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The New Birth
John 3:4-8
The Gospel According to John
Series #13

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

John Taylor Smith was once preaching in a large church belonging to the Church of England, and his text was John 3:7 - "Ye must be born again." In order to drive the call of the text home Smith said, "My dear people, do not substitute anything for the new birth. You may be a member of a church, even the great church of which I am a member, the historic Church of England, but church membership is not new birth, and 'except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" The rector was sitting to his left and he pointed to him and said, "You might be a clergyman like my friend the rector here and not be born again, and 'except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" Then he pointed at the archdeacon and said, "You might even be an archdeacon like my friend in his stall and not be born again and 'except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" You might even be a bishop, like myself, and not be born again and 'except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'"

A few day later Smith received a letter from the archdeacon saying, "You have found me out. I have been a clergyman for over thirty years, but I had never known anything of the joy that Christians speak of. I never could understand it. Mine has been hard, legal service. I did not know what was the matter with me, but when you pointed directly to me and said, 'You might be even an archdeacon and not be born again,' I realized in a moment what the trouble was. I had never known anything of the new birth." (Ron Prosis, *Preaching Illustrations from Church History*, pg. 176-77)

Maybe you could describe your Christian experience to date as being a hard, legal service – one in which you do not have any true joy – one in which you know all the facts, but have no evidence of true spiritual life. That is the kind of man which we find Jesus talking to in John 3. Now, we don't know for sure that he didn't have any joy, but we do know that he didn't have true spiritual life. He thought he was fine – he thought that he was in the kingdom without any question. He came to Jesus at night because he had questions about Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus lovingly confronts him with this bombshell truth – unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Let's read John 3, and I want to read verses 1-10 this morning. *Read John 3:1-10.*

There is a fundamental truth which runs throughout the Scriptures which we must understand. It is a core truth about salvation and about our redemption from sin and our hope for eternal life. It is clearly presented in many texts, but there is probably no clearer text than this one before us

today. That core truth is the need for regeneration, or new birth, in order to enter into the Kingdom of God. It was a truth that Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand and know, but that he was completely clueless about. And it is a truth that so many today seem so absolutely clueless about as well. Man always wants to believe in man. We always want to hope for the best in mankind. We always want to think that man isn't as bad as our worst expressions. We would like to think that the things wrong with us as a human race can be fixed by some minor tweaks. This is why we are so prone to fall for the catchy promises of politicians. We are prone to believe that if the right people could just get into power and they were given the right to make some policy and governance changes we could fix all that is wrong with America and get everything back to the good ole' days that we remember so fondly. This is also why we are so prone to parent children by making constant tweaks to their behavior patterns to form and shape them into great human beings because we are prone to think that they are mostly good and just need some help to flesh out their best potential. Mankind wants to believe in mankind. We want to put our hope and our confidence in what man can do to solve man's problems. This is why we pursue life coaches and psychological/psychiatric help because we believe that if we can just change a few habits or get rid of some negative thoughts or deal with some negative consequence of something that happened to us in the past then we can do and be better. Mankind wants to believe in mankind. You want to put your hope in you – that you can be the little train who could.

And while that might be true for succeeding in business, or for being a contributing member to society or for learning how to ride a bike – it is not true for the one thing that matters eternally more than anything else – getting into the kingdom of God. Enter Nicodemus. If there is a guy that we as human society would pick to represent us as our best shot for gaining entrance into the kingdom of God based on human achievement and effort – it would be this man, Nicodemus. He knew the Old Testament Scriptures. He was a part of the Pharisees – meaning he was an expert in the Law and was part of the separatists' movement to keep the Jewish faith pure. He was looking for the Messiah – the promised son of David who would come and rule and reign over them in righteousness. He was apparently an older man based on his question in verse 4. And yet he was inquisitive about this new teacher in Israel. He was not all crusty and stuck in his ways. He did not dismiss Jesus as some fly by night zealot or as some threat to the power structure of the Sanhedrin. He heard and saw in Jesus something different, and so he wanted to know what the truth was about this man – this teacher in Israel. And he came to Jesus in the cover of darkness – at night. This darkness in John is not just a physical darkness, but is symbolic of a spiritual darkness. This is obviously true as Jesus continues to talk with Nicodemus. He simply doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about when he tells him that he must be born from above.

So, here is this wonderfully religious man – one who is highly accomplished in human society – the best and the brightest as it were – the most highly respected and the most well accomplished as it relates to human righteousness. If anyone can be right with God and gain entrance into God's eternal kingdom it is Nicodemus. And here he is at night, seeking an audience with Jesus. And the Gospel of John doesn't tell us why he came. At the end of verse 2 you get the idea that he had something he was going to say next, but Jesus knew the question before it was asked and gave Nicodemus an answer that blew his world apart. And it is in this

interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus that we find this fundamental truth about our salvation so clearly stated. And that fundamental truth – the one that is universally true for all people of all time is that unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. He further explains this statement in verse 5 when he responds to Nicodemus by saying, “unless one is born of water and Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. And then in verse 7 he drives it home and tells Nicodemus that he should not be astonished that he has told him – “you must be born again.” So, what is Jesus talking about? What is this being born again – or as we explained last time – this being born from above? And how does it happen? And why is it necessary before someone can enter into the Eternal Kingdom of God? How would we know if we have been born from above? Those are a few of the questions I want to answer from the Scriptures over the next few weeks.

So, this morning we will focus our attention on what it is and why it is necessary? What is the new birth – or this birth from above? And why is it necessary? And the answer to those two questions goes together. As we explain the one, we will necessarily explain the other.

I read down to verse 10 this morning because I wanted you to see Jesus’ amazement with Nicodemus’ ignorance in this matter. He calls him the Teacher of Israel – meaning he was the guy you went to if you had a question about the Scriptures. He had obviously set himself apart from other Jewish teachers of his day. He knew his Scriptures and was an effective communicator of their truth. And yet he had missed this key and fundamental doctrine of the new birth. And so many do! We want to believe in mankind. We hold out hope that we can somehow contribute something to this equation that ends in our salvation and our entrance into the Kingdom of God. But Jesus clearly says – “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

In verse 4, we see Nicodemus’ first reaction to this statement by Jesus of universal truth. He first thinks of Jesus’ words in the natural realm. He is obviously trying to figure it out, and can’t, and so he says to Jesus, how can this be? How can a man be born when he is old? He can’t possibly enter into his mother’s womb a second time and be born, can he? And the obvious answer is – of course he can’t! But notice how Nicodemus is thinking in the realm of the humanly possible. He is still thinking of this as something he must do in order to obtain entrance into the Kingdom of God. But Jesus patiently instructs him in verse 5. Rather than blast Nicodemus, he patiently gives him another explanation of this new birth. He gives another universally true statement, marked off by those two words – “truly, truly.” And then he makes a truth statement which is intended as the answer to Nicodemus’ question in verse 4, and it is a further explanation of his statement in verse 3. He says, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” So, whatever it means to be born from above in verse 3 it must line up with what it means to be born of water and the Spirit in verse 5. And apparently, Jesus expected Nicodemus to have some kind of understanding about what he meant by needing to be born from above before entering the kingdom of God. As the teacher of Israel, the Lord Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand what it means to be born from above and to be born of water and the Spirit.

So, the answer to the question – what does it mean to be born from above and born of water and the Spirit – must be something that Nicodemus could have understood from the Old Testament. Which is really important because there have been a lot of answers given to this question which do not fit that description. So, for instance, some have interpreted this passage as saying that one must go through the waters of Christian baptism in order to enter into the Kingdom of God and then they must be spiritually reborn – born of water and the Spirit. This is typically the view of those who see Christian baptism in every verse that refers to water. And they tend to say that one cannot be saved from sin unless they are baptized and that the waters of baptism are necessary for this new birth. This is known as baptismal regeneration, and there are many problems with it – but the first of which is that Nicodemus would not have had any ability to understand the ritual of Christian baptism in this text. So, then if that is what Jesus meant, it was rather unfair of him to be surprised that Nicodemus did not know what he was talking about.

Others have said that Jesus is referring to two births here – the first one being the physical birth – the birth of water, referring to the amniotic fluid which is released during the birthing process. And then the second birth being the spiritual birth by the Spirit. The problem with that view is that Jesus is using two things to describe the same birth and we know that because he only uses one prepositional phrase. So, both water and Spirit are controlled by the one preposition “of” in verse 5. If he meant to communicate that there were two births he was talking about then he would have used two prepositions. Not only that, but he is explaining in this one phrase in verse 5 what he meant by being born again in verse 3. So, he is talking about one birth – and he has already put that birth on another plane – it is a birth from above – and now he clarifies that further for Nicodemus and tells him that it is a birth of water and the Spirit. So, what should Nicodemus have heard here?

Well, the Old Testament uses water and the Spirit to refer to an outpouring of God’s mercy and grace which will cleanse Israel and give her a new heart. There are several passages throughout the Old Testament which lay the groundwork for such a hope – that God would do a supernatural work in Israel to bring them to new spiritual life.

- And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. – *Dt. 30:6*
- For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” – *Jer. 31:33-34*
- And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰ that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. – *Ezekiel 11:19-20*

But, there is a really clear text which is the one that Jesus most likely had in mind. It is a prophetic text in Ezekiel 36 – so go ahead and turn there with me – Ezekiel 36. From the texts I have already read, you can see that Nicodemus should have had this expectation of God doing a supernatural work in Israel as he poured out his Spirit upon his people and gave them a new heart. There were several other texts that I didn't read that also reference water as being poured out by God for the purification of God's people – the cleansing from their sin. So, the idea of water and the Spirit in the Old Testament is the idea of purification from sin and a work to give God's people a new heart. And the clearest text which presents that idea is here in Ezekiel 36.

Ezekiel was a prophet during the Babylonian exile. He is himself in exile with God's people and he is given God's word to deliver to God's people both in exile and those still left in the land. He prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem and the obliteration of the Temple and he prophesies the hope that God's people still have even as they are in exile and their nation is in ruins and God's Temple is destroyed to rubble. And what is Ezekiel's message of hope – “guys, we can do this. We can rebuild. Our Israelite spirit is strong. We have overcome great obstacles in the past and we can overcome them again. No one can stop us, and no enemy force can forever overcome us. We will rise from the ash heap of history and we will overcome!” Is that his message? Does he turn Israel's hope to Israel? No! He turns them in their lowest moment of national despair to put their hope in the Lord their God. He must, and he will, do something supernatural and spiritual to restore His people. And chapters 36 and 37 are such a key part of that prophecy. Obviously, this is a prophecy for national Israel – no one argues that. This is a prophecy of a national restoration. It is a prophecy which was partially fulfilled in the restoration and rebuilding of the land under godly men like Ezra and Nehemiah. But it is still awaiting a day of complete, national fulfillment which I believe will happen near the end of the Tribulation when the nation of Israel will look upon the one whom they have pierced – the Lord Jesus Christ – and they will nationally sing the hymn of lament and repentance found in Isaiah 53 – and they will turn to the Lord Jesus in saving faith to the extent that all Israel will be saved – as Paul says in Romans 11. But between that initial and partial keeping in Ezra and Nehemiah's time, and the final and complete fulfillment at the Lord's Second Coming, we see this outpouring of God's Spirit in this age of grace by which He cleanses and gives a new heart – and this is regeneration – or to be born from above.

Look at verse 22 – this is the text I think Jesus expected Nicodemus to think about when he told him that everyone must be born of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God. *Read 36:22-27.*

Notice that they had gotten themselves into this mess by their sinful rebellion against God. God had proven himself holy and glorious by dealing with their ongoing unrepentance and sinfulness by bringing foreign nations upon them and destroying their land and carrying them into exile. The problem was all theirs and the solution was all God's. They got themselves into this mess through their sinful rejection of God and through their idolatrous ways. And now God was going to do a supernatural work from above which would cleanse them and completely remake them. So, in verse 25 he will pour water on them and this water will cleanse them. This is symbolized in the waters of purification prescribed in the Mosaic Law, but it is a water that is supernatural and spiritual. It is a water of cleansing that only God can provide, and it is from

above and poured out upon Israel. And it is accompanied by God supernaturally giving Israel a new heart and a new spirit. Their heart of stone will be removed, and they will be given a heart of flesh and God's own Spirit will be within them and He will cause them to obey the Lord God. This is not a mere reformation of current material. This is not a slight covering over of past offenses and a moving on in a new direction. This is not merely a tweak to Israel's spiritual state so that they can do better when they get back in the land. No, this is a complete overhaul. This is taking out the old broken down engine and putting a new one in – one that is engineered by God and maintained by God's Spirit. They didn't need an adjustment to their heart – they needed a completely new heart. Why? Because they were completely hardened to the Lord their God. Which is quite the statement when you consider the state of Old Testament Israel. They were given every advantage and provided every spiritual resource from God. They were given clear instruction from God about how to live every day of their existence – how to avoid evil and keep their hearts pure and clean before the Lord. They were even given the very visible presence of the Lord to dwell among them so that they never forgot who they were to worship. They were given prophets along the way who came to them in the name and by the power of the Lord to call them to repentance and to return to the Lord of their forefathers. And yet they went their own way. They were given the choice and the responsibility. The option was laid before them. The resources were given to them. The reminders of their God were everywhere – the instruction was plain, and yet, what did they do? They rebelled against God and went their own way. And so, they needed a complete rebirth from above. They were all of the problem and they needed an external and supernatural solution.

And what we see in seed form in the Old Testament we find flowering in the New Testament into the clear and undeniable truth about man's heart condition before God. So, what was true of Old Testament Israel is what is true of all mankind of all time. But don't take my word for it – listen to the Word of God's description about man's heart condition apart from God's gracious work of regeneration.

- For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. - *Romans 1:18-21*
- What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." ¹³ "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes." - *Romans 3:9-18*

- But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. – *Romans 6:17-18*
- 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. – *1 Cor. 2:14*
- And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. – *Eph. 2:1-3*
- Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. – *Ephesians 4:17-18*

The Biblical record is clear. Mankind is darkened in understanding, ignorant of truth, alienated from life in God and dead in our trespasses and sin. We do not accept the things of God because we have no ability to spiritually understand. We are dead to God and our hearts are as hard as stone. We are slaves of sin because we are completely under its dominion. Therefore, we have no spark of divine life, we have no work of universal grace that has made us somehow able to respond by our own volition to the message of the gospel. We are hopeless and helpless and lost. We separated from God and frankly, we don't care. We bring nothing but the problem to the equation. We do not bring any part of the solution! So, what is the solution? Well, we must be born again, from above. We must be born of water and the Spirit of God.

- 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. – *John 6:63-64*
- 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*
- 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— ⁶ and 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. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. – *Ephesians 2:4-9*
- I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. – *1 Cor. 15:50*

- But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. – *Titus 3:4-6*

Conclusion: So, what is the new birth and why is it necessary? Well, the new birth is a supernatural work of God by which he cleanses us from sin and implants spiritual life in our spiritually dead souls. He does this on the grounds of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf – and we will see next week that he brings this to our hearts through the word of the gospel spoken to us. But it is all his work and it is universally needed. If Nicodemus needed to be born from above, then certainly you need to be born from above as well!

Have you experienced this birth from above? Have you been born again? In the weeks to come we will consider how this happens – what means God uses to bring spiritual life into our spiritually dead souls – but you don't need to wait until then to be born again. Today can be the day of your salvation. Look to Jesus and live!