

3. You must be born again

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 September 2012

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening, friends. Very good to see you all. Let's turn in our Bibles, please, to the book of Numbers. We're coming to John's Gospel a little bit later, but we'll start in the book of Numbers, and you'll find this on page 129 in our big hardback Bibles. The reason we're having a short reading from Numbers before we turn to John's Gospel is that the Lord Jesus, as you will see in a moment, quotes from this particular passage when he's explaining to Nicodemus what the new birth means, and I thought it would be good for us to have this little reading as background to us. So it's Numbers chapter 21, and I'm reading from verse 4 to verse 9, and we're partway through the wanderings in the wilderness of the children of Israel before they finally reached the promised land. So Numbers chapter 21, verse 4.

From Mount Hor, they set out by the way to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, and the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. They're talking there about the manna.

Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, we have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. So that was the remedy. Look at the serpent and live. Well, this is the word of the Lord to us from the Hebrew Scriptures, and we'll turn now to John's Gospel, chapter 3. And you'll find that on page 887. John's Gospel, chapter 3, and I'm reading from verse 1 to verse 15. 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.

That which is born of 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 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. 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. This is God's word to us, and may it be a blessing to our hearts today.

[4 : 52] Amen. Well, let's take our Bibles and we'll turn to John's Gospel, chapter 3 again, page 887, as we continue with this little series in chapters 2 and 3. And we're due to be looking next week at verses 16 to 21, and then in a fortnight's time, God willing, at the final section of chapter 3.

But tonight, verses 1 to 15. Now, this passage, verses 1 to 15, is a unique passage in the four Gospels. There is nothing remotely like it in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. And John is recording for us an interview, or you might call it a conversation, between Jesus and a senior Jewish leader called Nicodemus. Jesus is the one who steers the conversation. If you like, he sets the agenda for the conversation. And the subject that Jesus talks about to Nicodemus is the necessity of the new birth. And that is our subject this evening, you must be born again. Now, let me highlight the key sentences uttered by Jesus. And I think you'll see how Jesus is pressing this subject of the new birth on Nicodemus, and is lovingly, but forcefully engaging Nicodemus' mind on this subject. So if Nicodemus had come along to speak to Jesus about something else, Jesus is not allowing him to. He's saying, we're going to talk about this. So here are Jesus' first words in verse 3.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Then look at verse 5, the next thing that Jesus says.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, that's another description of the new birth, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. And then look at verse 7. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again.

So in verse 3, he is saying, without the new birth, there is no seeing the kingdom of God. In verse 5, without the new birth, there is no entering the kingdom of God.

[7 : 22] And verse 7, don't be surprised, amazed, or astonished at what I'm saying. Don't think, Nicodemus, that this is some obscure point of theology that's off the ordinary man's radar.

This is central and essential. You must be born again. So do you see how insistent Jesus is in engaging Nicodemus' mind on this subject?

Now, if we ask the question, well, how did John know about this conversation? The most likely answer is that it was Nicodemus himself who told John, perhaps sometime afterwards, about how he had become a Christian.

Because being born again is another way of talking about how to become a Christian. You can imagine Nicodemus saying to John, Well, John, I found out where the Lord Jesus was staying, and I waited till after dark, because I didn't really want to be seen.

After all, I was a Pharisee. I was a theological professor. I knew that many people in the Jewish establishment did not look kindly on Jesus, didn't care for him. But I personally found him very interesting, and I felt that I simply had to speak to him.

[8 : 30] So I slipped down the road, under cover of darkness, and I'd only just got through the door, when he immediately began to speak to me about being born again.

Well, I was astonished. And it must have shown in my face. Because he said to me, Don't be astonished that I said to you, You must be born again, because you must be born again.

It's the one thing you need, Nicodemus. You may be a theological professor, and you may know the Hebrew scriptures backwards, but you must be born again. All right, well, I hope we're getting the feel of the conversation.

And I hope we're beginning to see how insistent Jesus is that Nicodemus should learn about the new birth. Now, over the last two weeks, we've been looking at other things that are new.

We've looked at the new wine and the new temple from chapter 2. Jesus creates the new wine, and Jesus is the new temple. So when Jesus comes into this very Jewish establishment, he is really saying to the Jews, Judaism, as you understand it, needs something else.

[9 : 35] It needs to be fulfilled. It needs what only I can give it. So now we have this third new element, which is the new birth. Well, let's begin with the final two verses of chapter 2, just as a lead-in.

Just look with me there. Chapter 2, verse 24. Jesus, on his part, did not entrust himself to them. These are people who were believing in him. He 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.

Then chapter 3, verse 1. Now there was a man. Do you see the use of the word man at the end of verse 25, and again man in chapter 3, verse 2?

And the Greek word that John uses for man in both those verses is the ordinary word for a human being. The emphasis there is not on maleness, but on humanity.

And if that final verse of chapter 2 is telling us how deeply Jesus understood human beings, then the first verse of chapter 3 is immediately making the point that this man, Nicodemus, must have been also somebody that Jesus knew.

[10 : 49] Jesus was immediately able to see right into his heart. As soon as Nicodemus stepped over the threshold, as soon as he spoke his polite opening lines in verse 2, Jesus knew his heart and he knew what he needed more than anything else.

Now no doubt Nicodemus had other needs as well. He was probably a man of at least 50. He might have had arthritis or eczema or gallstones.

He might have had a troublesome neighbor. He might have had a dog that bit visitors. No doubt he had plenty of needs. But Jesus was not interested in those human needs and problems.

He put his finger immediately on the one great need of this man, and that was his need to be born again. Now what is John showing us in this famous passage?

What is he teaching us? I'd like us to look at the passage under two main headings. First, John is showing us man in the dark.

[11 : 53] If you like, man without God. Man without life. Man without eternal life. Man who is still dead towards God. So man in the dark. Let's look at the way John shows us the helpless predicament that Nicodemus is in without the new birth.

Well, first of all, he comes to Jesus, as verse 2 puts it, by night. Now, of course, that means late in the evening, after dark. But almost certainly, John means us to understand that Nicodemus was benighted.

His understanding of God and of truth was darkened. He couldn't grasp the real nature of God or what it means to belong to God. And you can see how incapable he is of following Jesus' line of thought.

Jesus says to him in verse 3, Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And Nicodemus can only understand him in the most crass earthly terms.

Look at his words in verse 4. Born again? How can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Well, the suggestion is so foolish, if you like, that Jesus doesn't even answer the question.

[13 : 10] What's happening here is that Jesus is speaking God's truth from heaven. But Nicodemus doesn't have a heavenly atom in his makeup. Look across to chapter 3, verse 31, towards the end of the chapter, verse 31.

He who comes from above, from heaven, that's Jesus, is above all. He who is of the earth, someone like Nicodemus, belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way.

So Nicodemus' thoughts and words are earthbound. He's incapable of understanding truth from heaven, at least at this stage. So what happens next?

Well, what happens next is that Jesus, in verses 5, 6, 7, and 8, says quite a bit to Nicodemus about the new birth. And all Nicodemus can say in verse 9 is, How can these things be?

In other words, you're talking double Dutch to me, Rabbi. I simply can't understand what you're saying. My hearing, I'm talking about myself here now, my hearing is not quite as sharp as it could be.

[14 : 19] I can hear things when I really want to, but often it's not quite as good as it should be. Occasionally I find myself at home answering the telephone, and I pick it up and I listen to somebody who's speaking rather rapidly.

And they launch into a few sentences. And these sentences come at my unsuspecting ear. And then there's a pause. And I realize that I'm expected to say something in reply. So I say in my politest and most friendly voice, Would you mind saying all that again at about half speed?

You're talking into a very middle-aged ear here, and I didn't really understand a word. Brothers, have you had that experience, sisters? Some of you have got some gray hairs. Yeah, you have, haven't you?

All right, now you know what I'm talking about. In a sense, this is rather what it's like for Nicodemus. He hears the words, but he can't grasp their meaning. There's nothing wrong with his hearing.

His problem is that he's not born again. He's still earthbound. His thoughts and values are the thoughts and values of the world. He hasn't begun to understand the glory and truth of heaven.

[15 : 26] And yet, Nicodemus has great advantages. The first is that he's clearly an able and intelligent man. You'll see verse 1 tells us that he's a ruler of the Jews.

Now, nobody gets into that kind of position unless he's respected and looked up to by a lot of people. But more than that, he's described by Jesus, you'll see in verse 10, as the teacher of Israel.

Not just a teacher of Israel, but specifically the teacher of Israel. Now, that's not quite like the Archbishop of Canterbury, but it's very much like the professor of theology at the university.

So, can you imagine it? This grizzle-bearded professor slipping furtively along the street late in the evening and knocking at the door of a 30-year-old preacher who speaks with a Galilean accent.

So, Nicodemus has advantages of ability and intelligence and considerable learning. And that's not all. He also seems to be a very nice chap.

[16 : 30] His mother seems to be the sort of mother who's brought him up properly. I guess she boxed his ears when he spoke rudely to his elders and betters. And I say this because of the very courteous way that he speaks to Jesus in verse 2.

He opens the conversation by calling him rabbi, which was a very respectful thing to say. And then he calls him a teacher who's come from God, which doesn't mean that he thinks that Jesus is the son of God, but it certainly means that he thinks that Jesus must have a specially close relationship to God, rather as someone like Moses or Daniel might have had.

And then there's another advantage that Nicodemus had. At least in theory, it should have been an advantage. And that was that he knew the Hebrew scriptures very well, what we call the Old Testament.

And in the heart of the Old Testament prophets, in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, there are some great passages about the coming of the new covenant and the power of the Holy Spirit to wash people clean and give them a new heart.

And those passages really are all about the new birth. Nicodemus must have read those passages hundreds of times. He must have taught them to generations of students sitting in the schools of theology, chewing their pens and taking notes and hanging on his every word.

[17 : 51] And yet, for all these advantages, his senior position in Jewish society, his intelligence, his knowledge of the Bible, and his pleasant, polite character, Jesus tells him here that he has no part in the kingdom of God.

Just look how clearly and simply Jesus puts it. Verse 3, without the new birth, a man cannot see the kingdom of God. Verse 5, without the new birth, a man cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now, it would never have occurred to an educated Jew like Nicodemus that he had no part in the kingdom of God. The Pharisees, and Nicodemus was a Pharisee, they prided themselves that they were in pole position for entry into God's kingdom.

They saw themselves as the favored ones, the children of Abraham, the sons of the covenant. And in human terms, they were all of those things. And yet, Jesus says this extraordinary and shocking thing to this fine, upright Jew, unless you're born again, you can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God.

And if this disciplined Jew, with all his advantages and his Bible learning, is outside the kingdom, what hope is there for outlandish Gentiles like you and me?

[19 : 11] So there's the first thing. This passage shows us man in the dark. In the words of verse 31 in this chapter, this is someone earthly, someone who is earthbound.

His knowledge and understanding are limited by his earthliness. All he knows is the kingdom of this world. He knows nothing about the real kingdom, the kingdom of God. And he cannot enter it unless he is born again.

Well, let's move now to our second section, where we see two necessary things. The first necessary thing is the new birth. So let's see what Jesus says about it.

Let's look together at verse 3. Jesus says, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Now, if you have one of our church Bibles, or if you have the English Standard Version, I think you'll see that there's a little figure one after the word again in verse 3.

And if you follow your eye down the bottom of the page and read the footnote for figure one, you'll see that it says, or from above. The Greek is purposely ambiguous and can mean both again and from above.

[20 : 32] And it's the same you'll see in verse 7. Now, that actually is a very helpful footnote, because it's showing us something to do with when, but also something to do with whence.

Again is a when word. The point being that the new birth is a second birth. It's going to follow our natural human birth sometime some years later.

But the phrase from above is a whence phrase. The point being that the new birth comes to us from heaven. Its origin is not in this world.

And because it comes from above, we're to understand that it comes from God. Now, that's exactly what we read back in chapter 1, verses 12 and 13.

Perhaps you turn back a page to chapter 1, verse 12 with me. Think when and whence. So, verse 12 in chapter 1. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

[21 : 45] Now, those two verses are all about the new birth, and they refer both to the when factor and to the whence factor. So, those who believe in the name of Jesus are given the right to become.

There's the when factor. Once they were not children of God, but at their new birth they became children of God. And then we have the whence factor in verse 13.

This birth is not of blood, not of human bloodlines, or perhaps even the blood of labor and childbirth, nor does it come from the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, which refers to a husband taking his wife in his arms and begetting a child.

It's not that sort of birth, John is saying. This birth is of God. So, the new birth is not a human thing. You and I cannot engineer it or bring it into being.

No amount of effort or screwing up our nerve ends or screwing up our courage can create the new birth in ourselves. It is from God. It is from above.

[22 : 52] So, when a person becomes a Christian, that's what happens at the new birth. It is a glorious act of divine power that does it. So, there's the first thing Jesus teaches Nicodemus about the new birth.

It is from above. It is from God. Now, the second thing is that it happens by water and the spirit. Look with me again at verse 5.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Now, the reference to water there cannot be a reference to Christian baptism.

Christian baptism involves human agency. And as we've just seen, the new birth only comes about by the power of God. This phrase, water and the spirit, is really quite a simple thing to understand.

Jesus is teaching Nicodemus what effect the new birth has upon a person. And the effect is to cleanse that person from the stain of sin.

[23 : 56] That's the idea of water. And to fill that person with new life or spirit or the life breath of God himself. So, really, it's very simple. The new birth washes away sin.

Forgiven. That's what the Christian can say. Forgiven. So, Jesus is not talking there about H₂O water. He's using a symbolic picture. He's talking about the power of God to cleanse our hearts and our very consciences from all the guilt that we have collected over the years.

And then again, as well as this washing, he fills us with the spirit. The word for spirit is the same word as the word for breath. So, as God causes a person to be born again, he puts his own life breath, his own life-giving spirit, into our minds and our personalities.

And we begin to discover, to our amazement and our joy, that we are alive towards God. That's what it means to become a Christian.

We become alive towards God. Before the new birth took place, we were dead towards God. He was as far out of our thinking as Pluto or Saturn.

[25 : 08] We didn't know him. But once we're born again, we're alive to him. And it shows in so many ways. We begin, for example, to pray. We begin to read the Bible with real interest and with real hunger.

We begin to undergo a kind of Copernican revolution. Everything changes. One mark of it is that we begin to like Christians and to seek out their company.

We actually begin to want to come to church. And we begin to be willing to stand up for our faith when we're challenged. We become willing to endure difficulty and even persecution when it comes our way, as it will sooner or later.

So that's what Jesus is talking about here in verse 5. Cleansing and new life. The water to bring cleansing and the spirit to bring new life. So the new birth is, first of all, from above, from God.

Secondly, it comes by water and the spirit. And then thirdly, from verse 8, there is something mysterious and powerful about it.

[26 : 16] Verse 8, the wind. Same word there as spirit. 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. In that verse, Jesus is saying that we're conscious of the effects of the wind.

I mean, the wind that blows around the earth. We know about it in Scotland, don't we? He's saying we're conscious of the effects of wind. We're conscious of its power. You hear its sound. And we can see the effects.

It bends the trees over and the grasses. But despite that, despite the fact that we can see the effects, there's a lot about the wind that we can't understand. He says, you don't know where it comes from or where it goes to.

And that also is so true. Even today, with everything we know about weather forecasting and meteorology. Meteorology. The wind is still something of a mystery to us, isn't it?

[27 : 15] And the forecasters will struggle to give us accurate predictions about it. If you're old enough, you'll remember a day in October 1987, the day before the great hurricane struck the south of England and brought down, I think, two million trees in 24 hours.

And the BBC weather forecasters told the nation that tomorrow will be windy, but nothing too serious. Remember that? Michael Fish was the windcaster, the broadcaster, the forecaster for that day.

Okay, dear Michael Fish, I guess he's never been able to live it down. But he may well take a certain amount of comfort from what Jesus says here in verse 8. Because the point of verse 8 is that man cannot control or understand the wind.

Now, Jesus is saying that's what it's like with the power of God's spirit or God's breath. We can't control him or fully understand him. But we can see the powerful effects that he has upon a person, the change that he brings to a person.

Now, it's pretty clear that Nicodemus was born again at some point soon after this conversation. Because he appears on two other occasions later in John's Gospel.

[28 : 26] First, at the end of chapter 7, where he's prepared to take the side of Jesus against his fellow Pharisees in an argument about Jesus. And then secondly, in chapter 19, where he comes with Joseph of Arimathea to ask Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, for the dead body of Jesus to bury it.

And the two men, Joseph and Nicodemus, lovingly bury the body of Jesus. A Pharisee who has not been born again would never have done such a courageous thing.

A thing which clearly identified him as one of Jesus' people. So the new birth is from above. It's by water of the spirit. It's mysterious and powerful.

Now, here's a question. Do we have to be able to date the new birth when we become Christians? The answer is no. I know that some people here, perhaps quite a number of folk here, could date the new birth in their own experience very precisely.

There are some folk here who could truthfully say, On the 17th of February, in such and such a year, I was born again. That was the day when the Lord took hold of my life and turned it right around.

[29 : 37] Whereas other people would say, and I think I'd include myself in this group, that it happens gradually over a period of months or even years. As I look back on my early life, I know that in my early teens, when I was 13 or 14, I was as dead towards the Lord as a dodo.

But by the time I was 16 or so, I knew that I belonged to him. I can't put my finger on a particular date. But what's important is not the date of our new birth, but the fact of it.

We don't need to know exactly when we were born. The important thing is that we are alive. It can be a little bit like crossing the border between two countries. If you're driving, for example, from Spain into Portugal, everything looks very much the same a few miles either side of the border.

The countryside looks similar. The weather's pretty similar. The people look very similar. But when you've penetrated a little bit further into Portugal, you begin to realize that you really are in a different country.

The language is different. The politics and history and traditions are different. The identity of the people is different. And then you have no doubt that you are in a new country.

[30 : 52] Now, it could be just like that for us with the new birth. At first, everything can seem rather the same. We don't necessarily feel very different. We don't seem to be psychologically very different.

For example, if you're frightened of spiders before you become a Christian, you'll probably find that you're still frightened of spiders afterwards. Life can look very much the same initially.

But after a while, we begin to realize beyond any shadow of a doubt that life is very different. Our values change. We begin to turn aside from the things that we have idolized.

We begin to love the Lord. We begin to love his people. We begin to love the Bible. And let's allow Jesus to make us very clear on one point. And that is that without this new birth, we can't be Christians at all.

I say that because you sometimes hear people say, Well, yes, I'm a Christian as far as I know, but I'm not a born-again Christian. As if being born again means that you're wild or half nutty, or likely to be found swinging from the chandeliers in the church.

[32 : 03] Now, Jesus makes it absolutely clear here that a person is either born again, and thus a member of God's eternal kingdom, or he is not born again, and therefore is not a Christian at all.

Look again at the plain language there in verses 3 and 5. Without the new birth, we have no part in the kingdom of God. We can't even see it, let alone enter it.

So being born again is not a matter of being wild-eyed or silly or noisy. It's a matter of being brought to life in relation to God as he gives us his Holy Spirit, and as the Spirit takes up his residence in our hearts, and begins to redirect the course of our lives.

So there's the first necessary thing. We must be born again. Now, you'll probably be realizing that this raises a tricky question.

If a person is not a Christian, and he knows that he's not a Christian, but he wants to be born again, how is he going to experience the new birth?

[33 : 07] If the new birth is a gift and a blessing from God, which it is, and if it can only be a birth from above, given by God, and cannot be engineered or produced by the will of man, how can the poor, needy human being who wants to be born again be born again?

Now, in a way, that's more or less the question that Nicodemus asks Jesus in verse 9, where he says to him, how can these things be? In other words, you're telling me about this powerful new birth from above, but I confess to being clueless.

Well, let's see how Jesus answers him. First, he gently rebukes him in verse 10, and he says, are you really the great professor of theology, and you don't understand these things?

Unspoken answer, yes, that's the case. Well, says Jesus, let me explain. Verse 11. Now, I'll just try and paraphrase Jesus' words here to bring out their meaning.

So from verse 11, truly, truly, I say to you, you in the singular, this is you Nicodemus as an individual, what I'm talking about and testifying to are things that I know deeply.

[34 : 20] But the problem is that you, and this is you in the plural, meaning you Jews, the problem is that you Jews do not receive and won't accept my true testimony. When I've talked to you Jews about earthly things, about the concerns of this world, you haven't believed me.

So it's not likely you're going to start believing me when I talk to you about heavenly things like the new birth. You Jews are suffering from can't believe syndrome. But listen to me now, Nicodemus.

Verse 13. I speak with authority because I have descended from heaven. Yes, I'm a man. I'm the son of man. But my identity and authority and origin are all in heaven.

So let me tell you now on that authority, verse 14, about why I've come. I have come to be lifted up on a cross in just the way that Moses lifted up that famous bronze snake in the wilderness.

You know your book of Numbers, Nicodemus, in the Old Testament, which describes the story of the snake in the wilderness. Now let me just break off from my paraphrase just for a moment.

[35 : 31] Earlier this evening, I read that story of Moses and the snake from Numbers chapter 21. The point was that the people of Israel at that stage were not trusting the Lord during their wilderness years.

They were complaining to the Lord and to Moses that they had no water and food, or at least no decent food, because all they had was this manna from heaven, which they got fed up with. They wanted a rich and varied menu.

They wanted their curries and paellas and their five fruits a day. And all they had was manna. So their sin was complaining about their lot, complaining that the Lord wasn't looking after them properly.

And as a punishment, the Lord sent poisonous snakes into the camp of the Israelites, and many people were bitten and many died. So the Lord said to Moses, I am going to provide a remedy.

Fashion a model snake out of bronze, and stick this bronze snake high up on a pole, so as to make it visible from a distance. And this bronze snake on the pole is going to be the life-giving remedy.

[36 : 39] Tell the people, if someone's bitten by a snake, look up at the bronze snake on the pole and you will live. And that's exactly what happened. When people were bitten with the deadly poison, they looked up at the bronze snake and they recovered.

It was a look of faith and trust at the figure high up on the pole. They looked up trustingly at that figure and their life was restored. Now do you see how it was the Lord who was punishing the Israelites for their stubborn unbelief, but it was the Lord who provided the remedy and the cure.

Now Nicodemus had known that story ever since he was a little boy, and Jesus knew that Nicodemus knew it, and that's why he refers to it here. So he is saying to Nicodemus in verses 14 and 15, Nicodemus, think Numbers 21.

It was God who in anger sent the punishment, and it was God who in mercy provided the remedy. And the time is very soon coming when I, the son of man, am to be lifted up on a pole.

And just like the bronze snake in the wilderness, I shall prove to be the God-given remedy, which will be the only cure for the God-given punishment that lies across the whole human race.

[38 : 04] And this means, verse 15, that whoever puts his trust in the son of man lifted up on the cross will be healed from his deadly condition and will be given eternal life.

So if the first necessary thing is the new birth, which is only given from above, the second necessary thing is that men and women should believe, should put their trust in the son of man lifted up on the cross, because that is the only way to safety and eternal life.

It's the trusting look at the figure on the cross that brings us eternal life. And let me point out a very important word in verse 15, and that is the word whoever.

That's one of the greatest words in John's gospel. Whoever believes in Christ will have eternal life. Do you see it's there again in verse 16? That whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

And again in verse 18, whoever believes in him is not condemned. So this means that no one is excluded from coming to Christ if they are willing to come and put their trust in him.

[39 : 19] That's important that we realize that no one is excluded. You might be a person who has lived a most unhappy life, full of mess and disorder, and you may feel stained and deeply dirtied by your past, but you're invited by Jesus to come to him.

You might have been an atheist and fiercely antagonistic to Christians, but you're invited to come to Jesus. You might have lived life as a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Buddhist, but that's all the more reason to come to Jesus.

He says whoever believes in him will have eternal life. That's the assurance of verse 15. Therefore, come to him, trust him, let nothing hold you back.

So I think we're, I hope we're beginning to see how these two necessary things, the new birth, and our trusting belief, belong together. Only God can bring about the new birth.

Only God can breathe his Holy Spirit into us and make us alive to him. But as he does this in us, we find that we must take the step of believing, putting our faith in Jesus, staking everything we are and everything we have on him.

[40 : 36] So friends, this is the wonderful way in which the Christian life begins. And if you turn back again to chapter 1, verse 12, you'll see how beautifully John puts together the new birth and our belief.

So chapter 1, verse 12, but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, that's our part, that's our believing, that's what we have to do.

He gave the right to become children of God. That's the new birth coming from him, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

This is how eternal life begins, and eternal life hangs on this. John has written his gospel for this very purpose, that we should leave behind the darkness of death and unbelief and put our trust in the only Savior.

If you've never done that, friends, will you do it? As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever, whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[41 : 50] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. We thank you, Lord Jesus, for your gracious, kind words to Nicodemus.

Thank you for teaching him that he must be born again. And thank you for showing him that he must believe, put his trust in you, the Son of Man lifted up upon a pole, bearing the sins of the world, taking the penalty and punishment of them, that we might be forgiven and set free.

Amen. Have your way, Lord Jesus, in every life and heart that is here tonight, we pray. Have mercy upon us and help us both to love you and to thank you and to trust you.

We ask it for your dear name's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[42 : 59] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.