

The New Birth – Part 3
How does it happen?
John 3:4-8
The Gospel According to John
Series #15

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

We continue this morning to consider the conversation between Jesus and this remarkably interesting man – Nicodemus. The record of this conversation is only a few verses long, but the depth of these words has sent us on this several week journey through the text. And what we have seen is that this super religious man had something so wrong with him that he needed a new birth. If he wanted to get into the Kingdom of God, he needed to be born from above.

Maybe you are already familiar with the story of John Wesley's conversion to faith in Christ, but it is so illustrative of this text. You know John Wesley as the great preacher, evangelist, and pastor who was one of the founders of the Methodist movement in the 1700's. He was a deeply religious man. He was a missionary to the United States. He had been friends for many years with many who knew and loved the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He even preached that gospel to many, but he knew something was wrong with him. He despaired of his life and of his ministry and was about to quit the ministry. He found himself back in London and kept his nose in the Bible. He awoke on May 24th and spent time in the Scriptures in which he read: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." (2 Peter 1:3-4) Later that day he found himself in a gathering of Moravians who had invited him to join them for a study of the book of Romans. In the meeting someone read Martin Luther's preface to his commentary on Romans and Wesley testified later that "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."¹

Wesley was so much like Nicodemus. He was relying on his own effort. He was super religious and super serious about being right with God. From a human perspective, if anyone was getting into heaven, it was Nicodemus and John Wesley. But they both also knew that they needed something outside of themselves. They were both questioning and searching. And they were both confronted with the truth about Jesus and were born again or born from above.

¹ <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/john-wesleys-heart-strangely-warmed-11630227.html>

As we have studied these words of Jesus about the new birth, we have asked and answered several questions. We have asked the questions, what is it? Why is it necessary? And How does it happen? Remember the context of the conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus has just started his public ministry. He has made quite the splash in Jerusalem with a tense cleansing of the Temple followed by a host of miraculous signs among the people. He has clearly claimed by his actions to be the Messiah – the one who had God-given authority to take possession of the Temple. And so, this spiritual giant – from man’s perspective – Nicodemus, comes to Jesus in the cover of night. He is obviously seeking something from Jesus, but we are never really told what it is. But Jesus knows his heart better than Nicodemus even does, and he tells Nicodemus the truth he needs to hear. He tells him that he cannot see the kingdom of God unless he is born again, or born from above. And then he tells him that he must be born of water and the Spirit before he can enter into the kingdom of God. Let’s read this interaction again in John 3:4-8.

Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand what he was saying because he was the teacher of Israel. In other words, Jesus is using Old Testament truths and applying them to Nicodemus, and to everyone else, to tell us the truth about how we are going to get into the Kingdom of God. We must be born from above, or born again. What does this mean? It means that we must be given spiritual life through the supernatural and sovereign work of God’s grace. He must wash us with the pure waters of forgiveness by His Holy Spirit and he must give us immortal and eternal life by his Spirit. But why must he do this? He must do this because we are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are like that valley of dead bones in Ezekiel 37 – we are without life and without hope of spiritual life. We are hopeless and helpless in our lost and sinful condition. But God delights to bring spiritual life to spiritually dead souls. By His Spirit he loves to show this sovereign mercy whereby he causes us to born again unto this living hope. But how does this happen? How is it that this new spiritual life is brought to us through this birth from above? Last time together I told you that I wanted to highlight 5 answers to that question, and we got to 2 of them last time – meaning we have 3 more for today. We saw already that this new birth happens supernaturally, and it happens mysteriously. In other words, it is a work that God must accomplish, and he does so in accordance with his own sovereign wisdom. We cannot control, connive, manufacture, manipulate, or demand this work of God’s Spirit to bring this new spiritual life into a spiritually dead soul. But that doesn’t mean that it just gets miraculously implanted into someone’s heart. No, there are prescribed means which God always intends to use to bring spiritual life – to bring about this new birth. So, how does this new birth happen? Well, it happens Scripturally and mercifully and through Christ.

I. Scripturally

- a. You are in John 3 and I want you to flip over to John 6 once again. This is such a crucial text in John 6. In the interaction between Jesus & Nicodemus we don’t have our every question answered about the new birth. But when we broaden our focus, we quickly see a clear and compelling answer coming from many other Scriptures. In fact, the few we will consider over the next few minutes are representative of so many others. This is how God works to bring someone to spiritual life – he uses His Word, the Scriptures, to bring them to faith. So, let me prove that to you by taking you on a quick tour of some key texts.

- b. In John 6, Jesus is interacting with a large crowd. He has fed the 5,000 plus and he has walked on water, and now the crowd is back looking for more bread. He has clearly told them that he is the true bread from heaven. In verse 35 he is so bold as to say, "I am the bread of life; whoever come to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." As the interaction with the crowd develops, we find out that most of them were highly offended by Jesus' words. How could they possibly eat Jesus' flesh and drink Jesus' blood and thereby have eternal life. And many of them left and ceased to follow Jesus. And so, in verse 61 Jesus turns to his apostles, his chosen 12 and speaks to them about what he has said. And look at verse 63.
- c. Do you see the truth so plainly presented here? The crowd cannot have this saving faith in Jesus by the efforts of their own flesh. In fact, the flesh is no help at all, it is the Spirit who gives life. But how does he give life? "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life." Do you remember back in chapter 3 where Jesus said that the flesh can only produce the flesh and the spirit can only produce the spirit? Well, he tells us here that the words of Christ are able to produce life and the spirit – in other words, it is through the words of Christ that spiritual life is brought to the soul. The words of man cannot produce spiritual life because mankind is fleshly. But the words of Christ can produce spiritual life by His Spirit because they are spiritual and life-giving words!
- d. And in case we aren't sure that is what Jesus meant, just look down a few verses at verse 68. Jesus is asking his apostles if they want to leave too with the rest of the crowd and Peter answers – "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." Did you notice where Peter's statement started? It started with the words of life they had received from Jesus, and then he went on to profess their belief in Jesus as the holy one of God. In other words, their faith was brought about by the life-giving words of Jesus.
- e. Flip with me to Romans 10. This is such a familiar text, but it would be hard to over emphasize its importance to answering this question. How does the new birth happen? Well, look at verses 13-17.
- f. The issue being addressed is, if everyone who calls on the name of the Lord can be saved, how is it that they end up calling on the Lord to save them? Well, they call out to the Lord because they believe, and they believe because they have heard the word of Christ preached to them by those sent to preach the good news. This saving faith is brought about by the preached word of Christ. Not all who hear the word of Christ will believe – as is evidenced in John 6, and right here in Romans 10 where he quotes Isaiah's lament about not all having believed what they heard. But no one believes without hearing the word of Christ. The spiritually dead soul must be brought to life through a supernatural and mysterious work of God. And that work is brought to that soul through the word of Christ. And faith is the result of that hearing. The ears are opened and the spiritual eyes are given sight to truly see Christ Jesus for the first time, and the heart believes and the mouth confesses that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him

from the dead and that soul is justified and is saved! This new birth comes through the hearing of the word of the Gospel.

- g. And this obviously does not mean just hearing with your ears, audibly, but hearing or reading the truth of Christ in the Scriptures. That is why Paul can say to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14-15 that he is to continue in the word of truth he has learned and firmly believed. And he tells him in verse 15 that he is to continue in the sacred writings – the Scriptures. In other words, he is calling him not just to hear them, but to read them and study them. And then he gives this description of those Scriptures – “which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2 Tim. 3:15b). So, these Scriptures Timothy has known for so long and must continue to study have the power and the ability to make one wise for salvation. In other words, these are not just truth propositions or theological statements – but in these Scriptures there is the best wisdom to be found in all the universe – the wisdom which leads us from death to life, from being lost to being saved by Christ!
- h. So, in John 3 and John 6, we have Jesus telling us how this new birth happens. And this is further explained through Paul in Romans and amplified by his words to Timothy. Now consider what Peter says in 1 Peter 1. He is calling the church to walk in pure faith which shows itself in earnest love for one another. And he bases that command in verse 23 on this truth – “since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;” How were they born again? Well, it was not of perishable seed. Remember, that is what was at issue in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. Flesh could not do this. The perishable seed of life that flesh brings to the equation is no help at all in bringing imperishable life. So, how does the imperishable seed of spiritual life get into us? It is through the living and abiding word of God. This supernatural birth from above that happens through the mysterious providence and sovereign goodness of God comes to us through the Word of God. This is the prescribed means of God to bring imperishable life to humanity. It is through the word of God telling us about the Incarnate Word of God. God never brings spiritual life to a spiritually dead soul in any other way than through His life-giving Word. This is why Paul says in Romans 1:16 about the word of the Gospel that he is not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. This is why in James 1:18 the text says that it was of God’s own will that he brought us forth, listen to this, “by the word of truth.” That is God’s modus operandi. This is how he does it – though the Word of Christ proclaimed. To those who are spiritually dead it is foolishness and a stumbling block, but to those who are called, the preaching of Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:22-25)
- i. For a clear example of how this works, we need look no further than the book of Acts. So, turn with me to Acts 2. And I know you know this text so well, but look at it through the eyes of this question. How is it that the new birth is brought to the spiritually dead soul? In Acts 2 there is this unique and long-anticipated

filling of the Spirit of God upon the Apostles so that they were speaking in the tongues of the crowd that gathered in their own languages from distant lands. It is such a spectacle of amazement and probably some chaos in this moment – so much so that the crowd thinks the apostles must be drunk. So, Peter seizes the moment and stands before the crowd to explain what is going on. He preaches the truth about Jesus of Nazareth and proves to them from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophetic word and must be the long-anticipated Messiah. His words explain the truth about Jesus - who he truly was, why he died, and how he rose again. And this proclaimed word by Peter culminates in verse 36 where he says, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

- j. This is clear and convicting truth preached about Jesus. And where the crowds previously had been cold and unbelieving, on this day there is something different. They are cut to the heart and they cry out for salvation by asking, “what shall we do?” In other words – if all that you have said is true – we are in trouble. We killed the Messiah sent by God. What must we do to be saved from our treacherous rebellion? And so, Peter said to them in verse 38 – “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” This could easily sound like they must be baptized to receive forgiveness of sins. But verse 41 makes clear to you what is happening here. It says, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” They received his word and as evidence of their belief they were baptized. And this is the largest ingathering of souls that we are told about in the book of Acts. These folks were born from above in this moment. They were brought from spiritual death to spiritual life. And how did it happen? Through the Word of God about Christ proclaimed through Peter.
- k. Alright – so you get the point – the new birth happens through the prescribed means of the Word of God. What does this mean for you?
 - i. If you don’t have this spiritual life, then the only way to get it is through the Word of God. Seek the Lord while He may be found and call upon him while he is near. Submit your heart to the truth about Christ and cry out to God to give you this spiritual life. And know that when you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved – you will have this spiritual and true life.
 - ii. If you know others who have not yet been born from above, their only hope is this supernatural and mysterious work of the Almighty God to cause them to be born again. But don’t fret and don’t quit, as though there is nothing you can do. You cannot manipulate or demand or control the sovereign grace of God, but you can be the agent who delivers the means for salvation that God always uses – His Word. Your relative, your neighbor, your friend, your child, the random person you meet in the course of life – their only hope of crossing from spiritual death to spiritual life is if they hear God’s life giving Word about His life-giving Son. Be the

one whose feet carries the good news of the Gospel of grace into the lives of those who need to hear. It is their only hope.

II. Mercifully

- a. So, how does the new birth happen? It happens Scripturally. And it also happens mercifully. This sovereign act of God whereby he brings life to the spiritually dead soul happens mercifully. You must not miss this. Turn to Titus 3 and we will read verses 3-7.
- b. Mercy is the opposite of wrath. God's wrath is the holy and righteous anger stirred by our sin which demands a just punishment. God's mercy is the ceasing and the appeasing of that wrath so that we do not receive the outpouring of that wrath that we so obviously deserve.
- c. Don't miss this! Beloved, don't get used to this. Don't get so accustomed to hearing about mercy and grace that they lose their wonder. Consider afresh the amazing work of God to show you mercy! See yourself in verse 3 and let verses 4-5 take your breath away once again. God's mercy is like the ever-shining sun. One ray after another beats down upon your head and warms your soul with the blessedness and goodness of God. But because God's mercies are new every morning and because He has determined to shine his face upon you in mercy, your heart quickly takes for granted this glorious display of mercy. Like the sun, you just expect it to always be there. Isaac Watts in his restatement of Psalm 139 said it this way:

Lord, when I count thy mercies o'er,
They strike me with surprise;
Not all the sands that spread the shore
To equal numbers rise.²
- d. God's mercy is so abundant and free that it is like the sand at the seashore. But its every grain represents an untold glory of God's merciful dealings with your soul. And this is the only hope you truly have. That God will show you mercy. This is the basis of your salvation. This is why we come to the God who made us with humble brokenness – because we need salvation from our sin, and our only hope is mercy. This is how the new birth happens. It is completely dependent upon the tender mercy of our thrice holy God. You bring nothing to the equation but your sin and rebellion. And God brings spiritual life to you through no work of your own, but solely based upon the work of Christ.
- e. Just think of the examples in the Scripture of those who received this new birth to see the broad array and varied nature of God's mercy:
 - i. Nicodemus – uber religious and self-righteous – born again by God's great mercy
 - ii. Peter – inner circle level disciple of Jesus – natural leader – high octane personality – tended to rely on his flesh – born from above by God's great mercy

² Watts, I. (1998). [*The Psalms and hymns of Isaac Watts*](#). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

- iii. Zacchaeus – Jewish sellout who gave himself to be the Roman’s tax collector for his own personal gain – called by Christ and shown God’s great mercy to be born again
 - iv. The Philippian Jailer – had no prior knowledge of God until he heard Paul and Silas singing in his jail – was so committed to his job and so driven by loyalty to Rome that when he saw the prison doors were open he assumed the worst and was about to take his own life – but God intervened and rescued him and saved him and his household through this glorious extension of mercy
 - v. The woman at the well in John 4 – living a life of abject immorality – the worst of the worst – and yet still trusting in the religion of her parents to save her – intersected by Jesus and shown great mercy so that she is born again from above
 - vi. Saul of Tarsus – the Jew of the Jews, the Pharisee of the Pharisees – so zealous for God that he eagerly hunted down and imprisoned followers of this Jesus – had every reason for confidence in his flesh – like Nicodemus, if anyone could get into the kingdom of God based on religious achievement and effort, it was Paul – and he was shown mercy by Jesus who intervened in his life and rescued him from his sin and caused him to be born again
- f. Friend, whether you are the most religious one in the room, or whether you are the worst sinner in the room. Whether you are broken by the realities of life and are despairing of life itself, or whether you feel like you have life by the tail and are winning this great game we are all playing. Whether you have no prior knowledge of God but you know you are in trouble and in need of salvation, or whether you know more about the God of the Bible than most. Whether you are a type A personality who simply gets things done, or you are the weak and weary and hardly able to take the next step in life. Friend, you need mercy from God! You cannot and you will not enter into the kingdom of God if you do not receive mercy from God! And God delights to show you mercy – so cry out to Him today and plead for mercy, and you will be shown mercy and He will bring this spiritual life to your spiritually dead soul!
- g. And Christian – marvel anew at this great mercy. Refuse to move on. Gaze with fresh eyes of faith upon the great ocean of mercy you have been shown to make you right with God through Christ Jesus our Lord!

III. Through Christ

- a. And that is the last way that this new birth happens – it is through Christ. He is the resurrection and the life. Our mortality takes on immortality in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. This is right here in our text in Titus 3. Look at verse 6, speaking of the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit – in other words, the new birth – the text says that He was poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. None of this happens apart from Christ. He is the alpha and the omega – the A and the Z – of our salvation from sin. There is no mercy apart from Christ Jesus. There is no spiritual life apart from Jesus Christ. There is

no forgiveness of sins apart from Jesus Christ death under the weight of our sin and his glorious resurrection from the grave to bring us victory over our sin. There is no peace with the thrice holy God whom we have sinned against in greater measure than we will ever understand apart from Christ Jesus our Lord! There is no safety from God's righteous wrath apart from Jesus. There is no eternal life apart from the life found only in Jesus. There is no way to enter into the Kingdom of God apart from the salvation secured by Jesus Christ.

- i. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – 1 Peter 1:3
- ii. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. – Eph. 2:4-7
- iii. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. – Col. 2:13-14

Conclusion: Are you in Christ by grace through faith? Have you been born from above? Have you been brought from spiritual death to spiritual life by the great mercy extended to you through the Son of God? Do you have true and unending peace with God because you have been forgiven of your sins and washed clean by the purification of God's Holy Spirit through God's Holy Son, the Lord Jesus Christ?