

O Lord God Almighty, the maker  
and sustainer of all life, we come before your word this morning  
in the name of your Son, and we ask you, O Lord, that you  
will speak to us. We know not, teach us what we  
have not, grant us what we cannot, help us, and where we will not,  
O Lord, have mercy upon us and change us, we pray. In Jesus'  
name, amen. Please take your seats, and if  
you would, turn with me in your copy of the Word of God to John's  
Gospel and chapter 2, actually 3, but we'll begin at the end  
of chapter 2. And we come to one of the great chair texts  
in all the Bible concerning the reality and the importance of  
the new birth. Let's pick up the reading. In  
John 2, verse 23, we'll read down to chapter 3, verse 15.  
This is the word of God. Please take heed how you hear.  
Now, when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed  
in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But  
Jesus, on his part, did not entrust himself to them because he knew  
all people. and needed no one to bear witness  
about man, for he himself knew what was in man. Now there was  
a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.  
This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know  
that you're a teacher come from God, for no one can do these  
signs that you do unless God is with him. Jesus answered him,  
truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot  
see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, how can  
a man be born when he's old? Can he enter a second time into  
his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly,  
I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot  
enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh  
is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not  
marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind  
blows where it wishes, and you hear it sound, but you do not  
know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone  
who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus said to him, how can  
these things be? Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel,  
and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I  
say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what  
we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have  
told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe  
if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven  
except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as  
Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son  
of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal  
life. Amen. The grass withers, the  
flower falls off, but the Word of God endures forever. Well,  
from one perspective or another, America is the land of born-again  
Christianity. The numbers have remained remarkably  
consistent over the past 30 or 40 years. In between 35 to 40%  
of our population claim to be born again. The highest number  
was 45% back in 2006. If you take out the Yankees and

only think of the South, that number rises to 60%. No surprises there. And yet of that 45%, only about 7% have anything but a passing knowledge of the Bible. There's little difference in these born-againers when it comes to their attitude and practice regarding premarital sex, the consumption of movies and media, and even their charitable giving is little different when compared to their secular American cousins. David F. Wells, in his wonderful book, *The Courage to be Protestant*, describes this subset of born-againers as the remnant of a cultural spirituality that has no doctrinal moorings, inspires little or no Christian commitment, and often opposes itself to the institutional church. Only about 21% of the 45% actually bother going to church at all. Well, as a slice of American religion, it's interesting. As a barometer, though, of our Christian believing, these numbers should be taken with a grain of salt. We use the term born again fairly glibly. But for Jesus, it is a matter of immense importance. Because if you are not born again in this life, whatever else you have, whatever else you know, whatever else you do, when you die, you will not go to heaven. Have you been born again? There is perhaps no more important question in all the world, and it's the question of our text this morning. You might think, of course, I'm born again. I'm a member at First Presbyterian Church. I'm even on the diaconate or the session. But notice who Christ is addressing in our text this morning. He's addressing Nicodemus, a man of prodigious learning, a man of remarkable religious knowledge, expertise, and erudition. He is the teacher of Israel. And what's more, he's introduced to us as the leader, as it were, of this group in Jerusalem who have been very impressed by Jesus. Now, when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. They believed in him. They saw the signs. These are testing miracles. And they put two and two together and said, he's the Messiah. But Jesus, on his part, did not entrust himself to them. Remember last week, or two weeks ago, we said he did not believe himself to them. They believed in him. He didn't believe himself to them. He didn't entrust himself to them. Why? Because he knew, and the ESV is shamelessly gender neutral here, literally it says, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man, now there was a man. You see the man, man, the man, the man, the man, the man, and now suddenly there's a man coming. Nicodemus is coming, as it were, as the leader and chief of these people in Jerusalem who were convinced, but they were not yet converted. They knew about Christ, but didn't know him. And if there was any man on the planet you would think could sidestep Christ's imperative, you must be born again. Actually, it's not an imperative,

it's an indicative. You must be born again. It's not something you do, this new birth. It's something that's done to you. But if any man could sidestep this, you'd think, surely it's Nicodemus. And yet Jesus looks at Nicodemus and says, you must be born again. And Nicodemus, and the term born again, it can mean born from above, or it could mean born again. And Nicodemus plainly sees Christ meant being born again a second time. He's kind of confused. How can these things be? And Jesus said, are you the teacher of Israel and yet do not understand these things? How can a man be born when he's old? How can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? So plainly, Nicodemus understood Christ to be talking of a second birth. But the phrase born from above is helpful because it shows us where that birth comes from. It's a birth from God that results in a total transformation of the root and fruit of a man's soul. It's much more than just a new start in life. It's a new heart. Total transformation. And you'll see that if you turn in your Bibles, a great place to see this is Ephesians 2, right? If you turn there a second. And

I'm gonna quote from the New American Standard, because it's the passage I've done the most work in. But note what Paul says. He's describing these now Gentile Christians, but he's speaking of them before they were converted. He says, and you were dead in your trespasses and sins. Think of fish dead in a polluted stream flowing downstream. Dead fish. And we're dead not in water or even polluted water. The water of our death is trespasses and sins. That's the pollution. And we're being flushed down the river. in which you formerly walked, Paul says, according to the course of this world, being swept along, just doing what everybody else was doing, dead fish flowing downstream. But behind the world and the fashions of this world and the practice of this world, Paul says, there's a dark hand at work according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. He's speaking, of course, of Satan. These people are dead and they are driven by the world and by Satan. And they're addicted, Paul says, to lust. Among them, we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, The lust of the flesh, what feels good to the body, that's what drives them. And the lust of the mind, what seems good to the mind, it seems reasonable to me, is the world's mindset. The problem is, though, it's not true before God, but it doesn't matter. It seems reasonable to me. It seems good to my mind. Oh, and it feels good to my body. That's the driving mindset of dead sinners. And they are deserving of wrath. among whom we were children of wrath, even as the rest," Paul says, dead, driven, addicted, deserving

of wrath. But God, but God, being rich  
in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us even  
when we were dead in our trespasses, He made us alive. Now in the passage from death

to life, you can give no assistance. You could be the best heart surgeon  
in the world, but if your heart stops and you fall to the ground,  
you can't assist in your own resuscitation. The paramedic  
might not know how many chest compressions to do with mouth  
breaths. And you don't go open your eye  
and go, it's 20 to 1, or whatever the number is now. I forget,  
but the new numbers, they change all the time. But you can't go  
up and go, you're doing it wrong. Help. You're dead, right? And  
it's like that with the soul, too. Remember the most startling  
example of this I ever saw? was in the salvation of a young  
lad called Joseph Nichols back in Savannah. It was the 7th of  
October, 2014. It was Josiah's seventh birthday.  
Another lad in our congregation was suddenly killed in a car  
accident that day, and I'm having lunch with Joseph that day in  
Panera Bread. And Joseph was actually an atheist,  
though he's a child of our congregation, loosely. And he was very cynical,  
and I was sharing the gospel with him. And he said to me,  
I've tried to live the Christian life, doesn't work. Before that, he said to me, I  
hate dogmatism. And I said  
to him, really? How badly do you hate it? And  
he goes, I am dogmatically opposed to it. And I said to him, it's  
hard not to be dogmatic about something, isn't it? We all are. And then he said,  
I'll be honest.

I've tried to live the Christian life. It doesn't work. And I  
said, well, can I tell you why that's the case? He said, sure.  
I said, no, I'm going to assume the truth of the Christian world  
and life view. But the Bible says human beings were living  
souls in living bodies. And then when we sinned, in that  
moment, we died. We began to die physically because  
we had died spiritually. We became dead souls in dying  
bodies. Now, it's kind of hard to figure  
out. It probably wigs you out to hear you're a dead soul and  
dying body, but it explains why you are the way you are. Think  
about it. If I had a heart attack now and  
dropped dead, I said, My body wouldn't cease to exist. It just  
wouldn't have the life God intended. The eyes that God made to see  
wouldn't see. The ears that God made to hear  
wouldn't hear. The mouth God made to speak and  
to kiss my wife and my children goodnight wouldn't do any of  
those things. The hands that God made to move and gesticulate  
wouldn't do that. They'd be silent and still. The  
heart that God made to beat would be dead in my chest. And likewise,  
what's a living soul do? When God speaks, it listens.  
When God reveals his glory, it sees his glory. When God makes  
a command, the living soul lurches forward in obedience. When God  
makes a promise, the living soul believes it. When God brings

along one of his image bearers, even a nasty image bearer, a living soul is inclined to love it and honor it and respect it. But a dead soul, doesn't do any

of those things. It exists, but it doesn't have life. And the reason you can't live the

Christian life, I said, is because you're a dead soul in a dying body. And Christ says, you must be born again. And Joseph, if I'm lying, I'm dying, he literally went like this. I want to spend the rest of my life glorifying God. How do I do that? And I thought, well, that's never happened before. It was just an incredible kind of one of those moments. Like, literally, he jerked in front of me when I said, you must be born again. He jerked, and the rest is history. It was just incredible. He went from death to life, a total transformation that came from God, not from him. Faith and repentance, which comes

first, the new birth or faith and repentance? Well, if you've been listening to me, it's obvious. It's got to be the new birth because you can't believe if you're dead. You can't repent if you're dead.

Why are babies born? Do babies born because they cry or do they cry because they've been born? And if the cry of faith and repentance is a sign of life, it comes after the new birth, not before. It's not something we do, it's

something that's done to us. And Jesus says it's an absolute necessity. Why? For three reasons. Listen to me now. This is not some academic, we're

not a vet slicing up a rat, we're talking about your eternal destiny and mine. Why must you be born again? Jesus

says, until you're born again, you'll be blind and you can't see the kingdom of God. Until you're born again, he says, you'll be dirty and you can't enter the kingdom of God. And until you're born again, you'll be hard in your nature and not ready for the kingdom of God. Let's work through those together. First of all, until you're born again, you'll be blind, blind

in your soul, and you can't see the kingdom of God. You see that there in verse three. And it's wonderful. Nicodemus

comes with this kind of compliment. Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher come from God, for no one can do these things that you do unless God is with him. And Jesus cuts straight to the point. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a man is born again, he cannot see - notice the verb - cannot see the kingdom of God. Instead, he'd be

gripped by a spiritual blindness, is the idea. It's a major theme in John's gospel of light and darkness. In him was life, and the light was the light of men, and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not comprehended it or did not overcome it. You remember the double entendre

in John 1 verse 5. Didn't comprehend. But it didn't want to, it was fighting against the light. There's a war between the light and the darkness. In John 3, Jesus says, this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, but

men love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who practices evil hates the light and does not come to the light for fear that his deeds will be shown up for what they really are, is the idea in the Hebrew. Greek, sorry. Later in John's gospel, there's an interplay between this blind man, and in John 9, it's funny because this man was blind, but now he can see, and the Pharisees are quite confident they can see, but Christ says they're blind. And until we're born again, we'll be always in love with the darkness and lost in the darkness. And when the darkness wraps around us, we will say, well, hello, darkness, my old friend. Because it helps us avoid what we know to be true. Until you're born again, Jesus says, you cannot see the kingdom of God. John put it differently later, or Paul put it differently in 1 Corinthians 2, the natural person, a person who's fleshly, not born again, not of the Spirit, cannot accept, does not, sorry, 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. Not able to. His soul is blind. His heart is dead. And the things of God seem stupid to him. Maybe that's who you are this morning. Maybe you go home from church in the car and your spouse, your wife or your husband, they're excited. The word of God's alive in their hearts and they're excited, they're talking about it. And you think, you're from a different universe. Heard one professor describe being born again in his biography as a new man living in a new world. As if the top was taken off the world, and he could see the inner reality of it that was always there, but he was blind to it before. Maybe that's you in church. You're here, and it doesn't quite make sense to you. And you think, ah, what's going on here? But yet there's times the light of the word of God flashes into your heart like lightning and leaves you feeling a little bit uncomfortable. In fact, a lot bit uncomfortable. As this word of God that is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword pierces to the division of your soul and your spirit, of your joints and your marrows, discerning the thoughts and the intentions of your heart, as Christ comes alongside you, as he came alongside these people, he says to you, as he said to them, I know who you are, I know where you are, I know what you've done, and your heart feels uncomfortable, and you wanna hide, where's darkness, my old friend? But it doesn't make sense to you, and the reason it doesn't make sense, Just the fact that at times I struggle to be clear in the pulpit, it's that until you're born again, you can't see these things. You're blind to them. It won't make sense to you, because the problem's inside you, and you need help from God. Until we're born again, Jesus says, you can't enter the kingdom of God. You can't see it. You

can't enter it. There's verse 5. And Christ is saying, he's repeating himself here, but like Hebrews would want to do, they use a parallel structure in their teaching. They say the same thing a different way. It's all over the Psalms and Proverbs, right? But Christ, as a Hebrew, does this in his teaching. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, sorry, if one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. saying the same thing a different way. Born of water and the Spirit. Now, there's two ideas going on here. We are defiled, and we are disabled. Defiled, born of water and the Spirit. Commentators debate what Christ means here, water and Spirit. But the best commentators see Isaiah pointing back, sorry, John pointing back to Ezekiel, don't know where Isaiah came from, pointing back to Ezekiel. And John is always, or the Christ of John is always quoting Ezekiel. It's all over the place. The new temple, the water flowing from the new temple, so many quotes to Ezekiel, nods to Ezekiel. And in Ezekiel 36, God says, I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned among them, and the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord. When through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes, I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water. Notice, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. From all your idols, I will cleanse you, and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. I'll remove the heart of stone, insensitive, hard heart of stone. I'll remove it from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh, a soft heart, a malleable heart is the idea. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you'll be careful to obey my rules." And so you notice there the idea of the coming of cleansing and the coming of the Spirit, and a new heart being given. And most scholars see Christ as referring, unless you're born of water and the Spirit, that the new birth is a total transformation, but also a total cleansing. You'll see the same thing in Titus 3, when Paul is describing his own spiritual experience and the experience of these Christians before they were born again. He says, for we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But, he says, when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he saved us not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, listen, but according to His mercy by the washing of regeneration and by renewing of the Holy Spirit." See those ideas? Washing of regeneration, the cleansing of water, and the renewing of the Spirit. Washing

and transforming power that cleanses us and transformed us. And that's what Christ is speaking

of here. Unless you're born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Because we're dirty, and therefore

we're disqualified, defiled. We need to be washed, changed, before we can enter. But there's a third reason why

we need the new birth. Because until we're born again,

we cannot see the kingdom of God. Until we're born again,

we cannot enter the kingdom of God. Until we're born again,

we aren't ready for the kingdom of God. Our nature is wrong for it. Verse 6, that which is born of

the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is

Spirit. What Christ is saying here is,

if you have a flesh nature, which is humanity devoid of the Spirit

of God, dead in sins, enslaved to lust, If that's your nature, you can't

flesh your way out of the flesh. You'll always be flesh. If that's

what you are, it's what you shall be. Because you can't get out

of the flesh by the flesh. Easier for an ant to become an

angel by trying really hard. Squeeze those little antenna

together. and you can become an angel. No you can't, you're

an ant and that's what you're going to be. Well if you're in

the flesh, if you're born in the flesh and we all are, you

can't flesh your way out of the flesh. And that which is born of the

Spirit, when the Spirit comes, the Spirit transforms and turns

us into a spiritual being, our nature is changed. So Paul says

in Romans 8, Those who live according to the flesh, according to the

rule of the flesh, set their mind on the things of the flesh.

And those who live according to the Spirit set their mind

on the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is

death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. And

then he says, for the carnal mind is enmity against God. It is not subject to the law

of God, nor indeed can it be. So then those who are in the

flesh cannot please God. That there's enmity. It's not

just that we want to, but we can't. Like I'd love to drive

home and see mom and dad, or mom's, and Gloria and I, but

not mom's dad and I, but dad is, I'm still alive, I'd love

to drive and see him, but I can't get there from here, but I'd

love to. That's not the flesh. The flesh isn't trying to become

into the spirit. The flesh is hostile to God,

Paul says. It's resistant to God. Maybe that's you this morning.

Maybe it's not just that you realize I don't understand these

things, but actually when the Bible comes in, you actually

start feeling yourself hostile and angry. Are you saying to

me that I'm not good enough for God? No, that's not what I'm

saying to you. That's what God is saying to you. Maybe you're sharing the gospel

with a family member, your father or your mother or your sister,

and they don't know Christ yet, and you share the gospel, and

every time you do, they get angry. And the problem is not necessarily

you. We can be obnoxious with the



gospel, but often it's a reflection. They really are angry at God, and that anger comes out every time they meet him. When you share the gospel with them, you become the brunt of that anger. But they're not really angry with you. They're angry with God, their creator. The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it's not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can it be, so then those who are in the flesh cannot please God. So I'm telling you this morning, as we bring this sermon to a close, you need more than a new start. You need a new heart. Has that happened to you? Now some of you may never know a moment, you can't remember a moment when you were born again, but the Spirit has come because you've seen the effects. Just like a tornado leaves its effects, you see when a tornado comes. It leaves marks. When the spirit comes, he inclines our heart toward God. He lifts us up. We're aware of his presence, his faithfulness, his character. We trust him. We trust his son. We find love for God burgeoning in our hearts. We find the love of God motivates our thoughts, words, and deeds. We start enjoying reading the Bible. I was talking to one of our elders recently, and it's a wonderful conversation, but I was talking to him about questions to ask. If you're thinking about someone to nominate for the Bible, for an elder, a question you could ask them would be, tell me, what's your favorite book of the Bible and why? Do you enjoy reading the Bible and why? And hear what they say. And this elder looked at me and he said, He said, oh, he said, I wish I loved the Bible more than I do. And tears began rolling down his face. And he was condemning himself, saying, you know, I wish I read the Bible more than I do. Days go by when I don't read it at all. But he's weeping, and I'm thinking, don't you see? The very tears you're weeping show me your heart. You love this book, what it is, the God you meet in this book, and what it does to you. And through the tears, he said, oh, yeah, I do. I love this book. I wish I loved it more. And the new birth leaves marks in your soul. Have you been born again? Maybe you're here this morning, and you have not been born again. And you know that. You're saying, yes, the gospel doesn't make sense. The Bible's a closed book. And whenever people try and share the Bible with me, I find myself getting angry because they're telling me that I'm wrong, not just here or there, but everywhere. And I get very cross and angry at that. And I'm upset. What do I do? Well, first of all, you've got to be Jesus Christ, the one who will assign your eternal destiny, says, unless you're born again, you cannot see or enter the kingdom of heaven. You need God to do something at the very depth of your being. And if that's not done, if you aren't born again, a day will come when you will wish, oh,

you will wish that you were never born at all. What do I do? They've got to be done to me. I can't do it myself. What do I do? All I can say to you is expose yourself as much as possible to this book. This book has power. The God who speaks this book is the God who created the universe with words. His word has power. And it's the way he brings the new birth. In James, James says, of his own will, God brought us forth by the word of truth. And the word brought us forth means to birth us forth. And he did it by his word. Peter in 1 Peter 1 says, you have been born again, not of seed, which is perishable, Not of a father's sperm is the idea, but imperishable. That is through the living and enduring word of God. For all flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the word which was preached to you, James says, or Peter says. Expose yourself to the word as much as possible, especially the word preached, because when the word goes forth, the regenerating power of God goes forth. And if you want to be wet, well, you go where the water is. If you want to be alive, you go where the life-giving word of God is heard and preached, and you expose yourself to it, and you say, Lord, cause me to be born again. And if the pastor's right, I can't even pray that prayer and mean it, but I'm praying that prayer to you, oh Lord God, and I need you to save me. Come into my heart and change me. Cause me to be born again. Open my eyes, unstop my ears, revive my heart. I tell you, there's a God in heaven who listens to prayers. call upon Him, and He will deliver you from yourself, from your deadness, and you'll find yourself alive and able to believe in Christ, able to worship, able to submit to Jesus, His law, and ready and ripe for heaven. Let's pray together. Father, we thank You for Your Word, for its truth and its power. We pray this morning, Lord, that it will continue to perform its work in the hearts of this congregation, that you will remember your promise that when your word goes forth, it will never return void, but will accomplish its work in the souls of those who believe. In Christ's name, amen.