
JOHN: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

THE SAVING WORK OF THE SPIRIT

A message presented by Pastor Marc Minter
to First Baptist Church of Diana, TX on March 26, 2017

INTRODUCTION

The hymns we sing, say more than we often realize. Just consider a line from Amazing Grace: "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved..." God must indeed teach sinners like us to fear Him before He may alleviate those fears. The Bible speaks of salvation in various stages or features. In this message, we shall consider Jesus' teaching on 'regeneration.' What does it mean? Where does it come from? And how does this inspire glory to God?

JOHN 3:1-13

3:1 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 are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.*"

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

4 Nicodemus said to him, "*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*"

5 Jesus answered, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 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.*"

9 Nicodemus said to him, "*How can these things be?*"

10 Jesus answered him, "*Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 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. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*"

THE POINT I'M AIMING AT TODAY:

God deserves all glory since He has worked spiritual life in us.

MESSAGE OUTLINE:

(1) A WALK THROUGH THE PASSAGE

(2) WHERE IS THIS CONCEPT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

(3) WHAT DOES 'BORN AGAIN' OR 'BORN FROM ABOVE' MEAN?

(4) WHAT BENEFITS ARE THERE IN THE SPIRIT'S SAVING WORK?

MESSAGE

(1) A WALK THROUGH THE PASSAGE

- John's linear progression in John 3:1 to 16 and then through 21
 - Carson says, “the entire focus is on *the work of the Spirit* (v. 8), the work of the Son (vv. 14–15), the work of God himself (vv. 16–17), and the place of faith (vv. 15–16)”¹
 - Therefore, this message is the *first of a three-part series* within a series “*The Saving Work of God: Father, Son, and Spirit*”

3:1 **Now** there was a man of the *Pharisees* named Nicodemus, a *ruler of the Jews*.

- Now
 - “*de*” – now; but; and – This word connects the narrative here to the ending of John 2:
 - “*when he [Jesus] 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*” (Jn. 2:23–25).

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). The Gospel according to John (p. 192). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

- Pharisees
 - A sect among Jewish people that were distinguished by their strict piety and adherence to the Mishnah – oral tradition of laws that expanded upon the Old Testament law.
- Ruler of the Jews
 - Nicodemus was among the Jewish elders / leaders (aka Sanhedrin)

2 This man came to Jesus *by night* and said to him, “*Rabbi*, we know that you are a teacher *come from God*, for no one can do these *signs* that you do unless God is with him.”

- Night
 - At least 3 of the 4 other times John uses the word “night,” it is metaphorically pointing to a lack of belief or understanding (9:4; 11:10; 13:30).
 - John uses “dark” and “darkness” the same way (1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35; 12:46)
 - This is not to say it was not actually nighttime, but it is to say that the reason John tells us it was nighttime is that it is also metaphorically illustrative of Nicodemus’ disbelief.
- Rabbi
 - “*Teacher*” – This is a polite greeting, but telling of Nicodemus’ posture.
 - Note the same greeting from the ignorant disciples of John the Baptist (1:38).
 - Nicodemus is a “teacher” as well... His use of this title for Jesus merely acknowledges Him as a peer.
 - Nicodemus also knows Jesus has done many “signs,” so his refusal to greet Him as “Messiah,” or at least as “Prophet,” betrays his low view of Jesus.
- Come from God
 - Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus is “from God,” but this is not a full endorsement of His divinity. This is a recognition that any prophet “from God” might have.

- Signs
 - “signs” or miracles were the reason Nicodemus believed Jesus to be “from God.”
 - Unlike the spurious believers (2:23-25), Nicodemus is still investigating Jesus concerning the whole matter of His person and purpose.
- What are we to make of Nicodemus here?
 - Carson says, “The most natural reading of 3:1–15 is that at this point *Nicodemus, though interested, is not particularly open to the truth* (after all, Jesus’ signs serve Nicodemus as a conversation starter, not, as in 2:23–25, as a trigger for faith, spurious or otherwise), *yet eventually he comes around to side with Jesus* (7:45–52) and ultimately to take his place at Calvary (19:38–42).”²

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

- Truly, truly
 - Jesus introduces potent statements, **thick with doctrinal significance.**³
 - Jesus said, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life*” (5:24).
 - Jesus said, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin*” (8:34).
 - Jesus said, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am*” (8:58).
- Born again
 - *gennoō anōthen* – “born from above”
 - Peter uses *anagennoō* (1 Pet. 1:3, 23) – “born again”
 - The phrase carries the concept theologians call “regeneration”
 - “*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...*” (2 Cor. 5:17).
 - “*children of God*” are “*born of God*” (Jn. 1:13).

² Carson, D. A. (1991). The Gospel according to John (p. 186). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

³ Interestingly, this “truly, truly” phrase is unique to John’s Gospel

- See the kingdom of God
 - This phrase is a parallel with the idea of “*having eternal life*” (5:24; 6:27; 6:40; 17:3).
 - Carson says, “To a Jew with the background and convictions of Nicodemus, ‘to see the kingdom of God’ was to *participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, to experience eternal, resurrection life.*”⁴

4 Nicodemus said to him, “*How can a man* be born when he is old? *Can he enter* a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

- Confusion
 - Nicodemus’ mind is only on fleshly things – thinking of a natural birth and not a spiritual one
- Self-activity
 - Jesus has told Nicodemus what God must do to/for a person to have life, but Nicodemus is asking what he (a man) can do.

5 Jesus answered, “*Truly, truly*, I say to you, unless one is *born of water and the Spirit*, he cannot *enter the kingdom of God*. 6 That which is *born of the flesh is flesh*, and that which is *born of the Spirit is spirit*.”

- Repetition and expansion
 - Notice that Jesus uses some similar words and phrases in His second response to Nicodemus
 - “*truly, truly*” and “*born*” and “*kingdom of God*”
 - Yet another profound (theologically thick) statement
 - Jesus is still speaking of what it means to be “born again” or “born from above”
 - Jesus is also still talking about one’s participation in “eternal life” or “the kingdom of God”

⁴ Carson, D. A. (1991). The Gospel according to John (p. 188). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

- born of water and the Spirit
 - **Some insert baptism here**
 - Some teach '*baptismal regeneration*' from this text: "*Water baptism is the means by which spiritual birth takes place.*"
 - There are numerous problems with this position.
 - If one makes baptism a sacrament that is necessary for salvation (can't be saved without it), then an addition has been made to the Gospel. This is vehemently opposed by Scripture (Gal. 1:6).
 - John doesn't mention anything about baptism at all in this narrative or the verbal exchange. Therefore, if water baptism is what Jesus is talking about here, John has decided to insert this extremely profound teaching in a most obscure way.
 - The construction of the sentence does not lend itself to two "births," but one. One "birth" of both "water and Spirit." The disjoining of these does violence to the text and its meaning.
 - **Some think the water refers to natural birth**
 - From this perspective, John is recording Jesus as saying, "*Unless one is born both naturally (from his mother) and spiritually (from the Spirit), he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*"
 - Proponents of this view see it as perfectly aligning with the phrase "born again."
 - However, as we have already pointed out above, there is no need to try to create two different "births" here. In fact, it is unwise and harmful to do so.
 - **Let Scripture help us to understand Scripture**
 - Jesus says that this concept is nothing new (v7) and that it is elementary to biblical teaching (v10, 12). Therefore, we are wise to ask, "*Where is this in the Old Testament?*"
 - We shall ask and try to answer this very question below.

- “born of flesh is flesh” and “born of Spirit is spirit”
 - This explanatory statement is simple and clear.
 - Jesus reminds Nicodemus (and us) of the powerlessness of “flesh” and the necessity of spiritual birth.
 - Jesus says elsewhere, *“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all”* (Jn. 6:63).

7 *Do not marvel* that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 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.*”

- Do not marvel
 - This should come as no surprise.
 - Since “washing” and “renewal” is necessary; and since flesh is no help at all, because it only gives birth to flesh; it should come as no surprise that “you must be born again/from above”
- So it is...
 - Spiritual birth is like the blowing wind:
 - The Spirit of God comes and goes how He pleases
 - You may hear/see evidence of His miraculous work
 - But, you may not peer into His comings and goings

9 Nicodemus said to him, *“How can these things be?”*

- Self-activity
 - Nicodemus’ question is about **process** not further explanation
 - Carson says, “Doubtless he [Nicodemus] himself had for years taught others the **conditions of entrance to the kingdom of God**, conditions cast in terms of **obedience to God’s commands**, **devotion to God**, happy **submission to his will**; but here he is

facing a *condition he has never heard expressed, the absolute requirement of birth from above.*"⁵

- In other words, Nicodemus' whole religious approach was related to personal obedience to the letter of the law.
 - Jesus is telling him that he is powerless, and God must do something to/for him.
 - To Nicodemus, and to us, this is mind-blowing.

10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

- Teacher who doesn't understand
 - Once again, this concept of "spiritual birth" or "regeneration" is elementary/foundational to biblical teaching
 - This illustrates the sheer powerlessness of the flesh.
 - Even the diligent religious efforts and better-than-average intellect did not help Nicodemus understand.

11 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*. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if *I tell you heavenly things*? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except *he who descended from heaven*, the Son of Man.

- Profound testimony from heaven about heavenly things
 - Nicodemus started the conversation talking about what "we know" (v2), but Jesus quickly alerts him to his utter ignorance apart from God's revelation – which is embodied before him!

⁵ Carson, D. A. (1991). The Gospel according to John (p. 198). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

(2) WHERE IS THIS CONCEPT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

- “Born of Water and Spirit” – referring to a single act of God
 - The **washing** or **pouring of water** and the **breathing** or **pouring of God’s Spirit** are both closely associated with the arrival of the Messiah
 - **Living Water**
 - The prophet Zechariah spoke of the “*Day of the Lord*” (14:6-11).
 - It will be a “*unique day*” of immense “*light*” (v6).
 - “*living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem*” and there will be no drought (v8).
 - “*the LORD will be king over all the earth*” (v9).
 - “*Jerusalem*” will be elevated above all, fully inhabited, and dwell in complete “*security*” (v10-11).
 - In fact, the LORD God is the “*fountain of living water*” (Jer. 2:13, 17:13).
 - This theme arises in John 4 and 7.
 - **Pouring out water and the Spirit**
 - Isaiah 44:3 – God said, “*I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.*”
 - This imagery of **washing** and **spiritual renewal** is especially prominent in Ezekiel 36-37
 - Ezekiel prophesied during the time of exile following the destruction of Jerusalem (by Babylon) in 586 B.C. God’s words through Ezekiel were to be a steadying promise during their exile.
 - Ezekiel 36:22–28 – “*It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ...25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses... 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and*

give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules... and you shall be my people, and I will be your God."

- **So, the imagery of water and spirit points to a time when God is fulfilling all His promises in the Messiah.**
 - Zechariah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah all use this same imagery.
 - Therefore, it is right that Jesus said to Nicodemus that a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament would expect such things.

(3) WHAT DOES 'BORN AGAIN' OR 'BORN FROM ABOVE' MEAN?

- One aspect or feature of salvation
 - Salvation includes regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification.
- Regeneration
 - *gennoō anōthen* – “born from above”
 - *anagennoō* (1 Pet. 1:3, 23) – “born again”
 - **Baptist Faith and Message** (aligning with our own Confession of Faith) – “Regeneration, or the new birth, is **a work of God's grace** whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart **wrought by the Holy Spirit** through conviction of sin, **to which the sinner responds** in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶
 - **Wayne Grudem** – “Regeneration is a secret act of God **in which he imparts new spiritual life** to us.”⁷
 - Simply put, being “born again” or “born from above” is something God does to us, effectively bringing spiritual life.

⁶ <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>

⁷ https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/regeneration_grudem.html

- Regeneration necessary because of Degeneration
 - Jesus said, “*That which is born of flesh is flesh...*” (Jn. 3:6).
 - “Flesh” is used in various ways by John.
 - “*the Word became flesh* [sarx]...” (1:14).
 - Incarnation – human, bodily form
 - “*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh* [sarx] *is no help at all*” (6:63).
 - Natural, Fallen human nature
 - The Father has given the Son “*authority over all flesh* [sarx]...” (17:2).
 - Humanity in general
 - “*Flesh*” here (3:6) is same as 6:63 – Natural, Fallen human nature
 - Nothing good is in the flesh (Rom. 7:18).
 - A mind set on fleshly things is death, not life (Rom. 8:6).
 - A fleshly mind is “*hostile to God*” and does not submit to God (Rom. 8:7).
 - The “*desires of the flesh are against the Spirit*” (Gal. 5:17).
 - The works or deeds of the flesh are heinous sin (Gal. 5:19).
 - The passions or cravings of our flesh rule over natural humanity, such that they are given the label of “*children of wrath*” (Eph. 2:3).
 - ***Regeneration is necessary because of degeneration, and thanks be to God that He intervenes!***

Major Point: God deserves all glory since He has worked spiritual life in us.

APPLICATION

(4) WHAT BENEFITS ARE THERE IN THE SPIRIT'S SAVING WORK?

1. Christian humility and gratitude

- When we realize that God has brought us spiritual life apart from anything we have done, we are rightly humbled before God and others.
- Our hearts should be overwhelmed with gratitude for God's spiritual and miraculous work of bringing us life.

2. Evangelistic boldness and hope

- We know that God imparts spiritual life through the proclamation of His word! We may speak boldly, telling the Gospel freely, knowing that God will provide spiritual life as He purposes to do so.

3. Conviction in prayer

- We may ask God to bring spiritual life to our friends and family members, knowing that He alone can do it and that He is able.

4. Appropriate worship – giving God the glory He is due

- We may offer ourselves wholly to God, giving Him all glory and honor; for He is the author and finisher of our faith.

Major Point: God deserves all glory since He has worked spiritual life in us.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Regeneration: What does it mean to be born again? by Wayne Grudem

https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/regeneration_grudem.html

'Born-Again'-ism by Richard R. Ochs

<http://www.chapellibrary.org/files/6213/7643/2893/bais.pdf>

Are you born again? by J.C. Ryle

<https://www.monergism.com/are-you-born-again>