

The New Birth (Pt.1)
John 3:1-8
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INTRODUCTION

1. We come now to the third chapter in the Gospel of John, which is actually a continuation of the subject found in chapter 2:23-24.
2. John says in chapter 2:23-24, “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. 24 But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, 25 and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.”
3. Then in verse 1 of chapter 3 he says, “Now there was a man.”
4. “Now” is a Greek particle that can be translated “now” or “but.”
5. It should begin with “but” rather than “now” to show the contrast.
6. This again is a good point to say that many times chapter divisions are a more a hindrance than a help.
7. They may help you to find where you’re at in the text but they hurt you in seeing the connection with previous verses if there is a break in the middle like here.
8. Let’s read the entire narrative and begin at chapter 2:23

through chapter 3:21.

9. We will not study all of this today but I want you to hear it all in its context.
10. Read John 2:23-3:21.
11. The heart of John's Gospel is chapter three.
12. Because it is here where a person is given what God requires for salvation.
13. Two times in this text, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (3:3, 7).
14. That phrase occurs 4 times in the Bible, two in John, two in 1 Peter.
15. This section can be divided into two.
16. The first ten verses is "Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus" and verses 11-21 is "Jesus' discourse on God's plan of salvation" (John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*).
17. Now "the story of Nicodemus contrasts with what has just gone before. Many of the Jews in Jerusalem professed to believe on the Lord, but He knew their faith was not genuine. Nicodemus was no exception. The Lord recognized in him an earnest desire to know the truth" (William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*).
18. The narrative begins in verses 1-3 of chapter 3 with *Nicodemus's inquiry of Jesus*.

I. Nicodemus's Inquiry of Jesus (vv.1-3)

John says, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.'"

A. Nicodemus' Identity (vv.1-2a)

1. He was "a man of the Pharisees" (v.1a)

The word "Pharisee" (pharisaios) refers to "a member of a Jewish sect" (Strong). It is literally "separatists" (GING) but not "in the sense of isolationists" (John MacArthur, The MacArthur Study Bible).

They were "separatists" "in the sense of being zealous for the Mosaic law (and their own oral traditions, which they added to it [cf. Matt.15:2-6; Mark 7:8-13])" (John MacArthur, John 1-11, 100).

"According to Josephus, 6000 existed at the time of Herod the Great" (MacArthur, The MacArthur Study Bible).

James Montgomery Boice says they were "theological conservatives of their day. They believed that the Old Testament was the revealed Word of God and that the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, contained an inspired code of ethics to be believed and practiced literally" (The Gospel of John, volume 1, 187).

Warren Wiersbe says, “Not all of the Pharisees were hypocrites (as one may infer from Jesus' comments recorded in Matt. 23), and evidence indicates that Nicodemus was deeply sincere in his quest for truth...He was a man of high moral character, deep religious hunger, and yet profound spiritual blindness” (The Bible Exposition Commentary).

2. His name was “Nicodemus” (v.1b)

Nicodemus is mentioned by name 3 times in John's Gospel (3:1; 7:50; 19:39).

Nicodemus was a Jew but had a Greek name which meant “conqueror of the people” (Marvin Vincent, Vincent's Word Studies of the NT).

James Montgomery Boice tells us that “for the most part those who lived in Judea had Hebrew or Aramaic names. However, those in the upper classes, who were exposed to Greek as well as Jewish culture, often gave their children two names, a Greek name as well as a Hebrew one. Evidently this had been true of Nicodemus, which indicates that he had a Greek education. Moreover, since he apparently preferred to be known by his Greek rather than his Hebrew name, Nicodemus probably had a preference for Greek over Hebrew culture and may actually have been a Hellenist, that is, one who read the Old Testament in Greek and who looked at it in the light of the categories of Greek philosophy. It was therefore a highly educated man as well as a highly moral and ethical man who came to Jesus in the warmth of that Judean night” (The Gospel

of John, volume 1, 187).

3. He was “a ruler of the Jews” (v.1c)

This meant he was a member of the “Sanhedrin, the main ruling body of the Jews in Palestine. It was the Jewish ‘supreme court’ or ruling council of the time and arose most likely during the Persian period. In New Testament times, the Sanhedrin was composed of the High Priest (president), chief priests, elders (family heads), and scribes for a total of 71 people” (John MacArthur, The MacArthur Study Bible).

4. He “came to Jesus by night” (v.2a)

There are various interpretations given as to why he came to Jesus “by night.”

Some say he came by night “because he wanted to have a quiet uninterrupted conversation with the new Teacher ‘come from God’” (Wiersbe).

He most likely came by night because “he would have been embarrassed to be seen going to Jesus, since the Lord had by no means been accepted by the majority of the Jewish people” (MacDonald) and he also “might have not wanted his coming to imply the approval of the entire Sanhedrin...The important point, however, is not when Nicodemus came, but that he came at all” (MacArthur, John 1-11, 101).

B. Nicodemus’s Statement (v.2b)

Nicodemus said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that You

have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

1. Nicodemus addressed Jesus by the respectful term “Rabbi”

Although Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin and a respected teacher, he addressed Jesus as his equal. “He did not share the suspicion and hostility that many of his fellow religious leaders had toward Christ (cf. 7:15, 47-52) [MacArthur, John 1-11, 102].

2. Nicodemus recognized Jesus as coming “from God as a teacher” because “no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

“Like the people in the previous section (2:23), he was impressed with and believed that the undeniable power manifested in Jesus’ miracles was divine” (MacArthur) but “was like so many today who say that Jesus was a great man, a wonderful teacher, an outstanding example. All of these statements fall very far short of the full truth. Jesus was and is God” (MacDonald).

James Montgomery Boice says, “The first words that Nicodemus uttered were his claim to considerable intellectual knowledge. He said, ‘We know.’ He then began to rehearse three things that he knew: (1) that Jesus was continuing to do many miracles; (2) that the miracles were intended to authenticate him as a teacher sent from God; and, therefore (3) that Jesus was a teacher sent from God to whom Nicodemus should listen. Unfortunately for

Nicodemus, the point of the story is that Nicodemus's whole conception of Jesus Christ was wrong in spite of his knowledge. His intellect had deceived him. That is why Jesus rebuked him saying, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again' (v.3). There had been hundreds of teachers sent from God during the long course of Jewish history. Many of them had been authenticated by miracles. But Jesus was not one of these teachers. They were men. Jesus Christ was God. They had come to teach about God. He was God come to teach, die, and reveal Himself to men" (The Gospel of John, volume 1, 195).

C. Jesus' Answer (v.3)

John says, "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'"

1. Jesus was not interested in discussing the signs He did in Jerusalem
2. He was more interested in the transformation of Nicodemus's heart by the new birth
 - a) Jesus answers Nicodemus's unasked question, "Jesus answered and said to him."
 - b) He prefaces His answer with the phrase amen amen (truly, truly)

This phrase occurs 22 times in John's Gospel and was used to introduce a vitally important truth.

“What is that vitally important truth that Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand?”
That there is no entrance into God’s kingdom unless one is born again.”

John Calvin says that Jesus is essentially saying, “I care little about your calling me Master; for the first entrance into the kingdom of God is, to become a new man” (Calvin’s Commentaries: John).

- c) The words “born again” mean “born from above” (MacDonald). It is “suggesting that the new birth is supernatural and has its origin in God” (Boice, 198).

James Montgomery Boice says there are two words translated “again” in the NT. The first, *palin*, “refers quite simply to the repetition of an act” while the second, *anthen*, which is used here, refers “to the repetition of an act but implies much more. In the first place, *anthen* can also be translated ‘from above.’ This is the meaning of the word in John 3:31 that says, ‘The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.’ ‘Above’ points to heaven. So when the Bible uses *anthen* instead of *palin* in the first part of the chapter, it is suggesting that the new birth is supernatural and has its origin in God. Then, too, there is an even finer distinction that also bears this out. *Palin*, as I have said, refers to the repetition of an act.

Another also refers to the repetition of an act, but it involves one additional detail, the fact that the repetition of the act has the same source as the first act...Thus, when Jesus said, 'Unless he is born again,' He was suggesting that the new birth would have to have the same source as the original birth. That is, Nicodemus would have to be brought to life spiritually by God...he needed to be born again as Adam was born. God was the source. Therefore, Nicodemus needed to have a fresh impartation of spiritual life; there had to be a new creation" (The Gospel of John, volume 1, 198-99).

So, "To be 'born again' is to experience a second genesis. It is a new beginning, a fresh start in life" (R.C. Sproul, They Mystery of the Holy Spirit, 93).

"The new birth or regeneration, is the act of God by which He imparts eternal life to those who are 'dead in...trespasses and sins' (Eph.2:1), thus making them His children (John 1:12-13)" (MacArthur, John 1-5, 102).

R.C. Sproul makes a comment on the word "unless in 'unless one is born again.'"

He says, "When Jesus uses the word *unless* in speaking to Nicodemus, He is stating what we call a *necessary condition*. A necessary condition is an absolute prerequisite for a desired result to take place...The word *unless* makes regeneration a *sine qua non* of salvation. No regeneration,

no eternal life. Without regeneration a person can neither see the kingdom or enter the kingdom” (The Mystery of the Holy Spirit, 94).

- d) “The kingdom of God” is a phrase that refers “specifically of the kingdom of salvation, the spiritual realm where those who have been born again by divine power through faith now live under the rulership of God mediated through His Son” (MacArthur, John 1-11, 102).

It is “the spiritual life,” as John Calvin says, “which is begun by faith in this world, and gradually increases every day according to the continued progress of faith. So the meaning is, that no man can be truly united to the Church, so as to be reckoned among the children of God, until he has been previously renewed. This expression shows briefly what is the beginning of Christianity, and at the same time teaches us, that we are born exiles and utterly alienated from the kingdom of God, and that there is a perpetual state of variance between God and us, until he makes us altogether different by our being born again; for the statement is general, and comprehends the whole human race” (Calvin’s Commentaries: John).

If you will notice, Jesus says, “unless one is born again he cannot *see* the kingdom of God. And then in verse 5 He says, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot *enter* into the kingdom of God.”

John MacArthur says, “Nicodemus, like the rest of his fellow Jews, eagerly anticipated that glorious realm. Unfortunately, they thought that being descendants of Abraham, observing the law, and performing external religious rituals (particularly circumcision) would gain them entrance into that kingdom. But in thinking this, they were severely mistaken, as Jesus made clear. No matter how religiously active someone might be, no one can enter the kingdom without experiencing the personal regeneration of the new birth.

The implications of Jesus’ words for Nicodemus were staggering. All of his life he had diligently observed the law (cf. Mark 10:20) and the rituals of Judaism (cf. Gal. 1:14). He had joined the ultrareligious Pharisees, and even become a member of the Sanhedrin. Now Jesus called him to forsake all of that and start over; to abandon the entire system of works righteousness in which he had placed his hope; to realize that human effort was powerless to save” (John 1-11, 102-3).

R.C.H. Lenski says, “Jesus’ word regarding the new birth shatters once for all every supposed excellence of man’s attainment, all merit of human deeds, all prerogatives of natural birth or station. Spiritual birth is something one undergoes, not something he produces. As our efforts had nothing to do with our natural conception and birth, so in an analogous way but on a far higher plane,

regeneration is not a work of ours. What a blow for Nicodemus! His being a Jew gave him no part in the kingdom; his being a Pharisee, esteemed holier than other people, availed him nothing; his membership in the Sanhedrin and his fame as one of its scribes went for nought. This Rabbi from Galilee calmly tells him that he is not yet in the kingdom! All on which he had built his hopes throughout a long arduous life here sank into ruin and became a little worthless heap of ashes” (The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel, 234-35).

II. Jesus' Explanation of the New Birth (vv.4-8)

A. Nicodemus's Question (v.4)

“Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?’”

Verse 4 begins with Nicodemus's response to Jesus and reveals the depth of his spiritual blindness. He “could not understand how a grown-up could be born again. He pondered the physical impossibility of a man entering his mother's womb again in order to be born.

Nicodemus illustrates that ‘the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Cor. 2:14)” (MacDonald).

John Calvin said, “Renewal is frequently mentioned

in Scripture, and is one of the first principles of faith, it is evident how imperfectly skilled the Scribes at that time were in the reading of the Scriptures. It certainly was not one man only who was to blame for not knowing what was meant by the grace of regeneration; but as almost all devoted their attention to useless subtleties, what was of chief importance in the doctrine of piety was disregarded” (Calvin’s Commentaries: John).

B. Jesus’ Answer (vv.5-8)

“Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

In this section, Jesus explains the new birth. In the first section, He “spoke of the source of the new birth,” now He “speaks of the means why which it occurs” (Boice).

If you will notice in verse 5 He speaks of being “born of water and the Spirit.” What does this mean?

Before we look at what this means, let’s first examine:

1. What “water and Spirit” does not mean
 - a) “Water” does not here refer to physical birth

where “physical birth is accompanied by the release of the embryonic fluid from the womb of the mother. If this were the proper explanation, Jesus would be saying that in order for a person to be saved he must first be born physically and then his physical birth must be followed by a spiritual birth. True as this may be, it does not seem to be the proper interpretation of the statement” (Boice, 199).

b) “Water” does not refer to water baptism

This is not “substantiated either by the text or by biblical theology. The text says nothing at all about baptism, and the Bible elsewhere teaches that no one is saved by any external rite of religion. Baptism is a sign of what has already taken place, but it is not the agent by which it takes place” (Boice, 199).

Warren Wiersbe correctly states that “In the New Testament, baptism is connected with death, not birth; and no amount of physical water can effect a spiritual change in a person” (The Bible Exposition Commentary).

c) “Water” does not refer to Jewish ceremonial washings

2. What “water and Spirit” does mean

“Since Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand this truth (v.10), it must have been something

with which he was familiar.

- a) ‘Water’ and ‘Spirit’ often refer symbolically in the OT to spiritual renewal and cleansing (cf. Num.19:17-19; Isa.4:4; 32:15; 44:3; 55:1; Joel 2:28-29; Zech.13:1)” (MacArthur, John 1-11, 105).

A passage that Nicodemus would have been familiar with showing regeneration to be an OT truth was Ezek.36:24-27 which says, “For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. 25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”

“Without the spiritual washing of the soul, a cleansing accomplished only by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) through the Word of God (Eph.5:26), no one can enter God’s kingdom” (MacArthur, John 1-11, 105).

- b) Jesus continues by further emphasizing that this spiritual cleansing is wholly a work of God and not the result of any human effort in verse 6 when He says, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is

born of the Spirit is spirit.”

The only thing a physical birth can produce is “flesh.” “Flesh begets flesh.” But what Jesus is talking about here is a spiritual birth. “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

“Only the Spirit can produce the spiritual birth required for entrance into God’s kingdom. Regeneration is entirely His work, unaided by any human effort” (MacArthur, John 1-11, 105).

- c) The look of bewilderment on Nicodemus’s face must have prompted Jesus to say in verse 7, “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

This was something that ran contrary to all that he had been taught. His entire life was spent on believing that salvation came through his own external merit, just as Paul states in Philippians 3.

Paul put on his hope on externals when he said that he was “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Phil.3:5-6).

- d) Jesus concludes His point with an illustration from nature in verse 8. He says, “The wind blows where it wishes and you

hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

The wind cannot be controlled; it blows where it wishes. Even though you can hear or see its general direction, you “do not know where it comes from or where it is going.”

The same is true of the Spirit’s work. “His sovereign work of regeneration in the human heart can neither be controlled nor predicted. Yet its effects can be seen in the transformed lives of those who are born of the Spirit” (MacArthur, John 1-11, 106).

William MacDonald says, “The new birth is very much like the wind. First of all, it takes place according to the will of God. It is not a power which man holds in his own control. Secondly, the new birth is invisible. You cannot see it taking place, but you can see the results of it in a person's life. When a man has been saved, a change comes over him. The evil things which he formerly loved, he now hates. The things of God which he formerly despised, these things are now the very things which he loves. Just as no one can fully understand the wind, so the new birth is a miraculous work of the Spirit of God which man is not able to comprehend fully. Moreover, the new birth, like the wind, is unpredictable. It is not possible to state just when and where it will take place” (Believer’s Bible Commentary).

CONCLUSION

1. Have you been born from above?
2. Have you experienced the spiritual washing of the soul, a cleansing accomplished only by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) through the Word of God (Eph.5:26)?
3. Just as Jesus said to Nicodemus, He says to everyone else, "You must be born again."
4. We would like to talk to you more about what the Scriptures teach about salvation.
5. Me, Chip and Matt will be available after the service if you would like to talk with us.
6. Let's pray.