

# BORN AGAIN

## John 3:1-8

Rev. Richard D. Phillips  
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, Nov. 4, 2007

---

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." *John 3:3*

John's account of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem at the beginning of his ministry is brief. Jesus went up for the Passover and found merchants set up in the temple. He made a whip of cords and drove them out, provoking his first confrontation with the religious leaders. Many who observed this began to acclaim Jesus, but, John reports, "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" (Jn. 2:23-25).

This is the background for the meeting of Jesus and Nicodemus in chapter three. John says, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1)." It would have been easier for John to write, "Now there was a Pharisee..." Instead, he wrote, "Now there was a *man* of the Pharisees." The connection is clear: "Jesus knew what was in a man... Now there was a man." Nicodemus represents those who possess a certain belief in Jesus, or at least a certain regard for him, but one which Jesus neither accepts nor embraces.

### NICODEMUS THE MAN

Marginal believers could hardly have a better representative than Nicodemus. We can readily discern three things about him, beginning with his identity as a Pharisee.

People today do not think highly of Pharisees because of Jesus' criticism of their self-righteous hypocrisy. But they were the most

respected people of their time. Jesus' problems with the Pharisees stemmed from their religious practice and teaching. But it could not be denied was that they were exceedingly moral.

Secondly, Nicodemus was a leader of the people. He was "a ruler of the Jews" (Jn. 3:1), a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest governing body. Therefore, Nicodemus was a member of the ruling elite.

Thirdly, it is most likely that Nicodemus was a scholar. All Pharisees were devoted students of Scripture. It is noteworthy, as well, that Nicodemus is a Greek name. Upper class Jews often gave their children both Jewish and Greek names, signifying the two worlds in which they traveled. Having adopted his Greek name, Nicodemus may have been an admirer of the philosophers.

Nicodemus was not merely a man, but he was quite a man. It is hard to pick a similar figure from our own time, who combines political power with moral excellence and erudite scholarship. If religious mankind were to have a representative in Jerusalem, there could hardly be a better one than Nicodemus.

Why did a man like this come to see Jesus? By his own words, he was intrigued by Jesus' miracles and wanted to meet him. John records: "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'" (Jn. 3:2).

Nicodemus came under cover of darkness. Evidently he did not want his fellow Pharisees and power-brokers to know of his meeting, perhaps for fear of embarrassment. "Rabbi," he began, showing respect, "we know that you are a teacher come from God." There is, I believe, more than a hint of patronage in those words. "We know," he says, making Jesus aware that he speaks for powerful others who have condescended to give Jesus a favorable report. I don't think it is too much to suggest that he meant to impress upon Jesus his strength of position and resources. He might have gone on to remark, "We know you are from God. But things are much different in Jerusalem than way out in Nazareth. You are going to need good advice, handling, support and resources. We can guide you in your affairs." We don't know for sure that Nicodemus was going to say these

things, because Jesus cut him off long before he could. But what he did say suggests a patronizing attitude towards our Lord.

According to Nicodemus, he looked on Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God.” That is all. He reminds us of many people who compliment Jesus so long as he remains just a teacher. How different this is from those commended in Scripture for true faith, who come to Jesus, crying, “Lord, have mercy on us!” Nicodemus may have come to Jesus with good will, but it was that of an equal, a patron, and not that of a believer in his Savior or a worshiper before his God.

### “YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN”

**I**t is significant that Jesus did not welcome Nicodemus’ advance. Had Jesus been a mere teacher, a mere man, these words would have been music to his ears. He is recognized, accorded access, and promised support! Here is an agent to manage his affairs and open doors for opportunity. But Jesus bluntly stated that Nicodemus did not know what he was talking about. Nor could he. “Truly, truly, I say to you,” Jesus replied, “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3).

If we compare this episode with some of Jesus’ other encounters, we can see this reply as the reproof that it was. To the rich young ruler, so devoted to his money, Jesus commanded, “Sell what you possess and give to the poor” (Mt. 19:21). To the woman at the well, he offered “living water” (Jn. 4:10). Jesus always directs us away from our worldly source of confidence to the spiritual realities of heaven. So to the confident Pharisee, proud of his lineage, he said, “You must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). Leon Morris observes, “In one sentence he sweeps away all that Nicodemus stood for, and demands that he be remade by the power of God.”<sup>1</sup>

It is not only Nicodemus who needs to be born again. What Jesus told him is true for us all: “You must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). This is one of the great statements of the Bible. Jesus says that salvation requires not a merely superficial change or temporary religious excitement or an interest in new ideas. We cannot just fix the old

---

<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 188.

person or clean up our act. Salvation requires a radical re-making by which we are made inwardly new. J.C. Ryle explains: “It is a thorough change of heart, will, and character. It is a resurrection. It is a new creation. It is a passing from death to life. It is the implanting in our dead hearts a new principle from above.”<sup>2</sup>

The expression, “born again,” can also be translated as “born from above.” The Greek word *anōthen* combines the adverb “above” with the suffix “from.” It is found five other times in the New Testament, including verse 31 of this very chapter, and in each of those occasions it is translated as “from above.” The new birth is a birth “from above.” This is the point John makes in his prologue. He says that those who receive Jesus become children of God, born “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh or nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:12-13). The new birth Jesus is talking about is from above, that is, from God.

Nonetheless, Nicodemus’ response shows that he took Jesus’ meaning to be born “again”, which *anōthen* can also mean. “How can a man be born when he is old?” he asked. “Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (Jn. 3:4). This is, no doubt, one of many occasions when the apostle John intentionally uses a word that conveys a double meaning: born again; born from above.

Jesus answered: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). What does Jesus mean by “born of water and spirit”? Some think water refers to baptism and spirit refers to conversion. The problem with this view is that there is nothing here to indicate that water refers to baptism. Moreover, the Bible does not teach that true spiritual change results merely from undergoing any ritual, but instead speaks of the new birth as resulting from God’s Word (see 1 Pet. 1:24). Another view holds that “water and spirit” describes two different births – one from a mother’s womb by water and the other a supernatural birth by the Spirit. John 3:6 is thought to support this view: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

---

<sup>2</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, John*, 3 vols. (London: James Clark, 1975), I:122.

The third and best view observes that in the Greek text the grammatical structure of “water and spirit” indicates a single event, not two different births (a single definite article combines both words). Moreover, since Jesus chides Nicodemus for his ignorance (Jn. 3:10), he must be referring to things taught in the Old Testament. It turns out that Jesus’ description of “water and spirit” corresponds to God’s promise of the new birth in Ezekiel 36:25-27: “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. 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. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” This is a rebirth that a teacher like Nicodemus should know, involving cleansing from sin as by water, giving us a new and righteous standing with God, and the transforming of the heart by God’s Spirit, giving us new life to live for God. This is what the new birth is all about.

#### JESUS’ TEACHING ON THE NEW BIRTH

This is one of the most important statements of the whole Bible and therefore one we should study carefully: “You must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). We can summarize Jesus’ teaching here in three points: the new birth is *necessary*, the new birth is a *supernatural work of God*, and the new birth is *revealed by its effects*.

Twice in this passage, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you,” words that indicate the importance of what he is saying. This underscores his point that *the new birth is necessary*: “You *must* be born again” (Jn. 3:7). Until God regenerates us – that is, brings us to spiritual life – we are not even interested in God or Jesus or salvation. If we hear the gospel it makes no impact on us, and to the extent that we understand it we dislike it. Instead, we are attracted to worldly and sinful things. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh,” Jesus said, “and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:6). Until people are born again, they do not want to read the Bible and they do not accept what it says, just as the spiritually dead people of Jesus’ time rejected and crucified him. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains:

The world is not interested in the affairs of the soul at all and tries to avoid considering them. The world is spiritually dead, dead in trespasses and sins and it regards spiritual things as utterly boring. It wants to enjoy the world, it is out for the glittering prizes that the world has to offer. But the Christian has been made spiritually alive. He is very concerned about the affairs of the soul, they are the things that come first in his life and in all his thinking. How then has this happened? It is the power of Christ that has come upon him: “God has made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Eph. 2:5).<sup>3</sup>

The Bible says that before we are born again, we are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1). A dead person cannot believe or act in any way to save himself; he must be made alive. Like Lazarus in the tomb, he must hear the voice of Jesus and come forth – only then can he live. Not only that, before being born again we are spiritually blind. Given these biblical descriptions of our native depravity, the new birth is absolutely necessary, Jesus insists, not for us merely to enter the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:5), but even to see it (Jn. 3:3).

Nicodemus is an example of this. He began by talking about all that he and his colleagues knew. But without the rebirth of the Holy Spirit, he knew nothing of spiritual things. He could be vastly learned – and learning is a good thing – but until God gave him a new heart and a new light in the mind, he could not grasp the things of heaven. Paul explained why, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Therefore, Charles Spurgeon writes, “Ye may be rich or ye may be poor, but ‘ye *must* be born again.’ Ye may be intelligent, ye may be educated, ye may be talented, but ‘ye *must*, ye *must* be born again.’”<sup>4</sup>

The second point in Jesus’ teaching is that the new birth is not something we do for ourselves but is *a supernatural work of God*. This is seen in the terminology, “born from above.” We were all born a first time from our mothers. What work did we accomplish in being born then? We did nothing. We received birth from our natural parents. The same is true with our new birth from above: our spiritual rebirth is not our doing. It is the sovereign work of God’s grace; it is

---

<sup>3</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Safe in the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1988) p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Every Man’s Necessity,” from *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1455, 77.

his achievement for our salvation. Leon Morris observes, “Entry into the kingdom is not by way of human striving, but by that rebirth which only God can effect.”<sup>5</sup>

Nicodemus was puzzled by the idea of being reborn. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (Jn. 3:4). He was thinking of ways in which a man might cause himself to be born again. But Jesus insisted that only the Holy Spirit can cause the new birth: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:6). Joseph Ryan explains, “Being born again is not a decision you make. Whoever you are, however you came to Christ, you have been the object of God’s supernatural work on your heart.”<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, Jesus says that the new birth *is revealed by its effects*: “The 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” (Jn. 3:8). When I lived in Florida, we would see this principle vividly demonstrated during hurricanes. We did not see the wind blowing, but we saw the palms trees bending and the debris flying. Likewise, we cannot see the new birth but we observe its effects in our lives.

This poses a challenge for us to face today. The term “born again” has become popular. Surveys show that a majority of Americans consider themselves to be born again, by which they mean they have had some spiritual experience. But for many, there has been no real change in their lives. When it comes to things like sexual sin, their conduct in marriage, their use of time and money, and their life ambitions, a great many so-called “born-again” people are no different than non-Christians. This is a problem because, according to the Bible, if you have not been changed you have not been born again, regardless of any spiritual experiences you think you have had. To be born again, Paul said, is to be “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24).

What, then, are evidences of the new birth? Charles Spurgeon lists several, beginning with *faith in Christ* and in his gospel. Those who

---

<sup>5</sup> Morris, 189.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph “Skip” Ryan, *That You May Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 100.

are born again have come to Jesus for their salvation, believe the Bible, and defend its doctrines. Also, there is *repentance from sin*: Spurgeon says, “Sorrow for sin is one of the sure signs of the new nature.” Those who are born again do not merely hate the misery that results from sin, but they hate their sin itself. Next is *prayer*. The first thing said about Paul after his rebirth was “behold, he is praying” (Acts 9:11). Spurgeon sums up the effects of the new birth as *the possession of a new life*, with new desires, an interest in God, a love for his people, a joy in worship and a hunger for God’s Word.<sup>7</sup> This is what Ezekiel foretold, a rebirth that results in cleansing from sin and a new desire for holiness: “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Eze. 36:27).

Sinclair Ferguson tells of a young man who came to church and after a while was converted. He told an elder: “I can’t believe how much this church has changed within the last few weeks. The hymns are so lively now. The worship is so wonderfully meaningful. Why, even the preacher is better!”<sup>8</sup> Have you experienced something like that? Spurgeon asks, “Do you feel [that]... now you love God, now you seek to please him, now spiritual realities are realities to you, now the blood of Jesus is your only trust, now you desire to be made holy, even as God is holy? If there is such new life as that in you, however feeble it may be, though it is only like the life of a new-born child, you are born again, and you may rejoice in that blessed fact.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus’ teaching that the new birth is revealed by its effects not only challenges us to examine ourselves for such evidences. It also encourages us in our weakness and gives us hope about what the future holds for us. The Holy Spirit’s work does not end with the new birth, but continues throughout our lives: having made us alive, he goes on to bring us more and more to life, working in us the life of God and molding our character into Christ-likeness. The new birth is the beginning of a life-long process of spiritual animation and is the pledge of glorious things yet to come. How wonderful that Christians are no longer what we once were, and how wonderful that we will someday become what we are not yet. Paul says, “He who began a

---

<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon, “The Necessity of Regeneration” from *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 3121, 763-764.

<sup>8</sup> Cited from Ryan, 106.

<sup>9</sup> Spurgeon, 764.

good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

## THE NEW BIRTH EXPERIENCED

Ultimately, the new birth must not be explained but experienced. It will do us no good to understand the new birth unless we have personally experienced it through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

One man who was born again is Tom Papania. His grandfather was one of the original mobsters who brought the Mafia to America from Sicily. His upbringing was savage, and at age ten he vowed that he would never shed another tear. He grew up as a thief, an extortionist, and a murderer. His heart was so cold that even hardened criminals found it hard to look into his eyes, seeing nothing there but death.

But God began to speak to Papania’s heart, though he tried not to listen. He felt convicted about his many evil deeds, but wanting to rob God of the chance to punish him with death, he put a gun to his own head and was about to pull the trigger. Just then, the phone rang: it was a man he had met who kept inviting him to church. Just to prove that God was wrong, he put down the gun and agreed to attend the man’s church. When the service was over, the minister greeted him at the back door. He said, “I have something I want to say to you, but I don’t want to offend you. The eyes are the window of the soul. When you first came in here, I looked into your eyes, and all I could see was a little boy crying, wanting to be loved.”

The pastor had exposed Papania’s most painful secret, so he went back that night to murder him. But to his amazement, he could not go through with it. Instead, he talked with the minister, who asked him if he knew Jesus. He told Tom that he needed to be born again. Tom just laughed. “Pastor,” he said, if these people in this church found out who I was, they’d throw both of us out of here. I’m probably the biggest sinner you’ll ever see if you live to be a million years old. These people don’t want me. I’m a sinner.” He went on to recount his crimes, and before he knew it, he found himself kneeling on the ground, confessing his sins to God, and opening the door of his heart to let Jesus in. He said, “I’ve found Jesus, and I’ve been searching for

him all my life, and now that I have him, I'm not letting him go.” Tom Papania went on to become a prison evangelist, his life changed by God's forgiveness and love in Jesus Christ. He was born again.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus says to us all: “You must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). You cannot cause yourself to be born again. But if God is calling you through his Word, what you can do – and must do – is open your heart to Jesus in faith, receiving him as Lord and Savior. Through faith in him, you will see and enter God's kingdom of salvation because you are born again. “Whoever believes in the Son,” John writes, “has eternal life” (Jn. 3:36) – a life of love and truth and holiness that will never end.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cited from Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians* (Phillipsburg, NJ: 2005), 35-36.