff for all the crimes he had committed and he left the gang of robbers he had been part of and he felt compelled to go and preach the Gospel of Jesus to others how needed to hear – namely those on the African continent who so desperately needed Jesus. These are the marks of this irresistible work of God in his life. Johnnie would have never chosen any of that on his own, but when the Spirit of God blew upon his life, he couldn't help but be radically transformed from one who was spiritually dead, to one who was now gloriously alive!

iii. *It is Inscrutable*

1. This work is also mysterious in that it is inscrutable – meaning, it cannot be fully examined and understood. This movement of the Spirit of God in bringing the new birth is not like some science experiment we can conduct in Mr. McClenahan's lab. We can't reproduce it or fully analyze it or completely understand it, any more than we can with the wind that blows. We absolutely can understand aspects of this work, just like we can with the wind, but we cannot inspect its every part and understand all of its ways. It is mysterious in that it is inscrutable. God moves when and how God so chooses to move. He brings the new birth upon one soul and passes over another. Why? We don't know, nor can we figure it out – it is above our pay grade, for sure!

Conclusion: So, does this mean that we just throw our hands up in the air and say *Que sera sera* – whatever will be will be? No! In fact, it is one of the marks of those who have spiritual life that they long for this life to be brought to those they know and love. They long for the extending of grace to more and more so that the glory of the Lord might be seen more and more. And yet they know that they cannot manage the new birth, or demand it, or manipulate it, or even anticipate when the Spirit will work, or prophesy His next move, or direct it in any way. But those who are spiritually alive can pray and ask for this merciful God to extend His work into the hearts and lives of those we know and love. Just like every Christian in Corn, OK prayed for Johnnie Hiebert for years on end, and God finally answered and so moved – so too – we must pray. And while we pray we must work to faithfully proclaim, because as we will see next time, God always brings the new birth through the word of the gospel proclaimed.