

Born Again John 3:1-8

Our text tonight is John chapter 3. We'll read verses 1 to 8. Before the reading, we'll pray. Please join me in prayer. Father in heaven, we do indeed pray that you would bless your word to us. We ask that we would be given ears that hear, eyes that see, and hearts that understand and obey. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

John chapter 3, starting at verse 1: ¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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.' ³Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.' ⁴Nicodemus 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?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." ⁸The 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.'" Amen.

A famous evangelist, George Whitfield, in the first Great Awakening in the 1700s used to attract crowds of thousands and thousands. Many, many people used to come to hear Whitfield preach. Wherever he was, there was a concentrated gathering of people to hear what he said. And Whitfield used to go to America. He'd land in America, and basically he'd get on a horse and start to travel. And at every town and every city, he'd stop and he'd preach. If we was not invited to preach in the churches, he'd stand in the town square and he'd preach. Everywhere he went, he preached. They said he had an enormous and truly amazing voice, where even when he chose to speak quietly, his preaching voice still carried to thousands of people—a crowd of thousands could hear him preach.

And it's recorded that a man followed him from town to town for a few days, and after a while he came up to Whitfield and said, "Sir, I'd like to ask you a question." And Whitfield said, "Ask away." He said, "I've followed you now for four days. I've heard every sermon you preached for four days, and in every sermon you preach, you preach you must be born again. Why do you preach every sermon on the theme that you must be born again?" And Whitfield said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless you be born again." That's why. That's the answer. That's why he preached that message again and again and again.

Now Whitfield, John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Hal Harris, Daniel Rowland, and others, these men were the starters, or the founders of the Methodist denomination. And that may surprise you, when you think of what the Methodist denomination has become in the world today. It's a very liberal and non-evangelical denomination in most parts of the world. But it was founded on the message that you must be born again, by grace, through faith. By grace, through faith was the message of the Wesleys and Whitfield and others. They were basically a breakaway from the Church of England at that time, which was kind of lost and floundering in terrible and anti-Scriptural doctrines. And they had that message: You must be born again.

You see, the founders of that denomination, the Wesleys and Whitfield, were very, very diligent young men. They met at Oxford, and at Oxford University, they were members of what was called “The Holy Club,” which was more than just a Bible study. It was a club for mutual discipline and encouragement in obedience in people. Isn’t that great?

Here’s the problem—none of them were saved. It was a legalist’s club. They were seeking desperately to earn their salvation. They were fasting, they were studying, they were memorizing, they were keeping themselves awake at night trying to maintain all-night prayer vigils. They were pouring out all their effort into trying to make themselves Christian. They were seeking the assurance of salvation.

Whitfield says that he almost starved himself to death in fasting. And one day when young Whitfield, the youngest of those three, was out walking on a stormy day, under a tree he surrendered to God, confessing that he could not do the things that God required. He submitted to God and confessed that he had not the power within himself to make himself a Christian, and that he was lost. And in that confession, he was born again. And suddenly, he had a message.

You had this young man who had spent years now studying, studying, studying, disciplining himself, and suddenly he had a message. He had the message of an evangelist. He had the message that you must be born again. In his eyes, Scripture was opened. He understood things that never before had he understood. He trusted in Christ. He had the assurance of salvation.

It’s said that the first sermon Whitfield preached was in the Anglican cathedral of his hometown. He started his ministry and remained throughout all of his ministry an ordained minister of the Anglican church. But he preached in his own hometown in the church, and apparently to hear the local boy preach, the place was packed to the rafters. And he preached his evangelical gospel message of salvation through Christ, and Christ alone, and the necessity to be born again. And the minister of that chapel wrote a note to his bishop saying he’d had Whitfield there preaching, and that he’d preached this message that stirred the people up, and he thought some people had gone mad, because they’d been coming to his church for years and years and years, and suddenly they’ve decided that now that they’ve heard Whitfield preach, and now that they’ve heard this evangelical message, suddenly now they’ve decided that they’re Christians. And his conclusion was that they’ve gone mad.

This man didn’t understand. This man had no idea, and his conclusion was that his parishioners had gone mad. He said the people must have been Christians, because they were coming to church. And the bishop was a man of somewhat more insight than that particular curate, and he sent a note back saying, “Well, seeing as I’m preaching there in a couple of weeks, I do hope the madness remains at least that long.” In other words, “I want to preach to these people. If they’re faithful, if they’re interested in the Scripture and the word of God, I want to come and preach to them, too.”

Whitfield had a message. He had a new life. He gave up on punishing and inflicting things upon himself. He became a converted, born-again man. And that was the message of the Methodist church when it was founded. “You must be born again.”

We started to look at this passage last week. We introduced this man Nicodemus. “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews,” a very prominent man. Jesus refers to him as “the teacher of Israel.” If you just look forward to verse 10: “Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’” Jesus didn’t say to him, “Are you *a* teacher of Israel? Are you one of the many teachers of Israel?” He said to him, “Are you *the* teacher of Israel,” implying that Nicodemus may well have been first in his bunch, a leader in the group, the one you would have turned to expecting to find some wisdom and some knowledge. But apparently, Nicodemus didn’t have it, and he didn’t understand.

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, He was saying something He actually expected him to understand. Think of what that question says. Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” That’s a question. You ask that kind of question because you expect that the person you are speaking to would have understood. You wouldn’t ask it if you didn’t think Nicodemus had some idea of what you’re talking about. Jesus expected that Nicodemus would have known what He’s talking about. And Nicodemus did not.

We’ll keep reading: “² This man came to Jesus by night,” and remember, we looked at the idea in the gospel of John last week that night, darkness, is the idea of a lack of understanding. It was literally night, but when John uses those terms, he’s usually implying a little more. He’s implying that you need to understand something—this man is in darkness. “

“² 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.’” He makes a statement: “You’re doing great works. Therefore, you are a teacher sent from God.” Jesus makes a statement: “³ ... ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” Note carefully what was said: “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” It’s what’s called a conditional statement. You’re laying down a condition.

Now there’s a young man who’s going to be brought to our house and introduced to our family, because he’s liking my daughter. And there’s a conditional thing going on there. Unless he gets our approval, the friendship goes no further. He has to have something before something else can happen. That’s what a conditional clause or statement does. It lays out the requirement on the one hand, to be able to get to somewhere else.

Jesus lays out a conditional statement. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Get the depth of that. If you wanted me to tell you what’s the biggest single distinctive of Reformed theology, I can give it to you in a sentence: Regeneration precedes faith. What do I mean by that? That word, “born again,” or “regeneration,” precedes faith. Life from God precedes Christian obedience. Life from God precedes repentance. Life from God precedes the knowledge of God. The biggest distinctive of Reformed theology is the teaching that people are lost and dead in their sins. I almost don’t like to say “Reformed theology,” because what I’m saying is really that we take Scripture seriously. It’s actually what the Bible says, and we’re taking what the Bible says, and we’re applying and understanding it exactly as the Bible says. We have no emendations, no pretending, no euphemisms. We’re not putting little exception clauses in there.

My friends, the preaching here, the teaching here—I'm not trying to reach out to people, hoping that in them there's a little bit of goodness, just one little bit of their own righteousness, which if I can just find it, like a button inside them, and press that button—Bang!—out jumps a Christian. It's not like that. The button's not there. You know, the little self-righteousness button? Gone. Not there. Doesn't exist. There's no such thing.

What we're doing when we proclaim the truth is, we're proclaiming the truth to a valley of bones, to use another picture from the book of Ezekiel—we took a reading from Ezekiel. Well, Ezekiel has this situation where God says to him, "You go and speak to a valley of bones." And he preaches to bones. That's how dead they are—bleached, white bones. You know, there's highways in the outback. Along the edge of those highways are so many dead animal bones that the edge of the highway glows at night in your headlights. It's an amazing thing, especially northwest and up into outback Queensland. It's an amazing thing. And that's how dead the bones were that Ezekiel was sent to preach to.

This is a picture of salvation. It's a picture of God granting life where His word is preached. All I'm trying to do is preach the word of God, and I'm trusting that God by His Spirit will grant life, and that by His Spirit, you will have life and will respond to the word spoken. I'm trying to be as persuasive as I can. I may or I may not have any particular ability in that department, but in the end, what I know is that to be born again is something that can only be done by the Spirit of God. There's no technique. There's no "Ten Steps," you know, "Check, check, I've done this, I've done that. I must be born again." It doesn't work that way.

God grants life, and you, having received life, exercise faith, because faith is what God requires and desires. That's what Adam and Eve wouldn't practice in the Garden of Eden—faith. If they had practiced faith, they would have rejected the advances of the serpent. As soon as the serpent started to lie and started to tell them falsities, they would've said "No. No, no, no. We've got a word from God. The word from God says we're not to eat of this tree, because if we eat of it, we will surely die."

That's the exercise of faith—taking the word God has given you and living accordingly. That's what faith is. You can describe and explain faith in many, many ways, but basically it's taking the word that God has given and living accordingly. We require faith for our Christian life, and yet as dead unspiritual people, as dead people in the sight of God, as bones in the valley, we can't exercise faith. Dead people can't do it. What does Jesus say? You can't even *see* the kingdom of God. Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. See—perceive.

Turn in your Bibles to John chapter 12. How do you see an invisible kingdom? How do you see a kingdom which, although it is the kingdom that rules over this world, is not of this world? And I make that point carefully, because many people look in the gospel of John at what Jesus said to Pontius Pilate, and it says "My kingdom is not of this world," and they say that therefore, the kingdom has no influence nor effect upon this world. It has nothing to do with politics or world history, or anything like that. No, "of" means "from." "My kingdom is not *from* this world." Jesus says, "I am a King, and my kingdom is not from this world. I'm the King of *all* the world." In other words, He's the King over everything.

But to the person without faith, that kingdom is invisible. They cannot see the reign of the Son of God over all of creation. They cannot understand that all things were created through Him and for Him and by Him, and that all things are upheld by Him. We get lost in secondary causes. You know, we look at the things we think we understand, and we think that because we understand them, therefore we can cut God out of the cycle.

A classic example is conception—the conception of a child. We all imagine we know the biology. Well, who created the biology? Who upholds those laws of biology that a child may be conceived? And in Scripture, how many times do you find this statement that God granted conception when you're dealing with someone who was, till that point barren? Think of Sarah. Think of Rebekah. Think of Rachel. All three of those women, three in row, three generations—wives of the patriarchs—what about them? Go back and read. They were barren until the time that God said they will have children. Now they knew how babies were made. They knew what God had appointed as the means of becoming pregnant. They knew how God had created a man and a woman. But God had withheld pregnancy from them. But in time, at the right time, when it suited God, He granted conception.

We imagine because we understand the science of biology, well, it's got nothing to do with God—it's an independent law. It's been set up, and it runs of its own accord. No, my friends. Nothing runs independently of God. God upholds the very laws that He created. *God* upholds them. We can't perceive it. People don't perceive that. We as Christians actually have to train ourselves to think to see that.

Let's have a look in John chapter 12, verse 36. We're going to start in the second half of verse 36, where it says "When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.³⁷ Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him,³⁸ so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?'³⁹ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,⁴⁰ 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.'"

"He" is speaking of God. "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." What is the state of mankind in sin? Spiritual blindness. Blindness—the inability to see the rule of God. Why are they blind? Because their hearts have been hardened, because they suppress the truth in unrighteousness; because they will not submit to what they know.

My friends, understand something. God doesn't switch Himself off. God's not the great eternal switchboard, and *Flick*, on comes love—off. *Flick*, on comes judgment—off. *Flick*, on comes wrath—off. *Flick*, on comes grace—off again. God is God, eternally, infinitely, always. He's always loving, always saving, He's always judging, always condemning. He's always being graceful, He's always being the ruler over all. And we forget that. And we just let ourselves forget it.

God's always judging. He's always in the process of both hardening and saving. He's always in the process of turning away from Christ and turning towards Christ. He doesn't cease being who

He is. He can't. God is true to His own nature. He's truly God. He is good, He is great, He is holy, He is glorious. And He is true to His own nature, and His own nature is too good, too holy, too righteous, as the Scripture says, to look upon sin. He cannot look upon sin.

If someone appears before the judge at a criminal court—say they have kidnapped a small child, they have sexually abused the child, they have murdered the child and thrown the body in the river. We don't want the judge to say, "You know, I can see that you're not really a bad person, you just went wrong there. You're not really that bad a person, you're just a little bit misunderstood. So I'm going to give you another chance, and I'm going to forgive you and let you off, and put you back out there in society." That's not what we want the judge to say. Why? Because that dead child's blood calls out for justice. And just as God hears that call, even fallen sinful humanity hears that call.

God judges. God would not be righteous and holy if He did not judge, nor would He indeed be loving. You know, people like to say to me that "God is love," as though they're saying that God who loves, therefore, is God who does not judge. No. God loves according to His nature. His nature is good. Therefore, He loves that which is good. Therefore, He hates that which is evil, and He must judge according to His nature.

Scripture tells us this blindness that has fallen on humanity is the result of humanity's own sinfulness and God's judgment—His ongoing, even now-happening judgment. God's judging, and saving. He's loving, and He's hating. In the Psalms, King David says, "My Lord, O my God, I hate those who hate you with a pure and holy hatred." Well my friends, God hates sin with a pure and holy hatred. You know, it's kind of an old Christian proverb, "Hate the sin, love the sinner." I understand what we're trying to say there. I know that if ever I'm sharing the gospel with a person, it's not for me to judge nor condemn, nor for you, not for any of us. But in the end, on the day of judgment, sinners go to hell.

God hates the sinners who sin. He loves His elect people, He loves His own people, He loves those people to whom He grants life. We don't know who those people are. That's why we preach the gospel to all. That's why God gives us the mission of loving all. We're to show forth the love of God to all of humanity—take the word out everywhere to everyone. Do not judge, do not imagine that we even have the right to judge, because if wasn't for the grace of God, we'd be there with them. We'd be just like them. But God has dragged us out of the mire, that we can speak the message to other people still in that mire, in the hope that God will use our message to grant life and draw *them* out.

God's always judging, always saving, always loving, always hating. As I said, He's not a switchboard. God is God. He is fully holy, truly God. He is God in all His completeness, and He's God all the time, and He's doing the things that God does all the time—never stops. That would be against His nature. He's infinite, He's eternal, He's omnipresent, He's omniscient, He's omnipotent. He can't just switch off. He doesn't want to switch off, because He likes being who He is. He knows that He's good.

You want to know why God is so concerned with His glory and His goodness? It's because He knows He's glorious and He knows He's good, and He wants to share His goodness and His

glory. Any other creature in all the universe that gets interested in its own glory and goodness—man or angel—is sinning. In the book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel speaks of how the Prince of Tyre got proud, and how he got so in love with himself that he saw himself as great and glorious. Ezekiel talks to the Prince of Tyre as though he were the Devil himself. Any preacher in all of creation that is interested or concerned in his own glory is sinning.

But it is right that God, being perfectly, purely, totally righteous and good and holy, holy, holy, is concerned with His own glory. It is right that that good God wants to share His own glory. He wants to reveal His own glory. And you want to know why the universe, to our feeble human minds, seems almost infinite? It's not because only God is infinite, but it seems almost infinite, so enlarged that we can't comprehend it, because that's how big a stage God needs to reveal His glory. That's how great a stage He needs to reveal His glory. And even then, that's not enough. But considering our puny minds, our hopeless humanity, it's enough. God's always been God. He's always hardening, He's making blind, and He's giving light. He doesn't ever switch off. Always, He's doing the things God does.

And so when Jesus says, "You cannot see, you cannot perceived, you cannot even know that the kingdom of God is there unless you be born again," He's talking about the sovereign work of God's Holy Spirit, granting life. It must happen before you can even come into the kingdom you can't see. How can you enter what you don't know? How can you enter a kingdom that you do not know exists? You can't see the kingdom of God, unless you be born again.

Let's keep reading. Verse 4 of John 3: "4 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?'" And there's the confusion and the blindness of a man who is not born again. There's the confusion and the blindness of a man who cannot see the kingdom of God, who cannot understand what he's being called to. He's in darkness.

I should tell you, an alternate translation of that word "born again" that's equally applicable: "born from above." Unless a man is born from above. I tend to think that Jesus meant "born from above," and I tend to think that Nicodemus heard "born again." And that further displays Nicodemus's lack of understanding. He's not really following what Jesus says. And so Nicodemus asks the question, "Born again? Can a woman give birth to a man like me a second time? When you're old, can you be born again, like a baby?" Let's read on.

Verse 5: "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'" Here's where Jesus is revealing to Nicodemus what He's talking about. This is the cue that Nicodemus should have picked up. This is the handball, this is the underarm that Nicodemus should have hit out of the park. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

What does it mean? Why would Jesus expect Nicodemus to know what it means? He said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" Why would He expect Nicodemus to know what He meant? Well, Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and the Pharisees studied the Old Testament; the Pharisees memorized enormous chunks of the Old Testament; the Pharisees proclaimed that they were waiting for the Messiah, for the Saviour. Jesus would have

expected, quite rightly, that in his study of the Old Testament prophets, Nicodemus would have been familiar with a certain concept.

So now turn back once again to the reading we took from Ezekiel chapter 36, and move down to verse 22. Let's get some context in what Ezekiel is saying. Ezekiel was a prophet who preached to the captives of Israel in their Babylonia captivity. The nation of Israel, or the nation of Judah to be specific, was taken into captivity to a nation called Babylon. And from Babylon it had been prophesied that a remnant would return. In prophesying to that people who would return, Ezekiel is speaking to them of the life that comes from God. He's speaking to them of what faithfulness is. He's speaking to them about salvation. Ezekiel is also prophesying of the Messiah. So let's have a look at Ezekiel 36:

“²²Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.” Now stop. What's he saying? It's not because you're good, it's not because you're nice, it's not because I find you personally attractive, it's not because I can't live without you. Why is God saying He's going to do something? For the sake of His holy name. He had made promises. He'd made promises to Abraham. He'd made promises recorded in Scripture that He would have a people, and that the descendants of Abraham would have Him as their God. He's not going to let His promises fall in the dust.

We all know that the value of a person's promises is dependent entirely upon the character of the person making the promise. When liars make promises, they're not worth much. You don't expect much from the promise of a liar. You don't honestly expect much from the promise of an alcoholic or a drug addict. I can tell you from harsh experience, the alcoholic will always let you down. “It'll be better tomorrow”? That day will never come. No, it's never better tomorrow. “I won't do this to you again”? Yes, they will. It's always, always, always that way. But God has made a promise, and for the sake of His holy name, He will keep His promises.

Let's keep reading: “...which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³ And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴ I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.”

And here's the key: “²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” Just drop down a few verses to verse 31: “Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.”

Now you're going to say, “Scott, why did we skip those couple of verses?” We skipped the couple of verses because they speak to the people of Israel in covenant language that they would understand. They speak to the people of Israel tying the promises to the land. We'll have a look

at it, back to verse 29: “²⁹ And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. ³⁰ I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.” Then we go on to the repentance. “³¹ Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.”

Now those promises to the people of Judah, which were like the covenantal promises earlier given in the Old Testament—for example in the book of Exodus, where God’s promising to the people, “You go into your land, you obey me, you keep covenant, and I will bless you. And your fields will be fertile, and your cattle will not miscarry,” etc., etc., etc.—those promises were the kind of promises that the people to whom Ezekiel was speaking would understand. Ezekiel is saying to them, “This prophecy is about the fulfillment of God’s promises through Abraham, and God’s promises through Moses.” This prophecy is about how these things are to be fulfilled.

An illustration occurs to me that that I read from a professor named Greg Beale. He teaches at Westminster Seminary in the USA. He says, Imagine around about 1895, a wealthy farmer was speaking to his son, and says to him, ‘Son, when you come of age, when you get married, I’m going to give you the very best carriage that a horse can draw. When you come of age, your wedding gift from me will be the very best carriage that you can imagine. I’m going to order the best one made by Mr. Rolls and Mr. Royce in Britain, we’ll ship it over to you, and you’ll have the best carriage in all the world.’”

But then the son, a little bit older, gets married in 1925, and his father gives him a Cadillac. Why? Well, the car’s been invented and now there’s a better, more luxurious way to travel. He fulfilled his promise. He made a promise to his son, and he’s fulfilling his promise to his son. His son’s getting something better than he ever thought he was going to get. He’s not getting a carriage to be drawn by a couple of horses, he’s getting a beautiful car with a great big V-8 engine. He’s fulfilling his promise. It’s more than he initially promised.

That’s why I said let’s just drop the couple of verses. I wanted us to see particularly one of the effects of this new life is the effect of repentance. Verse 31 of Ezekiel 36: “Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.” That’s the effect of this new life coming through, from, and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But go back up and look at that culmination. What does God say He will do? Verse 25: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh”—now a stone heart is dead. In this metaphor, it’s the dead heart being replaced with a living heart—“and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Jesus expected Nicodemus to pick up on this prophecy. When Jesus said, “You must be born of water and the Spirit,” He was laying out the cue for Nicodemus to catch hold of. As I said, He

was underarming—underarming a nice little lollipop to him to hit out of the park. Nicodemus should have said, “Oh, you’re referring to the prophet Ezekiel.” But he didn’t get it. He didn’t think of it.

Another place that speaks of the water and the Spirit is in the book of Isaiah, chapter 44. And there we’re just going to read the first three verses. Once again, this is being expressed in the way of saying the fulfillment of covenant promises. Isaiah 44, verse 1: “¹ ‘But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! ² Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. ³ For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. ⁴ They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. ⁵ This one will say, “I am the LORD’s,” another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, “The LORD’s,” and name himself by the name of Israel.’”

“I will pour water on a thirsty land”—“I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring.” That’s a parallel. Read that verse 3: “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground.” The parallel is meant to enhance the meaning of what God has just said: “I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring and my blessing on your descendants.” You get the picture: Pouring out water is pouring out the Holy Spirit. The promises made concerning the land are actually to be fulfilled in the offspring receiving the blessing of life from the Holy Spirit.

The fulfillment of the promises always ends up coming back to whom? Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises, from the start of the Bible right through to the end. You always come back to Jesus, and you see that Jesus is the one who fulfills all of God’s promises, in one way or another. And often, the fulfillment is like comparing a motor car to a horse and buggy. The motor car’s better. It’s the fulfillment of a promise, but it’s more than the person who received the promise was ever expecting.

“⁵ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” Unless one is born of water and the Spirit. Now there’s more to this metaphor of water, this picture of water, and that’s what I want to trace out now. Turn first of all to the book of Ephesians chapter 5. Verses 25 and 26 are what I’m interested in here. This is Paul teaching on how a husband and a wife are to live together, and he says that a husband is to live in the imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Look how he says this. Ephesians 5, verse 25: “²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” By the washing of water with the word.

So water is not only a metaphor of God’s Holy Spirit, but in Scripture it’s also a metaphor of God’s word. God’s word is a washing and cleansing agent. Those who are immersed in and submerged in the written word of God are being washed in the water of the word of God.

Now let’s just get that even a little more clearly. Turn to First Peter chapter 1. There I want to look at verses 22 to 25. First Peter chapter 1, start reading at verse 22: “²² Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from

a pure heart,²³ since you have been”—there’s our phrase—“born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; ²⁴ for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”

So a person is born again. You can look at the book of Ezekiel, and you can say you’re born again by water and the Spirit, as Jesus said to Nicodemus. And then we can combine together our New Testament readings and say, But a person is born again by the word of God. And the word of God is compared to being washed in pure, clean water. And that’s not surprising. First Timothy chapter 3, and verse 16: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for correction, for training, rebuke, that the man of God may be equipped.”

All Scripture, breathed out by God. Now you know the association—the association of breath. God’s breath, in the Old Testament—that’s His Spirit. Breath, *ruch*, hard word to say. Wind. You can’t say it without expelling wind—*Ruch*. God’s breath, God’s Spirit, breathed out by God, is this word of God, and so the metaphor of water, and the picture that Jesus gives of water and the Spirit, is a picture of rebirth by the Spirit, by the Spirit-breathed word of God.

And this is the point that I want to make. A born-again person is born again by the word of God, and born again *to* the word of God. Don’t tell me that someone’s a Christian if they don’t accept that God’s word is God’s word. Don’t tell me that they’re regenerate if they don’t accept the authority of this word. Now I understand Christians can be growing, and Christians can be struggling with issues, and failing to understand certain passages. That’s part of growth in the Christian life. We all start off babies. Babies crawl, then they walk, then they run, and then you grow on and into maturity. People can struggle. But I’m telling you now, we’ve accepted in Australia this lie that as long as a person says a certain prayer at a certain time, as long as a person does a certain thing, as long as they then get baptized, or whatever the formula might be, they must be Christians. They must be born again.

I’ll give you some real evidence that you’re born again. You’re born from the word of God, you love the word of God, the word of God is your food, you live on the word of God, the word of God directs your thoughts, it makes you think God’s thoughts after Him. You submit to God’s word, you can’t get enough of God’s word, you hunger for it, you love it, you study it, you’d rather deny yourself sleep than not to read it. That’s evidence of regeneration. That’s evidence of being born again. The very word you’re born *from* is the word you hunger *for*. It’s the word you want to get under. You want to get under this word. You want to be submitted to this word.

You know, people look at the children of Christians in the church, and they wonder, How are they going? Are they here, are they with us, are they not with us, are they just turning up because it’s a habit? Well, one of the things you look for is, Is that child of Christian parents trying to get under God’s word, or are they trying to get out from under God’s word? Young people reveal a lot in the questions they ask.

Have you ever been asked, What’s the bare minimum that I have to do? What’s the least that can make me a Christian? That’s the question of a young person trying to get out from under God’s word. They don’t want the full weight of God’s word over them. They don’t see it as a blessing

and a protection. They don't see it as a fortress, God Himself upholding them, watching over them, strengthening them and guiding them in the way that they should go. They see God's word as a dead weight and a burden. And what they're looking for is the formula that requires of them the barest minimum.

They're looking for the formula that allows them to get as much of themselves out from under God's word as they possibly can, instead of asking questions about how they can get deeper into God's word. What should I submit to? What should I believe? How can I be a better Christian? How can I be growing in grace and faith and Christ-likeness? Those are the kind of questions. When people are asking those questions, they're trying to come under the word of God. They're trying to put themselves under the authority of God. They're trying to grow in Christ-likeness. Because one thing is perfectly obvious from the Scriptures—Jesus knew His Bible. I've heard some pretty good teachers say that they think He may well have memorized and known off by heart the whole Old Testament. He knew His Bible, He knew it well, He loved His Bible.

What was the final word for Jesus, in any argument or debate? When the Pharisees or Sadducees came and asked Him a troublesome question, when any argument or debate was made, what was His final word? Scripture. If Scripture says it, that's it. I can show you where Scripture says it; therefore, you're in the wrong, and that's it. Jesus was under the word of God. The very living word of God Himself brought Himself under the written word of God for our benefit.

Those who are born again with life from above, those who are born again by the Holy Spirit, love the Spirit-breathed word of God. They love it! They desire it, they hunger for it, they want to grow in understanding. They want to grow in their knowledge of the word. If there's no relationship to God's word, no proper relationship to God's word, don't be trying to tell me that the person is regenerate. They're not.

Those who are born again love the word of God. They were born by the word of God. A baby loves its mother. Peter says, You're born from the word of God. Well if you're born from the word of God, you'd love that which gave birth to you. You would love the word that brought you to God. You've got to be under, and submitting to, the word of God.

I've got a lot more I want to say about being born again. I've got a lot more I want to say about this new life that comes from above. I'll save what I've got for coming weeks. I said we're going to slow down here. We're going to slow down in this passage. We're up to chapter 3, verse 5. Next time we're in the gospel of John, we're going to pick it up there.

My friends, the obvious question and the obvious application is, Are you born again? Are you regenerate? Do you love the word of God? Have you been washed in the water? Have you been indwelt by the Spirit? Do you have the life within you? It's the obvious question to be asked. Don't fool yourselves. Don't sit there and be comfortable, and think to yourself, "You know, I'm a pretty good person. And I'm coming along here, and I contribute a bit, and I do a bit of work in churches around the place, and I haven't broken any major law for twenty years now. I'm a good guy, a good girl. I do it right. And you know, I think I've believed all my life, and I've never done anything too particularly bad."

My friends, don't worry about that kind of nonsense. It's not going to help you. The only life that lives in the presence of God is the life of God, and the life of God is breathed out through, from, and by His word. That's where the life of God comes from. It comes by His Holy Spirit. Are you washed in the word, are you washed in the blood, are you washed in the Spirit, are you filled with the Spirit? Do you love God? Not, Do you know *about* Him? It's good to know about Him. Not, Do you understand the things I'm saying? It's good to understand. Do you love Him? Do you love Him? Does your heart yearn for Him? Do you hunger to be with Him?

You want to know something great about our Saviour? He's got a body. You want to know what that means, my friends? It means in heaven, we've got all of eternity to get to meet Him, and when we meet Him, there's a pair of feet that we can grab hold of and worship at. There's a body, there's a person we can have one-on-one fellowship with.

When you meet Jesus, you're not going to be reaching out for a cloud, you're not going to be reaching out for a 3-D apparition, a projection like Princess Leia in Star Wars that your hand can go right through. When you meet Jesus, you're meeting the truly perfect man—truly man, truly God. You can take hold of His feet and worship at His feet, at the feet of your Saviour. And what's more, you can see the scars. You can see the scars that got you there. A man that we can worship and love.

Do you long to meet Him, to know Him, to love Him? Do you long to know His words? You don't know anything about Him apart from Scripture. You can't know anything about Him apart from Scripture. You haven't got the Bible? You don't know Him. You know about God in a general sense. Without the Bible, you can know about God the creator. You can look at this world and if you're prepared to actually use your mind, you can understand that it could not possibly be, apart from an intelligent creator. There's a movement called the "ID" movement—the Intelligent Design movement. You can see and show and understand that there must be a creator. That's all good.

But my friends, do you love and long to be with Jesus? Because He loved this word, and He submitted to this word. He breathed this word. It was His food. It was His very life. Your relationship to God's written word is an indicator of your relationship to God's Living Word. If you love the written word, if you are submitting to the written word, if your desire and your hunger is to know and understand the written word, it's a good pointer to the fact that you love the Living Word, and you want to be like the Living Word, and you want to be conformed into His image. You're truly a worshipper of Jesus Christ. We'll close there.

Father in heaven, I do pray for all in my hearing, I pray Father that you even at this time would be granting life in Christ, through and by the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray, Father, that you would be doing the work of God, which we know that you are always doing, that where there is darkness, you will bring light. Where there is deafness, you will bring hearing. Where there is stubbornness, you will grant a new heart. Where there is death, you will give life. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.