

## **“The New Birth”**

**John 3:1-10**

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Last February I preached a sermon on “original sin,” a doctrine fundamental to the entire message of the Bible and, therefore, to our Christian faith. We come into this world sinners, in bondage both to sin’s guilt and to its moral corruption. We come into the world both liable to God’s just punishment and loving what is displeasing to God. It is this fact about human life that explains both the world as we observe it every day – this vale of tears – and why every human being is in desperate need of salvation. Original sin is a doctrine little taught in our day; it is entirely ignored or scorned in the culture, but even in the church it is hardly acknowledged, no matter its fundamental importance to the entire biblical worldview. The fact is, you can’t get started in the Christian faith if you don’t acknowledge mankind’s problem and every person’s problem with sin. As has often been observed, “Man’s greatest need is to know man’s greatest need” and “He who despises the disease will despise the doctor.”

I thought I would add to the foundation of our faith another such “fundamental,” “mainstay,” or “pillar” of the biblical understanding of human life; another presupposition of the Christian gospel and its message of salvation and the gift of eternal life. So, tonight the new birth: what the prophets called the gift of a new heart; what the Apostle Paul called either the “new creation,” “the new man,” or “regeneration.” *If original sin is the problem, the new birth is a key element of the solution!* And where better to go to begin our thinking about the new birth than the most famous account of it in the Bible, the Lord’s conversation with Nicodemus.

### Text Comment

- v.3 “To see the kingdom of God” in the Bible means to be saved now and to find yourself in heaven at the end of history. To enter the kingdom means the same thing as to obtain eternal life.

Now you are aware, perhaps, that the word translated “again” in the phrase “born again” can also mean “from above.” Nicodemus in the following verses takes it to mean “again” and, of course, the Lord is certainly talking about a second birth, after and different from one’s natural birth. But it is a birth by the power of the Holy Spirit who comes from above and in other uses of the word in the larger context the sense seems to be “from above” as in 3:31. Probably John intends both thoughts and, in any case, “from above” includes the idea of “again.”

- v.5 “...with water and the Spirit” looks back to the OT, and especially Ezekiel 36:25-27, where again we find water and the Holy Spirit brought together in describing the transformation of the heart, by which a person is cleansed from sin and given new life. In other words, to be born again is another way to describe the same transformation of life described in the ancient Scriptures.

v.8 We can't see the wind, but we can see its effects and feel its power. Where the Holy Spirit works, new life appears.

Now most Christians are familiar with this text and with the terminology of being "born again." And, I suppose, in varying degrees of comprehension and consistency most would agree with the summary of John's message about the new birth in these four points.

- I. First, the new birth is absolutely essential to anyone's salvation. As the Lord puts it here, not once but twice for emphasis: unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God, which is simply another way of saying that you cannot be saved. The new birth is as essential to your eternal life as your first birth was essential to your life in this world.
- II. Second, the new birth is a divine work. Only God who made the soul can recreate the soul; only God can transform the deep structures of thought and feeling that produce a person's way of life. So the emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Out of the heart flow the issues of life and so people in bondage to sin need a new heart and only God can supply it.
- III. Third, the new birth is a secret work. Like the wind, we may be able to see its effects, but we cannot see the work of the Holy Spirit inside a human being. In many cases we cannot tell when it happens or even for some time that it has happened. Think, for example of covenant children born again very early in their lives.
- IV. And fourth, and finally, its purpose is to produce what Jesus calls here a *spiritual life*, which, in the language of the Bible means a godly life, a life such as only the Holy Spirit can create, a life of faith in Christ and obedience to God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh – and here "flesh" is being used, as Paul often used it, for human nature in its natural sinful state and condition. What is born of the Spirit is spirit, that is a life now lived with God. When Peter describes the new birth in 1 Peter 1, he too describes it as a personal transformation worked at the deepest level of the human heart, a transformation so radical that it can be likened to starting one's life all over again.

Now this is familiar territory for most of us, but that only makes it more likely that we take this stupendous reality far too much for granted. It should send shivers down our spine and instead we hardly think about it at all. Nicodemus certainly had little thought of the new birth! Nicodemus was a teacher of the faith, as Jesus reminds him in v. 10. And there was nothing particularly new or controversial in what the Lord said to him. Jesus reminds him of that as well in the same v. 10. "How can you call yourself a teacher of Israel and not know, not understand something as fundamental as the new birth." That comment had bite, and I imagine Nicodemus was stung by it! The new birth, Jesus was saying, belonged to the "ABCs" of biblical teaching.

The terminology the Lord uses isn't precisely the same that we find in Deuteronomy or the Psalms or Isaiah or Ezekiel – there we read of uncircumcised and circumcised hearts, or hearts of stone being replaced with hearts of flesh and so on – but it was perfectly clear throughout the ancient Scriptures that unless a person were transformed by the power of God, he or she could never enter the kingdom of God. He needed a new heart, sinner that he was, no matter that he was a Jew. She needed to be changed, transformed from the inside out, new principles planted in

her soul if she were to enter the kingdom of God. There was always an Israel after the flesh and an Israel after the Spirit, and to belong to the latter, to be a true Israelite, to be a citizen of the kingdom of God in fact, had always required and had always been taught to require a divine work of inner transformation.

Nicodemus had been dumbstruck by what he had seen and heard of Jesus of Nazareth. As we learn in v. 2, he had either witnessed for himself the miracle-working power of the Lord, which seems to me most likely, or had heard too many accounts of it from people whose word he trusted to doubt that Jesus was wielding supernatural power on behalf of many in the land. Suddenly miracles had returned! Jesus was at least another Elijah or Elisha. *That had got his attention!* But in most other respects, he seems to have been at this point a man of his times. His religion was banal, predictable, unsurprising, because it was man-made and depended entirely on rather ordinary performance. He was a monotheist, to be sure, not an idolater. He knew more of God than the pagans did. But he had not so much a biblical but a typically Jewish concept of salvation. He expected to go to heaven because he was a Jew, had performed acceptably the requirements of righteous living as the rabbis defined them, and hadn't committed any grave sins. At bottom, his religion was simply another form of the almost universal religious ideal. *Do ut des*, as the ancients would have said to their idols. "I give to you, God, so that you will give to me. I serve you in hopes that you will serve me." And being good in first century Judaism wasn't really all that hard.

Of course, much of modern western religion doesn't even match this rather painless way of salvation. Few today are as thoughtful or careful or serious as the Pharisees. Modern men and women rarely take the question of life after death to be of supreme importance. They have no fear of the judgment of God, no matter how much judgment there is in this world already. Americans, as a rule, don't think it much matters how they live. They don't think it matters to God, if indeed there is a God. They are good enough for God; of that they are blithely self-confident. In that way they are in precisely the same situation Nicodemus was in: clueless about what matters above all in life, about their need of salvation, and about what that salvation would require. Jesus makes this plain: without the new birth one cannot, one can never enter the kingdom of God, no matter who you are and how you live your life. Nicodemus, like so many others, never imagined that hope of eternal life rested on mighty interventions by God himself transforming a person from the inside out. And modern Americans, as a rule, *have never* imagined that God had to fix them, fix them from the inside out, if they were to go to heaven.

People by nature never see their need for a new birth, a second birth from above. *That is the universal effect of original sin.* It blinds people to their true condition and their need for what only God can give them, if only he will. No matter what the ancient Scriptures said, the Jews couldn't find the new birth in their Bible no matter that it was staring them in the face every time they read it. They were inclined as all human beings are inclined by their sinful nature to be satisfied with themselves *as they were and are*. There is nothing the ordinary human being thinks less necessary to his life and happiness than that the Holy Spirit should make him or her all over again. They do not think they are that bad or that only God can make them good!

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, almost certainly because he didn't want anyone to see him conversing with Jesus, who was from the beginning a very controversial figure and one much

spoken against in Nicodemus' social circles. He was curious; the Holy Spirit was at work in his heart. He knew something was up. But he had not yet come into the clear and was concerned about his reputation. (By the way Nicodemus figures largely in the new video series on the life of Christ, *Chosen*, and they get his state of mind just right.) Cancel culture was alive and well in first-century Judaism. But Nicodemus wanted to know what was going on. He realized that Jesus was someone special, someone of very great importance, someone who had God on his side, but he needed to step carefully. He didn't want his friends to think him some wild-eyed fanatic like the rest of Jesus' followers. But he was torn. How else could the miracles be explained?

What Jesus told him, in effect, was that he had not yet personalized the meaning of Jesus' ministry. He had not yet come to terms with the significance of Jesus or of the hostility to him on the part of his class, the community of Jewish religious leaders of which he was a part. He had not yet interpreted what was happening in terms of sin and salvation, of people who were dead in sin coming to life. He had not yet thought of anything he had heard of Jesus in terms of *his own salvation!* And so Jesus, as he often did, got immediately to the real issue. Nicodemus needed to be born again!

And so it has been countless times in Christian history. The self-satisfied, those comfortable in their world and its way of thinking, even in the Church, are not usually thinking about their need of salvation or what salvation would require. Death is looming before them, but their hearts are dead to what that must mean. In their pride they find it easy to think that all is well. After all, they are like everybody else, or even better than most. True, human life may present us with problems, troubles, and sorrows; we may have a guilty conscience about things we have said and done; but people rarely connect their troubles with their own spiritual condition, with their place before God, with the prospect of divine judgment. The once-born live in this world, but they are oblivious to what is really happening here. They worry about many things, but not the right things!

They can't see it; won't see it. You perhaps know the story of the friendship between William Wilberforce and the young British Prime Minister, William Pitt. Wilberforce, a serious Christian, a twice-born man, worried about his friend. Pitt, as most of the political class, was a typical nominal Christian. On one occasion Wilberforce persuaded Pitt to come with him to hear the Great Awakening preacher Richard Cecil. On that occasion Cecil was, Wilberforce thought, simply magnificent. He was presenting the gospel powerfully and plainly. He couldn't wait to find out what his friend Pitt had made of the sermon. But before the two friends were out of the hall Pitt turned to his friend and said, "Wilberforce, I have no idea what that man was talking about!" Such is man in his natural condition: to the truth that makes men free, blind, deaf, and dumb. And that is both the fact and the problem.

So it is that in the same way that Nicodemus wasn't expecting to hear about the new birth, hadn't come to Jesus to learn about the new birth, wasn't particularly interested in the new birth, no one was thinking much about the new birth when the Reformation broke over Europe, or two-hundred years later when the Great Awakening erupted within a comfortable, complacent Christianity. The new birth was the great need of every human being, but hardly anyone realized it then or realizes it now. The Lord said to Nicodemus that he couldn't even get started in understanding what was happening before his eyes until he was born again. And what was true

of Nicodemus is true of every human being, always and everywhere. Why should this teaching, this fact of biblical revelation and this phenomenon so easy to identify in Christian experience and Christian history; I say, why should this be so hard for people to accept and even for Christians to remember and to keep in mind?

I think the answer to that question is obvious. Jesus says here two things that are deeply offensive to human pride and our self-love. Pride is the bottom sin, and the new birth is an offense to the proud. *The first thing* is that, in yourself, you are not good enough, not nearly good enough. Your natural life is a moral wreck. Without a radical transformation of your person and your character, you will never please God. You have to become a different person than you are. That is hard, very hard, for proud people to hear. It has never been a popular message that there is something so wrong with people that they will remain forever on the outside looking in unless they are born again.

*The second thing* that offends is that *you* can't do anything about your problem. You're a bad person, you are by nature a rebel against God, the fact that you can't see this is the index of your problem. There is something terribly wrong with you, but try as you might, you can't fix it. No self-help book, no program of personal growth, no turning over of a new leaf is going to get you where you need to go. *Your situation is hopeless apart from the intervention of God.* Do you have any idea how offensive this message is and has always been? This is the chief reason people don't become Christians. It's the chief reason multitudes of people who have claimed to be Christians, including Christian ministers, never were. After all, why should the offer of eternal life as a free gift not be wildly popular? Who doesn't want to go to heaven instead of to hell? But, you see, no one can embrace the good news without first facing the bad news, the very bad news *about themselves*. And they will not do that. Such is the power and the depth of human pride and the adamant refusal to submit to God that it causes. And that is why the new birth is so desperately necessary. It alone makes human beings willing to see themselves as God sees them, as they actually are; to face their problem as it really is, and to cry out to God as the helpless people for the help only he can give them.

It has always been so. The new birth is the romance of Christian history: all these splendid stories of lives transformed, of people who had no idea what their problem was until they awoke and found themselves different people, new people, who could see what before they could not see, and were eager to do what before they would have hated the very thought of doing. I suppose there has hardly been a day, perhaps never a day, in all of human history on which there has not been someone born again, made into a new person. Here is Cyprian, the great bishop of North Africa in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

Given the manner of life I lived in those days, I used to think that what God in his tenderness promised me for my salvation was difficult, indeed distasteful. How could a man be reborn and quickened for a new life? How could one be regenerated and have done with all the past, and, without physical changes, be altered in heart and soul? How, I asked myself, was such a conversion possible? For I was captured and held prisoner by the countless sins of my past life; I did not believe it was possible to be rid of them. So I became slave to my vices, I despaired of better things. I learned to make excuses for my faults which had become my familiar friends." *But then:*

“A light from above entered and permeated my heart, now cleansed from its defilement. The Spirit came from heaven, and changed me into a new man by the second birth. Almost at once in a marvelous way doubt gave way to assurance, what had been shut tight, opened; light shone in dark places; and I found what had previously seemed...impossible could be done.

And so it has always been, millions upon millions of times. Calvin was changed, he said, by a sudden conversion. He was a changed man, not because he had done something, but because God had done something to and in him. And so George Whitefield, who described his conversion in language very like Cyprian’s. At the moment he realized that he was a new man, “His first act in his ecstasy was to write to all his relatives, ‘I have found,’ he [told] them, ‘that there is such a thing as *the new birth*.’” [Frank Boreham, *Treasury*, 65-66] Whitefield’s sermon on the necessity of the new birth, preached many times and in many places, ignited the Great Awakening. And so Charles Colson, whose influential account of his own sudden and dramatic transformation from sinner to saint was entitled *Born Again*. The next day he looked the same, when he opened his mouth, he sounded the same; he continued to be in many ways the same person he was before. But he knew that in the ways that matter most for time and for eternity he was a different person, a deeply different person.

It is this conviction that God must make and can make a person new, illuminate his mind, warm her heart, bend their will to what is holy and pleasing to God, change them root and branch, that Jesus was talking about and that vast multitudes of people throughout history have thrilled to discover had become *the* fact of their personal history.

It has been, to be sure, a common mistake to assume that the new birth will always produce an experience like these: sudden, dramatic, life-altering in the most visible ways. But the Bible never says this about the new birth. It never says that it is invariably a powerful and memorable experience. It never teaches us to identify the new birth by a person’s experience of it. In the case of covenant children it may never be an experience. Even in the case of converts, those who become Christians in the middle of life, the new birth may not produce a dramatic and powerful experience. Many are converted, seemingly more slowly and more gently. So it was with C.S. Lewis or Cesar Malan, the great figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European revival, who said, “God awoke me as a mother wakens a child with a kiss.”

But if not by a powerful experience, how can we know that we ourselves or anyone else is born again? We know that because we are, or they are *living the life of the Spirit*. This is what the Bible says many times in many different ways. And what is the life of the Spirit? In short, it is the life of a follower of Jesus Christ. It is life of obedience to God’s commandments, of service in his kingdom. It is not, of course, a perfect life. We know that, alas, all too well and the Bible makes no bones about the imperfections of the saints. The new birth *begins* such a life, a life that will continue forever, but it is not made perfect in this world. But there is now a deep agreement in our hearts with the Word of God, with the will of God, with the promises of God. We believe what we read in the Bible. John Stott said, “One of the first ways in which I knew that something had happened to me was that the Bible became a new book. As I read it God began to speak to me, verses became luminous....” [Dudley-Smith, I, 99] The truth is now *fixed* in our souls!

We *know* we are sinners; we know that we have offended *God*, and we know Christ is our savior. We are disgusted with ourselves and long to be better. We love God for his grace, Jesus Christ for his cross, the Holy Spirit for his work within us. We want to go to heaven not simply because we don't want to be punished, but because we want to be holy, to love as we ought to love; we want to live in the fellowship of the saints beholding the glory of God, and we want to see the Lord Jesus and know him face to face and be like him because we will see him as he is. We don't want the law of God to be changed to meet our hearts; we want our hearts to be changed to meet God's law. The fundamentally sinful bent of our lives has been overcome, if not yet at all fully in the practice of our lives, at least in the deep commitment of our hearts.

We who are born again have many things in common with unbelievers, so many that sometimes we can struggle to see the real difference between ourselves and them. In fact, they will look at us, alas, and think that we are much more like them than like God, hardly as different as being born all again ought to make us. That is our burden and our shame, we admit. But we still cannot deny that at the root of our existence, in what the Bible calls the heart, the heart out of which flow the issues of life, we are as different from them as night is from day. What we love they hate, what we confess they deny, what we long for they do not, and what we now understand as most important and precious remains a secret to them.

*Now, what are we to carry away from this review of the Lord's remarks to Nicodemus about the new birth?* Well, just this. Most of us here this evening, I trust, *have been born again*, have had happen to us the very thing that Jesus was talking about with Nicodemus. We know this because of the difference it has made. We have been born again! You may have no recollection of this happening to you. In many cases, in my own case, it happened before I was old enough to be aware of the change in my inner nature. But it happened. That my life and yours is a spiritual life, the very life described in the Bible, is the proof that it happened. But, if so, that means that God himself, the Holy Spirit, transformed *you*. He hasn't done that for everyone, but he did it for *you*. At some moment He came down into your heart and did something – whatever that something was – and made you a person you would otherwise never, never have become.

Human beings, all of them without exception, have been damaged by the Fall. While they still have an innate recognition of God and of their creaturely status, they also have an innate antipathy toward God, a fear of him, a spirit of rebellion against him. There is an inner disturbance in human beings and the result is they can never be the people they want to be. There is always this longing for something else, for more, but no willingness to seek that something else, that better life *in God*. Only the new birth can overcome that disturbance and finally set a person on the way to the fulfillment of his or her life, on the way to becoming what he or she knows deep down every human being ought to be. Only the new birth makes possible true understanding, correct thinking, and right feeling. Only the new birth gives you a passport to the heavenly country.

And *you have* been born again. You might not have been. Great multitudes of people in this world have not been born again. God grant that they be, but they have not, and similarly vast multitudes have lived and died in this world born but once, not twice. *But you have been born twice*. By the grace of God and the power of God and the recreative work of the Holy Spirit, you have been born from above after first being born from below. This remarkable thing, this

absolutely essential thing, this life-giving thing *was given to you!* The Holy Spirit came to you, whenever he did, and he fixed you. He freed you. He opened your eyes and softened your heart. You could not be this person without God having made it so! Do you, as I do, sometimes think about what sort of person you would be if you had not been born again. I shudder to think such things!

In the same way that the Israelites could never have escaped their bondage in Egypt apart from the power of God; in the same way that the blind, the leprous, the paralyzed could never have overcome their woeful conditions apart from the power of God wielded by the Lord Jesus; in the same way that the Apostle Paul would never have made the dramatic about-turn in his life and cease his vicious persecution of the Christians and become instead their greatest champion; so you would not be sitting here, you would not think as you do about the Bible, about the gospel, about the Triune God, about the cross, about your calling in life, about the life to come, apart from that divine work of recreation that was done *in you*.

You, my friends, are special, extraordinarily special. God touched *you*, changed you in just that way you had to be changed so that you could believe in Jesus and go to heaven. Special indeed! But *you* know, better than anyone, you know that God didn't give you new life because you were special. He gave you new life to make you special. It was a pure gift, utterly undeserved, and far, far, far beyond your power to achieve by yourself.

We have been born twice. We are new people, you and I; fit for eternity. It is utterly remarkable what we now are, what we can now do, if only we will, and what we will someday be. We are the children of God! We hardly begin to know what that means. We have been born of God! Now, for goodness' sake, lets you and I go out and live like it!