

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: 07 November 2018

Preacher: Sam Parkinson

[0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon and a warm welcome to the Tron and to our lunchtime service. If you're new, particularly warm welcome to you. It's great to have you with us. And to all the familiar faces as well, it's good to meet together during the week. Now, we're going to begin with a prayer and then in a few moments I'll read a Bible passage and then speak from that. But let's start by praying. Dear Lord and Father, many of us have come from busy times this morning, distracted times at work or otherwise. And we pray that over the next few minutes, you would focus us and refresh us and strengthen us for not only the afternoon ahead but the week ahead. To see the most important things in life and to live with you wherever we are, at work, at home, with friends. We pray you will speak today through your word, that you will encourage us and build us up. We pray it all in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Well, we're starting a new little series today for the next four weeks and we're going to be thinking as we look at the Gospel of John about what real Christianity is. We're going to the very heart of what our faith is all about. We're going to look at a passage in the Gospel of John which gets right to the heart of Jesus' own message. Right at the beginning of his ministry and it gets to the nub of a problem which is that ever since Jesus first went out preaching, people have misunderstood his message. There have been different ideas of what it is to follow him, what it is to be a Christian. And there is no better way to come back to really examine the main thing, what is Christianity really about, than going back to his own words as he explains it at the start of his ministry. So we're going to look at the Gospel of John, chapter 2, starting at verse 23. And that's on page 887 of the Bibles in front of you. Page 887.

John, chapter 2, starting at verse 23. Now, when he 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. Excuse the technical problems. 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 are a teacher come from God.

Any better? Glad to hear it. Sorry about that. Rabbi, we know 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 is 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. That which is born of the 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.

[4 : 26] 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 born of the Spirit. Now, the Gospel of John was written with a very clear purpose. He tells us in chapter 20 that it was written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. It presents evidence, in other words, that we might believe and through that have life. And after John's introduction, where he talks about who Jesus is, after Jesus's first miracle, his first great act, we come to this passage, which is the very first time we hear him teach for an extended time. We really get to hear what his message is.

And we see, as I've said, that he's dealing with a misunderstanding. Because there were, verse 23, lots of people who saw his miracles, his signs, there were lots of people who were amazed, and they believed. But it says Jesus didn't entrust himself to them, because he knew what kind of belief they had. He knew, in other words, that as the rest of the story will tell us, it was a very superficial sort of belief. It didn't result in any transformation that, on the contrary, it was something they could pick up or drop, depending on the day of the week and the convenience it had for them. And one of these people, one of these people who has believed him, one of these people who has seen these miracles comes to him in the night, Nicodemus. And he's not just anyone. If you see in verse 1, he's a Pharisee, he's a ruler of the Jews. Which meant, of course, that, among other things, he was someone committed to believing and obeying his Bible. As a ruler of the Jews, he's someone who's risen as high as anyone could at that time under Roman rule. He was a respected authority.

In verse 10, Jesus even calls him the teacher of Israel. So he's a famous, capable religious teacher. He's an archbishop or a chief rabbi, that sort of person. And he comes at night, you know, he's probably a little reluctant to be seen with Jesus. Maybe he's reluctant for a great teacher like himself to be seen asking questions of an uneducated peasant like Jesus. But he comes and he says, Rabbi, teacher, 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. And that seems, doesn't it, like a pretty good start. You know, it's perhaps a little bit patronizing. You know, we know, don't we, that you are.

But he has seen the miracles. And he knows Jesus is from God. And he knows he has to listen to him. So we have a religious, moral man who knows his Bible and knows Jesus is a teacher come from God, who has come to listen to him and who takes him very seriously.

And we get to see how Jesus reacts to that sort of person. And he is very, very clear in his response. And then in the process, he takes us right to the heart of our faith.

[7 : 38] I want to look at this in three short sections. In verses three to four, Jesus will tell us that we must be born again. In five to six, he tells us what it means to be born again. And in seven to eight, he tells us how to know if we have been born again. So in three to four, first of all, he tells us that we must be born again. He doesn't mess about, does he? He doesn't do much small talk on this occasion. And I think that's a sign of respect, isn't it? Nicodemus has shown he's serious.

He really wants to know the truth. He doesn't come for a bunch of pretty religious stories. He hasn't come just for a pat on the back. He's come because he wants to get to the heart of things. And so Jesus says, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And of course, the kingdom of God is exactly what Nicodemus, like every good Jew at the time, was looking forward to and hoping for. It was the point of their religion. They were looking forward to the day when God's rule was established, when the sin and enmity to God was wiped out, and when his people could live in peace under the rule of God's king, the Messiah. And he thought, perhaps as a good Jew, he would have a good front row seat, no doubt as to whether he'd be there or not. But Jesus says, there is something that has to happen, Nicodemus. There is something that has to happen to you, to every single person who wants to be there.

Everyone who wants to be part of God's remade world, everyone who wants life everlasting, whether that person is a drug addict in the gutter or a respected religious authority like Nicodemus, there is something that must happen to each and every one of us if we are to see the kingdom of God.

And Jesus says, listen, listen to me. That's what truly, truly means. Unless you are born again, Nicodemus, you will not see the kingdom of God. You must be born again. And the same is true for us.

[9 : 47] There is no other way. There's no other method and no other hope. Unless we are born again, we cannot see the kingdom of God. And so for Jesus, right at the heart of his message, this first great statement of his is that there is an absolute must if we are to come to him, if we are to be Christians, if we are to come to his kingdom. And it doesn't matter how moral we are, how religious, how decent we are, how much we love our families, or how good we are as neighbors and citizens. Unless we are born again, we cannot see the kingdom of God. Now, when we say that, we have to be careful, don't we? Because there's all sorts of fluff and nonsense that surrounded that phrase, born again, in our culture. It often means nothing more than turning over a new leaf.

Or perhaps it means be a sort of narrow, cultish, emotional, loony fringe of Christianity. But of course, it means nothing of the sort. This is the fundamental of every denomination of Christianity from the start. It does mean a radical new start, but it means more than the radical start that any of us can give ourselves. So let's put ourselves back in Nicodemus' shoes a moment.

He's never heard the phrase before. What does it mean to him? And you'll see he asks a rather dismissive question in response. I suspect he knew Jesus was talking about something spiritual.

But because he doesn't know what that is, he just asks his rather dismissive question, how can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? And so Jesus goes on in 5 and 6 to tell him to explain what it is to be born again.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh. That which is born of Spirit is Spirit.

[11 : 50] Now, acres of trees have been cut down to write books and exactly what these words mean. But really, to someone like Nicodemus, who knew their Bible, knew their Old Testament, it was actually quite clear.

And that's why in verse 10, Jesus will say to Nicodemus, are you the teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things? In other words, this is basic stuff. This is basic Old Testament Christianity that Jesus is telling him about. Because Jesus' words refer very clearly to the Old Testament, to many passages all through the whole of it. To passages that refer on the one hand for our need to be washed clean as with water, washed clean of our guilt and our sin, and on the other hand, to have our hearts changed from within so that we love what is good, love what God loves, instead of living for ourselves. Now, the clearest of all those passages is Ezekiel 36, 25 to 27. You may want to turn to it. It's page 724. 724. Ezekiel 36, 25.

724. Ezekiel 36, 25.

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. You shall be my people, and I will be your God. Now, just like Jesus' words, that ancient promise has two halves, doesn't it? Firstly, that we might be washed by God from our sin and our guilt.

[13 : 58] And secondly, that we might be given new hearts, new spirits. In other words, be changed from the inside so that we can live for him. And that is what being born again involves. So looking at each of those promises in turn, first of all, Jesus says, you must be born of water.

And Ezekiel says, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. They are saying, just as the Bible says over and over again, that whoever we are, mass murderer or upstanding citizen, our souls are marked by our guilt. And God is not a God who accepts the guilty.

He is a God who punishes the guilty. He is a God who will not permit evil in his new world, his kingdom. He hates evil. He hates selfishness. He hates pride. He hates arrogance. He hates all these things.

And so turning over a new leaf, making a new start, making a decent life in the years ahead is not enough because that guilt is still with us. We are stained by that guilt forever.

Now, have we been grumpy without justification this morning at work? Have we told a few white lies? Or something worse? But Jesus says here that there is hope. There is hope in being born of water. There is hope of being washed by God's Spirit, by his power. If he cleans away our guilt, then we really will be clean. Just as when we clean mud away with water. That, of course, is what Christian baptism has always symbolized and looked to. It marks the way that God washes a Christian clean by the power of his Spirit.

[15 : 49] God makes us clean. He gives us a true new start, reborn, born of water. And at the same time, because that is not quite enough, he transforms us from the inside as well. Because our hearts are wrong.

We are selfish by nature. And so if we're to enter the kingdom of God, we need to be born of the Spirit as well. And Ezekiel explains that too. God will give us a new heart and put a new spirit within us.

He will take away our hard, stony hearts, you know, insensitive to God, insensitive to those around us, and give us hearts of flesh that can feel again. I will put my Spirit within you, and I will cause you to walk in God's ways and obey his laws. The things you could never do before. You could never quite live the life God called you to. But now he reshapes you from the inside so you can begin to learn to do that. We need another kind of life, don't we? Not just the fleshy life we were born with.

Because to see God's kingdom, we need to be spiritually alive. Verse 6, we need to be born of the Spirit, just as we've already been born of flesh. And all this fits with what John has already said about Jesus. John the Baptist said that Jesus would come and baptize with the Spirit.

He would come and bring the Spirit of God with power to change us. Not just to give us a new start, but to make us utterly new people. And Jesus is saying, unless this happens to you, unless I make you a new person through the Holy Spirit of God, you will not enter the kingdom of God.

[17 : 36] God. You cannot. And so it's so important that we see Christianity is no mere set of beliefs, not a way of behaving. It's not a philosophy or an idea. It may include these things, but at its heart, it is a miracle, a miracle of God in our hearts. And because of that, and only because of that, it is the best news that could ever be. Because if it's just people like Nicodemus who get in because they're better than the rest of us, then there are some of us with no hope at all. But if God can remake us, absolutely. If God is willing to work a miracle in your heart and mine, if God is willing to give a new start and wipe away every single stain of guilt and set us on a new path we could have never reached by ourselves, then there is a hope for everyone and anyone.

And that has us asking the question, how do we know if that is us? How do we know if we have been born again? In verses seven and eight, Jesus is really answering the question, what does it look like to be born again? And he does that by explaining, first of all, what God's spirit is like, and then what it's like for someone who has the spirit of God working in them, what that makes them like. And he uses a little metaphor, he says this, the wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. And that's true, isn't it? You walk outside the door in a few moments, you feel the damp Glasgow wind blowing down your collar, you don't know where it's been. You know, it's come down a few streets and beyond that it's come across the hills and beyond that the oceans and the seas and the mountains and the continents and you haven't a clue and I haven't a clue where it's been. One commentary I read very helpfully said that this isn't really true anymore because our knowledge of wind movements in this has vastly increased in these modern times, but in those times the wind was unpredictable, which tells me that some people spend too much time in their studies.

I've never actually looked at the weather forecast and then gone outside to see if it was, you know, the same in any way. You and I, we go outside, we haven't a clue where the wind comes from and where it goes.

Now if you look at verse 8, you'll see there's a little note down to the bottom of the page and it says this, that the word for wind in Greek is the same word as the word for spirit. So Jesus is talking about the wind and he's talking about God's spirit at the same time.

And what he's saying is this, you can't explain God's spirit and its power. You can't predict it. You can't control it. You can't control him because he is a power of his own.

[20 : 36] Now you may be able to see the trees bend when the wind blows. In the same way you can see lives change when the Holy Spirit blows in them, when he is at work.

And so it is, he says, with everyone who is born of the spirit. When there is a change that is inexplicable by normal human terms, then we can see that God is at work.

I think of a guy in my last church, very, very just ordinary guy. He worked hard, liked doing triathlons.

Maybe not that ordinary then, but otherwise fairly down to earth. Just the kind of regular bloke you'd meet in any pub. And one of the things about being an ordinary bloke is that you are completely and utterly uninterested in religion.

He was uninterested in religion, in books, in everything to do with Christianity. He'd never shown any interest whatsoever. And the mark of him becoming a Christian was that an interest and a hunger to be with God's people, to read the Bible, to pray, came into this person who had never expressed the slightest thought of ever being interested in these things.

[21 : 53] It wasn't in his nature. It was something inexplicable caused by a power from outside of him. Very different from just getting a new hobby or a new interest.

Now, of course, it's not necessary for any of us to be able to point to a moment necessarily where God gave us a new birth, a new change, a new heart. But if we are Christians, if we have been born again, there will be a difference all the same.

If you become a Christian as an adult, it is often very obvious, very clear. But for someone like me, who's been a Christian since they were a child, I can't point to that moment.

But nonetheless, in our lives, there will be things, if we look closely, if we are born again, that if we think about them, don't quite make sense if we were just left to ourselves.

There are things we love, things we do, things we spend our time, our money, our care on. It would make no sense at all if we were just living for this world. But needed God's power at work in our hearts to make them happen.

[22 : 59] It's often hard to see that change in ourselves, isn't it? But others often see it in us when we cannot see it for ourselves. But God works a real change, a real transformation, even if it is slow to come out in each and a particular ones of us.

Now, as we come to close, Jesus' message here is utterly clear, isn't it? No human being on this planet has any hope at all of being in God's kingdom, unless God himself performs a miracle in them.

I want to speak first to the Christians here. This is what has happened to you if you're a real Christian. And while there is a danger for all of us in our Christian lives of returning to the false and indeed mad idea that we are better than others, or that we earned our place in God's kingdom, or that there are people out there not as worthy as me, all of which is utter nonsense, this truth reminds us of the reality.

If we are Christians, we are Christians for one reason only. He has reached into our hearts and grasped us in a way we could never do ourselves.

He has washed us. He has transformed us. He has remade us. And even if we cannot see right now the final result of what that will be like, He is at work in ways we could never do.

[24 : 28] He has done that with you. Cleaned off the filth you couldn't shift. Given you the new start you could never make. And planted in you a seed of imperishable life that will never die.

You will see His kingdom. Because He has made you and is making you ready for it. If, on the other hand, you are not a Christian today, then what this passage means for you is equally clear.

There is no hope at all. Not one jot of hope of you seeing the kingdom of God, of seeing life, if you build that hope on your own record, your own character, your own religion, your own morals, on anything at all in yourself.

Even if you are as good a man as Nicodemus was. You have, and we all have, no hope, if that is our hope. But, we do have hope if He transforms us from the inside out.

So if we come to Him to be given a new beginning, to be washed by the water of His Spirit, to be given new life by His power, if that Spirit himself comes to work in us, then we have hope we cannot lose.

[25 : 49] So as you sit here, ask Him. Ask Him to remake you. Admit that powerlessness that you cannot get there by yourself. Cannot do it on your own.

That you need a new start. That you need a new life. Ask the one who gives the Spirit, Jesus himself, to perform this miracle in your heart.

Because at its heart, Christianity is not merely about morals or beliefs. It starts with that miracle. And if Jesus has come to give us that, then each of us, whoever we are, can come to Him, certain that He will make possible what we cannot make possible.

He will make it possible for us to enter His kingdom. Now let's end with a prayer. Dear Lord and God, we pray that every person in this room might experience the power of your Spirit, giving them new life.

And that all of us might see one another again in your kingdom when you come again. We pray that those of us who are Christians, for whom you have done this, would be full of joy at the thought of what you have done in our lives.

[27 : 21] What we could not do, can never do, and yet you have done. Help us to trust in you to do everything. Amen.