

You Must Be Born Again

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles and Edward is beginning again a series this morning in John's Gospel and we're going to read together this morning from John chapter 3. John chapter 3, very famous and well-known chapter of the Bible.

I'm going to read the first 16 verses. And after the masterful prologue, the beginning of John's Gospel and the beginning of the story of Jesus as told by John, we come to chapter 3 and Jesus encounters this individual named Nicodemus.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and he 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.

Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, how can a man be born when he's old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

[1 : 23] That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the spirit is spirit. Don't marvel that I said to you, you must be born again.

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sign, 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 don't 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 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.

[2 : 34] For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Amen. May God bless his words. Well, good morning, friends.

Let's turn to John's Gospel, chapter 3. If you have a Bible in front of you, that would be a help. And as Willie said, we're starting a new series in chapter 3 and perhaps going into chapter 4 over these next few weeks.

Now, my title for this morning is this. You must be born again. Look at verse 7.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. Do not marvel at my statement.

[3 : 41] Don't think it's outlandish or weird or impossible or ridiculous. The fact is you must be born again. Why is it so vital to be born again?

Well, look at verse 3. Unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And look at verse 5.

Unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, which means born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. So without being born again, a person cannot see, cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now, we'll get to the details of this passage in just a moment. But I want first to put it into its bigger context. The context of the reason why Jesus came into the world.

Jesus came to the old world. This world. The world we know only too well. The old world that is shot through with decay, violence, and defiance of God.

[4 : 49] The world whose vitality and beauty and happiness have been so undermined by corrupt human behavior. By our rebellion. By our unbelief. This world that is tottering on its very foundations and is ripe for collapse.

But Jesus came to open a doorway into a new world. To be himself the doorway. The means of access into the new world.

And this gospel of John, more than Matthew, Mark, or Luke, is the gospel of the new world. You smell the fragrance of the new world on every page of John's gospel.

In John's gospel, Jesus is the new temple. He is the new Moses. He is the new manna. The bread that satisfies the hunger of the human heart eternally.

He is the resurrection. That is to say, eternal life. To be shared with his people. Is incorporated into his very being. Just turn back a page, if you will, to chapter 1, verse 4.

[5 : 53] And you'll see how John describes Jesus. Chapter 1, verse 4 and 5. In him, in Jesus, was life. And the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness.

And the darkness has not overcome it. And the implication is, cannot overcome it. And John the evangelist, the author of this book, is showing us that Jesus' arrival is the arrival of a new Genesis. Look at the very first verse here. Chapter 1, verse 1. In the beginning. Where have we heard that before? Genesis chapter 1, verse 1. In the beginning of the old world, God created the heavens and the earth.

But John is now telling us, in the beginning also was the word, Jesus, that he was with God. Indeed, he was God. Look at chapter 1, verse 29.

The next day. Verse 35. The next day again. Verse 43. On the next day. Chapter 2, verse 1.

[7 : 02] On the third day. It's Genesis 1. We run. Second day. Third day. Fourth day. Genesis introduces us to the old world's creation.

John's gospel introduces us to the creation of the new world. And the agent of the new creation, the only one who can open access to it, is Jesus Christ.

And he says to Nicodemus, in chapter 3, verse 7, you must be born again. If you are to be part of the kingdom of God, the new birth is indispensable.

Now, why has John the evangelist included this account in his gospel? Because he wants all his readers, his readers way back then and his readers today, to know that if we are to enter the kingdom of God, we must be born again.

Just run your eye over the whole section from verse 1 to verse 15. It's an extraordinary conversation, thoroughly one-sided.

[8 : 08] Nicodemus makes just three very short speeches in verse 2, verse 4, and verse 9. And the rest of it is all the words of Jesus as he teaches Nicodemus about the new birth.

Now, we learn from verse 1 that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and he occupies a senior position. He's a ruler of the Jews. So he's a man of weight in Jewish society, probably well advanced in years.

Because in verse 4, he asks how a man can be born when he is old. That's the question of a gray head, not of a 25-year-old. And not only is he a Pharisee and a ruler, he's also a teacher.

Look at verse 10. Jesus says to him, are you the teacher of Israel, and you don't understand these things? Not just a teacher, but the teacher.

He must have been more or less the professor of theology at Jerusalem University. But although he must have known the Old Testament like the back of his hand, he is, at the most important level, an ignoramus.

[9 : 14] He is the teacher of Israel. But the words of Jesus about the new birth are simply incomprehensible to him. Look at his question in verse 9. How can these things be?

He's like a blind man stumbling about in the dark. He cannot understand what Jesus is saying to him. Now, let's trace this conversation through.

I'll paraphrase it and then make a few comments. It's late in the evening, as verse 2 tells us. It's dark. It's nighttime. Indicating not only that the darkness had fallen on Jerusalem, but that Nicodemus is spiritually in the dark.

Jesus goes to the door. The man says, does the rabbi live here? Yes, he does. And then Nicodemus says, 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. Now, he's on the right track there. He's making connections. He says, we know that you have come from God.

[10:16] Now, look at verse 3. Jesus answered him. Answered him. He hasn't even asked a question. But it's as though his whole attitude is one great question mark.

It's as though he's saying to Jesus, well, who are you? Where are you really from? Do you perhaps bring some new truth that we of the Jewish establishment need to discover?

Well, Jesus cuts straight to the chase in verse 3. He immediately recognizes Nicodemus' need and Nicodemus' darkness. So he says to him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And this remark brings a new layer of fog and mist over Nicodemus' mind. Born again? Mother? Repeat the obstetrics and gynecology process of 60 years ago.

How can that be? No, says Jesus in verse 5. Not that. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

[11:25] It's a matter of spirit, not just ordinary human procreation. It's a different kind of birth altogether. Don't be amazed at my saying, you must be born again.

Now, Nicodemus, let me give you an illustration. Think of the wind blowing in the treetops. Can you see the wind? No. Can you hear the wind? Yes.

It sighs. It roars. It roars. You can't see it. But you see its effects because the treetops rock back and forth. It's mysterious. You don't know whether it's come from Tasmania or Greenland.

You don't know whether it's going to finish up in the Atlantic or the Pacific. But you know it's powerful. And you know it's real. It drives a great ship through the sea. It turns the sails of a windmill.

You don't doubt its power or its reality. And, end of verse 8, it's just like this with everyone who is born again by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

[12:24] The new birth is powerful and life-changing. It's real. Verse 9. You've lost me. I'm doubly in the dark.

How can these things be? Verse 10. Jesus speaks. Is it possible that a man with your qualifications doesn't understand these things?

If the professor of theology is in the dark, all Israel must be in the dark with him. Let me tell you a great truth, Nicodemus. We, that is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we know about these things.

We testify to these things. But you Jews, even learned Jews like you, Nicodemus, don't seem capable of receiving our testimony. How can you come to believe these great truths from heaven? This is the great truth, Nicodemus. I am the Son of Man who has come from heaven. I bring you truth from heaven. But you can come to believe these things.

[13:30] And you can come to believe these things. And that person will be the Son of Man. Because when that happens, whoever believes, whoever believes in the Son of Man will have eternal life.

And that person will know then what it is to be born again. It's a remarkable conversation. As the true teacher instructs the professor who is having to return to primary one in the school of the gospel.

Now we don't meet Nicodemus at all in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But he appears twice again later in John's gospel. His final appearance is in chapter 19.

Where he and Joseph of Arimathea courageously go to Pilate and ask for permission to bury the body of Jesus. That was a very risky thing to do.

And I think it shows clearly that Nicodemus had not remained long in the darkness. Now, here is the question for all of us. Why has John the Evangelist decided to include these paragraphs in his account of the life of Jesus?

[14:39] The answer must be that John wants his readers to grasp clearly the point at which the Christian life begins. The only point at which it can begin.

And that is the new birth. You must be born again. Jesus is teaching, John is teaching, the necessity of the new birth.

Now, it's not always realized just how fundamental this is. You know how in the media, people sometimes refer to a person as a born-again Christian. As if there might be two types of Christian. Born-again Christians and ordinary Christians. But that's not what Jesus is saying here. According to Jesus, and he ought to know, the only kind of person who can enter the kingdom of God is a person who is born again.

The kingdom of God is the glorious realm of eternal salvation. To be unable to enter that kingdom is to be destined for eternal ruin.

[15 : 44] No wonder Jesus says, you must be born again. He has no wish that any of us should perish. How then can you or I tell if we've been born again?

How can we tell if we belong to the kingdom of God? Well, the answer is pretty straightforward. New birth always shows itself in unmistakable signs of new life.

It cannot be concealed. If a person is beginning to want God. To want to know him. To want to serve him. To want to pray.

If a person is beginning to read the Bible with interest. If that person is wanting to be regularly with other Christians. And is unashamed to walk down the street on a Sunday morning with a Bible under his hand.

To come to church. If that person is beginning to ask. How can I be a responsible member of the church? If that person is beginning to see their hobbies and their interest in a different light.

[16 : 48] No longer as things to live for and to die for. If there's a growing sense of thankfulness to the Lord Jesus for his death and his resurrection. If there is a growing and amazed realization that sin really has been forgiven.

Then the new birth is evident. That person is alive to God. But if there is no new birth. Nothing has changed in your life.

You're only interested in the preoccupations of your life in this world. So you may be very interested in the arts or in sport. Or politics or the natural world.

But God is of no more interest to you than a street lamp. Or a pile of gravel at the side of a road. Your heartbeat doesn't quicken at the mention of Jesus' name.

For casual reading. You would rather pick up any book. Than turn to the Bible. It's not difficult to know whether you've been born again. The new birth doesn't change our basic characteristics of personality.

[17 : 55] It won't turn you from an introvert into an extrovert. But over time the raw material of the human heart becomes suffused with the joy of knowing the Lord.

Rather as the countryside in April and May is gradually filled with light and warmth and color. And leaves behind the pinched harshness of the winter. It's a wonderful thing.

To be born again. And Jesus who loves us. Says to all of us. You must. You must be born again. Now here's a question.

Does a person need to know an exact day. Or even hour. When the new birth takes place. No. Not at all. What is important is not when you were born.

But the fact that you're alive. I once had a young pastor from Kenya. Staying with me for a few days. Many years ago. His name was Johnson Moringa. And I remember asking him one morning.

[18 : 55] Moringa. How old are you? And he said to me. I don't know. You see he said. When I was born. The Kenyan government didn't require exact records of births and deaths.

So I just don't know. Well he was about 30. He might have been 26. He could have been 33. But he was alive. That was clear. That was what mattered. It's the same with the new birth.

What's essential. Is not the dating of it. But the fact of it. And it becomes obvious. When a person begins to be alive. To God. So there's the first thing.

John the evangelist. Has included this passage. Because he is teaching us. The absolute necessity. Of the new birth. But secondly. He's teaching us.

The nature. Of the new birth. And he does this. In verse 5 and 6. Jesus answered. Truly truly. I say to you. Unless one is born. Of water.

[19 : 52] And the spirit. He cannot enter. The kingdom of God. That which is born. Of the flesh. Is flesh. And that which is born. Of the spirit. Is spirit. Now these words.

Are perhaps not immediately. Understandable. To people like us. But Nicodemus. An expert. In the Old Testament. Would have readily. Understood them. There's no need.

To turn this up. But there's a passage. In the prophet. Ezekiel. In his 36th chapter. Where God. Is telling Israel. How he is eventually. Going to rescue them. From the ruin. Into which they have fallen.

And he says this. 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. Just notice that phrase. A new heart. And says God. A new spirit. I will put within you. And I will remove.

[20 : 47] 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. Water. To cleanse you. A new heart. A heart full of love. For God. To replace the old. Stony heart.

And a new spirit. Which means breath. The very breath of life. Do you see it? Water. To clean away your sins. So that you're acceptable. To God.

And breath. The breath or wind. Of the Holy Spirit. To bring life. Into your corpses. This is the new birth. Prophesied by Ezekiel.

Some 600 years. Before Jesus came. And although Nicodemus. Expresses his perplexity. In verse 9. He would have thought. All of this through. Subsequently.

[21 : 43] And from his knowledge. Of the Old Testament prophets. He would soon have put. The pieces of the jigsaw together. And he would have understood. That Jesus. Was talking about. This very thing. The new birth.

Indeed. How would John the evangelist. Have known the details. Of this conversation. If Nicodemus. Had not told him. All about it. You can imagine.

John and Nicodemus. Meeting. Years later. And John. Asking Nicodemus. Well how did the Christian life. Begin for you. My brother. Let me tell you. Says Nicodemus. Every word.

That Jesus said. Has been branded. Into my brain. I'm listening. Says John. Reaching for his notepad. And pencil. I'm going to write it all down. Because I think the world.

Will need to know about this. In due course. Well I'm jumping ahead there. Let's get back to. To water. And spirits. And the nature. Of the new birth. Water.

[22 : 38] Symbolizes. Washing. Cleansing. Each one of us. This is the Bible's teaching. Each one of us. Is stained. By our sinful rebellion. Against God.

Stained. So deeply. That we are. Unacceptable. To God. And we cannot. Make ourselves. Acceptable. To him. But if he. Washes away. Our sin.

Which he is willing. To do. Our sin. Is taken away. And we are forgiven. And then think of the spirit. The Bible word. For spirit.

Is pneuma. We get words like. Pneumatic. And pneumonia. From it. Pneuma. And it also means. Wind. Wind. Or breath. God is willing. And able. To breathe into us.

The breath. Of new life. To bring new birth. Like that. It's as though. He tenderly. Stoops down. To a corpse. And breathes. Into the nostrils. Of that corpse. The breath of life.

[23 : 32] And that person. Who was spiritually dead. Lives again. Is born again. And begins. To live. A new life. Now. Let's not. Misunderstand this.

The new birth. Is not. Just about. Becoming. A morally. Better person. It's not. Just about. Becoming. More loving. Or more caring. Or more self-disciplined. No.

The new birth. Is decisive. It decisively. Removes us. From the old. Order. Of sin. And death. And places us. Into the new realm. Of God's family.

Forgiven. And alive. To God. It's what. God gives to us. To enable us. To pass. From spiritual death. To spiritual life. To pass. From the road.

To hell. To the road. To heaven. It's God's. Gift. We can't. Produce it. In ourselves. By any amount. Of moral effort. Now.

[24 : 27] Nicodemus. As we've seen. Is mystified. By Jesus's talk. About water. And wind. And he says so. In verse nine. How can these things be? So Jesus. Reassures him.

And us as well. In verses. Eleven to thirteen. Where he says to him. I am the one. Who has the authority. To say these things. Verse eleven.

Truly. Truly. I say to you. We speak. Of what we know. And bear witness. To what we have seen. Jesus is saying. I'm not some.

Crack-brained enthusiast. Who has appeared. From the back streets. Of Nazareth. Spouting idle nonsense. I speak. With the authority. Of God himself. I know what I'm talking about.

I've seen the truth. Of these things. In the company. Of God the father. I bring you. Truth from heaven. Yes. You Jews. You don't receive. This true testimony. And you seem.

[25 : 21] Unable to believe. These heavenly truths. But. Verse thirteen. I am the son of man. Who has descended. From heaven. Heaven is my home.

My native habitat. To which I ascend. And from which I have. Descended. You can accept. My testimony. Because I speak. The truth. Which I have brought. From my father's home. And my father's heart. So this teaching. Of the new birth. By water. And spirit. It may seem. Impossible. For Nicodemus. To understand. At first hearing. But he came. To understand it later. And John. Has been telling. The world about it. Ever since. Just as he is telling. Us here in church. Today. And is inviting. Us this Sunday morning. To think it over. If you have been born again. And I know many of you have. Rejoice again. At God's mercy to you. You are an object. [26 : 16] Of divine. And undeserved. Mercy. As I am. But what if you have not been. Born again. What if you're sitting here.

Thinking. This is incomprehensible. To me. I'm just like Nicodemus. I'm asking. I'm asking. How can these things be. If that's you. Don't despair.

Because Jesus goes on. In verses 14 and 15. To explain to Nicodemus. A vital truth. Which surely sets him on the road. To eternal life.

And new birth. So let me read these two. Crucially important verses. 14 and 15. 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. Now in verse 14. Jesus is again speaking to Nicodemus.

[27 : 11] The Old Testament expert. Jesus is referring to a strange incident. Recorded in the book of Numbers. Numbers chapter 21. And Nicodemus would have known this story very well.

He'd probably have known it. Since he was a child. Sitting on his mother's knee. Listening to her. Reading the Bible to him. He knew the story backwards. It describes a time. When Moses was leading the Israelites.

Through the wilderness. On their way to the promised land. And that piece of wilderness country. Lying to the east of the Dead Sea. Was as barren.

And inhospitable. And hot. Then as it is today. Not like the lovely rolling hills. Of Perthshire. And Ayrshire. It was very difficult country.

To travel through on foot. And the people. At this stage. Grew weary. And impatient. And they began to complain. They were blaming God. And they were blaming Moses.

[28 : 08] And this is what they said to Moses. Why have you brought us up. Out of Egypt. To die in this wilderness. There's no food. There's no water. And we loathe. This wretched manner.

Which is our daily diet. All grumbling. At heart. Is grumbling against God. Because it's really saying to him. That he. That he is a rotten provider.

And ought to send us better living conditions. Now the Lord. Chastised them. For their grumbling. He sent poisonous snakes. Into the camp of the Israelites.

The snakes were biting the people. And many people were dying. Of snake bite. So the people were terrified. And remorseful. They came to Moses. Moses they said. We've sinned.

We realize it now. In speaking against the Lord. And against you. Please pray to the Lord. And ask him to take these awful snakes away. So Moses prayed.

[29 : 02] But did the Lord remove the snakes. From the camp. No he didn't. But he did provide a remedy. An extraordinary remedy. That no human being.

Would ever have thought up. He said to Moses. Moses make a bronze replica. Of one of these snakes. And mount it up on a long pole. And stand it in the camp.

Set the pole up. And whenever somebody is bitten. All he has to do. Or she has to do. Is to look up at that bronze snake. And they'll recover. Would you ever have dreamed up.

A solution like that. I wouldn't have thought of that. If I'd been dreaming for a hundred years. It's so unexpected. And yet. It worked. Now if I'd been there.

I would have invented. A DIY method. Of snake extermination. I'd have said. Come on. Let's set traps. All around the camp. Or I'd have thought medically. I'd have said.

[29 : 59] Let's apply poultices. That'll stop the poison. Getting up to the heart. I might even have said. Let's vaccinate. Or I might have said. Let's pick up a great club of wood. And rush around the camp. And whack them over the head.

Shouting. It serves you right. You beastly reptile. Take that. Whack. Those would have been DIY methods. Man relying on his own ingenuity.

But God said. No. Not that way. The only cure. Is to accept my solution. To the problem. Look up at the bronze snake.

On the pole. And you will live. Now back to John 3.14. As Moses lifted up the serpent. In the wilderness.

So must the son of man. Be lifted up. On a pole. Why? So that the person who is dying. The person who is. Rightly under the wrath of God.

[30 : 55] The person who is slipping. Into the abyss. May look up at him. And put his trust in him. And have eternal life. Our natural response to God.

Is to invent DIY methods. Of self rescue. For example. I will devote myself. To moral self improvement. I will cultivate. Moral cleanliness.

I will be more serious. More loving to my family. Less greedy with food and drink. I will write to my great aunt. Without asking to be remembered. In her will. I will change my shirt. Every day. Even my socks. I shall become a much better person. How can that possibly. Be the way to heaven. We are condemned.

Jesus is saying. That each one of us. Is like a person. Who has just been bitten. By a cobra. We are under sentence of death. We can't rescue ourselves. We do not have that power.

[31 : 56] But there is a remedy. It is utterly humbling. It brings no credit. To us ourselves. Jesus says. Here is the remedy. It is the only remedy.

Look at me. Strung up on the cross. The pitiful form. Of a man. About to take his last breath.

Remember the snake. In the wilderness. The dying Israelites. Only had to look at that snake.

And they were rescued. All you have to do. Is to look at that figure. Hanging on the cross. And trust him. And lean the weight. Of your confidence. On him.

And you will have eternal life. Now if you are listening to this. And you know. That you have never lent. The weight of your confidence.

On Jesus crucified. Will you do it now. Do it. Do it. While you can. It is the only road. To forgiveness. It is the only road. To the kingdom of God.

[32 : 52] What John is showing us. In this passage. Is the way. In which a person. Like Nicodemus. Or you. Or me. Enters the kingdom of God. There are two aspects.

To it. The first. Shows us. The kind mercy. Of God. God. And the second. Shows us. The trusting response. Of man. Think of the first.

The kind mercy of God. It's that. That brings the new birth. As a gift. To a needy individual. The new birth. Is the gift. Of God.

We cannot. Engineer it. For ourselves. It's a bit like. Human birth. We speak of the mother. Giving birth. To the baby. Well. The baby. Can't give birth.

To itself. It's entirely. Without strength. It is given birth. To. By its mother. And in the same way. We cannot. Give the new birth. To ourselves.

[33 : 47] It's God. Who gives it. To us. And as he gives it. To us. He shows himself. To be our heavenly father. And we become. His true. Child. But.

Jesus. Also. Shows us. The trusting. Response. That we must make. If we're to enter eternal life. And there it is in verse 15. That whoever believes.

In the son of man. Lifted up on the cross. Will have. Eternal life. That's a promise from him. So we're being shown. Two aspects.

Of the same wonderful. The event. The most important thing. That can ever happen. To a human being. On the one hand. God gives the new birth.

And on the other hand. We believe. In Jesus. Crucified. That's how a person. Becomes a Christian. That is the only way. In which anyone.

[34 : 42] Can enter the kingdom of God. And receive eternal life. No wonder. Jesus says to each one of us. You must. Be born. Again.

Let's bow our heads. And we'll pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. For God so loved the world. That he gave his only son. That whoever. Believes in him. Should not perish. But have eternal life.

Have mercy. Upon us dear father. And help us to believe. These wonderful things we pray. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.