

Sermon outline and notes:

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## John 3:1-8 (read 2:23-3:8) “You Must Be Born Again”

Intro. I’m sure most in my audience are familiar with the term “born again Christian.” When Jimmy Carter ran for President, just about the whole nation heard that phrase, for he said he was a “born again” believer. At about the same time Chuck Colson wrote a best-selling book entitled, *Born Again*. But do you really know what it means to be born again? I seriously doubt that the average American has a clear, biblical understanding of what it means to be born again. Even the average church member does not know what it means to be born again, because this truth is not taught in many churches. Nicodemus certainly did not understand, as you can see from his replies in vv. 4 & 9. So I want to make sure that each one of you has the opportunity to understand a topic that Jesus Himself considered so important. He said in the last of v.3, “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Your eternal destiny is at stake here!

The key to understanding this text is what Jesus said in v.12, “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” You see, Jesus is using analogy here. That is when you explain something that is unfamiliar or abstract or spiritual by using a corresponding earthly reality that is familiar. Here in John 3 Jesus is explaining a spiritual truth by using the analogy of physical birth. In just a minute I am going to show you the absolute importance of the new birth, and then explain what you need to know about the new birth. I hope that no one will leave this building today without an assurance that they have been born again.

But before we get into the main part of my message, let me give you some background concerning Nicodemus. He evidently was one of those mentioned in 2:23 who had, in a sense, believed in Jesus because of the miracles He did. For he says in the last of v.2 of my text, “for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” He believed that Jesus was a prophet sent from God. Also, based on Jesus’ references to the Kingdom, he probably was hoping that Jesus was the Messiah, or at least the forerunner of the Messiah, and that the Kingdom of God was soon to come, as promised in the prophecies of the Old Testament (Isa. 9:1-7; 42:1-9; 49:1-26; Zech. 9:9-10). He wanted to learn more about Jesus, and get some answers from this gifted teacher about the coming Kingdom of God.

Now vv.24 and 25 of chapter 2 indicate that Jesus knew all men. He looked beyond the surface issues, and He could see what was in Nicodemus’ heart and mind. Jesus knew what Nicodemus really needed even before he asks anything. And what was it that he needed? He needed more than even the strictest religious observance of the Pharisees could give him. Before Nicodemus could ask his first question, Jesus told him he needed to be born again.

So with that background into our text, consider with me why it is so important that you be born again. Note with me first of all:

## I. THE NECESSITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

The importance of this subject is seen in the fact that Jesus introduces it in vv.3 & 5 with “most assuredly,” or “verily, verily” (KJV) which means, “Truly, truly.”<sup>1</sup> This expression is employed by Christ only when He was about to mention a truth that is very important. My point is this: the new birth is so important because of its absolute necessity. Jesus clearly said in v.7, “You must be born again.” The new birth is not optional. It is not a suggestion. It is an absolute necessity! He says in v.3, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” He says in v.5 that apart from the new birth you “cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Like most Jews, Nicodemus was looking for the Messiah, who would usher in God’s Kingdom. Yet Christ clearly says that he and others cannot see or enter into the kingdom of God apart from the new birth.

Jesus makes it clear that *everyone* must be born again. No one is exempt. Jesus said in v.3, “...unless one (*tis*) is born again, he cannot [not able] see the kingdom of God.” Also in v.7 He says, “You must be born again.” Here, the “you” is plural.<sup>2</sup> Christ is not just addressing Nicodemus, but the rest of the Jews, and really all of us.

Why is the new birth necessary? It is because we all have sinned, as Romans 3:23 says, and we have all sinned because we all are sinners by nature. Jesus said in v.6, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh....” When we are born of flesh we not only inherit our physical DNA, but we inherit our parents’ spiritual nature, which is sinful. We must be born again because Paul said in Rom. 8:8, “...they that are in the flesh cannot please God.” The main problem is not that man is ignorant and needs instruction: it is not that he is feeble and needs invigorating: it is not that he is sickly and needs doctoring. His case is far, far worse. Paul said in Eph. 2:1 that we are dead in trespasses and sin. In Eph. 2:3 he says we are “by nature children of wrath.” We are born of flesh, and not of the Spirit when we come into this world. Our sin nature is manifest at a very early age. Our sin makes us totally unfit for heaven. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. So what the natural man needs above everything else is life, divine life.

So the new birth is required to enter God’s eternal Kingdom. Otherwise, you will be cast out. Jesus said something similar in Mt. 18:3, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” As birth is the gateway to natural life, so is the new birth the gateway to eternal life. We all must have a spiritual birth if we are going to enter into a holy, spiritual kingdom.

I hope you have been convinced by the Word of God and the Holy Spirit of the absolutely necessity of the new birth. Now, let’s move on from the necessity of the new birth to:

## II. THE NATURE OF THE NEW BIRTH

Once you realize the necessity of the new birth, the next step is to understand what it means to be born again. I’m so glad that Jesus used the figure of a birth because that’s something we all should be able to understand. We’ve all been born. Did anybody get here any other way? Did you just magically appear on earth when a stork delivered you to your parents? I don’t think so! We were all born, and so Jesus took something that was absolutely common to human beings,

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<sup>1</sup> This double *amen* is only found in the gospel of John for a total of 25 times! A single *amen* is found in the other gospels to introduce an important statement (Mt. 5:18, 26, etc.). Evidently John brought out a pattern of speaking that was not brought out by the other gospels.

<sup>2</sup> Nicodemus used the plural in v.2, “we know....”

something that we could all understand, and He used that analogy to teach us a great spiritual truth. And so, I want us to learn what it is to be born again. But first, let me share:

A. What the New Birth Is Not – It is:

1. Not Moral Reformation - Tell the average person that he must be born again and he thinks you mean that he must reform, mend his ways, turn over a new leaf in life. Nicodemus had already epitomized man's effort to reform and conform to God's Law. Yet that was not enough. The problem is moral reformation concerns only the outer life. And the trouble with man is within. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." God does not intend to change the flesh. God has no program to *improve* our old nature, or develop it. We can't be saved by our own efforts at moral reformation. Titus 3:5 says, "not by works of righteousness which we have done...." How then are we saved? He goes on to say, "according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration [new birth] and renewing of the Holy Spirit."

I could illustrate this by asking a boy to come up on the platform, stand up and put his hands under his shoes and see if he can lift himself off the floor. Of course he couldn't do it. Now, I can lift him, but he couldn't lift himself off the floor and no person by self-effort can lift himself into the kingdom of God. He can only be born into that kingdom.

2. Not Becoming Religious – If religion could save you, Nicodemus would have already been saved. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, the group that was the most religious and zealous about the Mosaic law and the Rabbinical religious traditions. Yet Jesus said in Mt. 5:20, "except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Now listen to me: You don't become a Christian by acting like a Christian, just as you don't become a dog by acting like one. Some of you could put on a good act, and bark just like a dog, walk on all fours like a dog, and even eat dog food, but that would not make you a dog. The only way to be a dog is to be born a dog. Then you will do the things that a dog does naturally.

Even so, you are not born again by acting religious. Some do a pretty good job of *acting* like Christians, but that doesn't *make* them Christians. You can go to church all your life, give a tithe of your income faithfully, be baptized, say prayers, take communion every time, but that doesn't make you a Christian any more than living in a garage would turn you into a car. To become a Christian, you must first be born again! You must be spiritually born a Christian.

B. What the New Birth Is:

1. It Is a Creation of God – The new birth is nothing less than a miracle of God! The word translated "again" in v.3 is translated "from above" everywhere else in John's gospel. How fitting that is, for our spiritual birth must come from above, i.e. from God. Paul said in 2 Cor. 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." Salvation begins with the creation of spiritual life within us. Galatians 6:15 says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation." Only God can create new life within you. Man cannot do this. That is why man cannot save himself. It is the work of God. It is something that we must trust God to do. But how different that was to Nicodemus. All his life he had been taught that salvation is of works. But when Christ shouted on Calvary, "It is finished," He meant what He said. All that men have to do now is just to accept the work of Jesus on their behalf.

Thus we see that since humanity is broken beyond all repair, God's work in the world is not a question of fixing what's wrong, but rebuilding the whole as a new creation. Even our bodies will be made new some day!

2. We Partake of God's Nature - When I was born the first time I received from my parents their nature. It is in my DNA. Even so, when I was born again at the age of 12, I received from God His nature. The Spirit of God begets within us a spiritual nature. 2 Pet. 1:4 says, "We are partakers of the divine nature." Now, if that nature doesn't dwell in you, you've never been born again. So many people who sit on church pews on Sunday morning have never become a partaker of the divine nature. They've gone through ritual, they have their name on the church roll, but they've never been born again.

How can you know if you've been born again? Well, here we have a clue. Look for the signs of having the divine nature. What then are the attributes of God's nature within us? First of all, God is holy. He says, "Be holy, for I am holy." Do you want to live a holy life? Do you want to live right? I'll tell you another mark of divine nature. You're going to love the Lord Jesus Christ and you're going to love God's people. I'll tell you something else. When you're a partaker of the divine nature, you're going to love the Bible, the Word of God. The Bible says in 1 Peter 2:2, "As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word that we may grow thereby." Just as a baby naturally longs for milk, even so the born again child of God longs for God's Word. Yet there are some people who rarely read this Bible because they have no desire to. They have no love for the Word of God. In fact, according to a recent survey, nearly 25% of persons who call themselves born-again Christians never read the Bible [Illus. #C-93]. But listen, if you are born again, you're going to love God's Word. So do you have the evidences of the new birth in your life?

Now that you understand the necessity of the new birth, and the nature of the new birth, I hope that some in my audience realize that you need to be born again. But how? In v.9 Nicodemus asks, "How can these things be?" Well let's see last of all:

### III. THE PROCESS OF THE NEW BIRTH

Though in some sense the new birth is mysterious, we are told a few things about the process of the new birth. But before we get into that, think about what is necessary for physical conception & birth to take place. The seed of man and the egg of the woman must come together in order for conception to take place. Then the baby grows inside the womb and then a birth takes place. Even so, there are at least two essential elements that are necessary for the new birth to take place:

A. The Word of God Must Be Received – Jesus said in v.5, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." New Testament scholars cannot seem to agree on the meaning of "water" here in v.5. Some say it is a reference to water baptism. If so, it would really be a reference to John's baptism of repentance, with the emphasis being on repentance. But baptism is a work and we're not saved by works. The Bible says it's not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us (Titus 3:5). And don't you ever let anybody tell you that you are born again by being baptized. Some say it is a reference to physical birth that is associated with the water of amniotic fluid. If so, then v.6 would parallel v.5, yet I consider it unlikely.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Jesus is making a reference to the Old

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<sup>3</sup> The chief problem here is that this culture did not refer to natural birth as birth "by water."

Testament prophecies that speak of a time when God will pour out His Spirit (Isa. 32:15-20; Joel 2:28) like water in the end times, resulting in cleansing of sin and a new heart within.<sup>4</sup>

Yet I and many others believe that the water here is symbolic for the Word of God. Several other times in the gospel of John, "water" is used symbolically (Jn. 4:14; 7:37-38). Nicodemus was very familiar with the fact that water was used in the temple for ritual cleansing. Titus 3:5 refers to the "washing of regeneration." Yet there are several times where water is linked to the Word of God. Eph. 5:26 speaks of the water of the Word cleansing us in salvation. In John 15:3 & 17:17 Jesus speaks of the Word of God sanctifying us and cleansing us. Other Scripture show a connection between the Word of God and the new birth. Jas. 1:18 says, "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth...." Finally, 1 Pet. 1:23 says, "having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever." And so the Word of God is like a seed that is planted in a heart. If a person receives it, and believes it, new life can result.

Now there are two primary applications from this point. First, it is essential that you expose your heart and mind to the Word of God. Read it. Come to church and hear it taught and preached. Secondly, we must share the Word of God with others through personal witnessing, giving out gospel tracts and Bibles, and through preaching & teaching. But not only do we need to share the Word of God in order for people to be born again, but there also must be:

C. Wade Freeman told of a fellow preacher who was conducting a series of meetings in an east Texas oil field. He was guest in a church member's home. One day he saw a "pumper" crossing the field in back of the house. He inquired of his host as to the man's relation with God. Information revealed that he was not a Christian. The minister stepped outside, hailed the oil field worker, introduced himself, and expressed an interest in the man's salvation. The unsaved man expressed anger and started away, but the minister, with New Testament in hand, followed closely and read such passages as "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Finally he spoke the parting words, "Remember, I am praying for you." Three nights later the old pumper was in the congregation. When the evangelist gave the invitation, he was the first to respond. His statement was, "Preacher, I couldn't get away from the words you read. They were with me day and night, and here I am to trust Jesus as Savior."

B. The Spirit Must Work – Again, Jesus said in v.5, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Then Jesus said in v.8, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." In Jn. 6:63 Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing." He uses the Word of God to convict us and enlighten us, but the new life comes from the life-giving Spirit of God! So when the Spirit of God and the Word

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 44:3 says, "For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, And floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, And My blessing on your offspring." Ezekiel 36:25-27 says, "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them." No wonder Jesus said in John 3:10, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

of God come together in a person's heart, and when that person responds with repentance and faith, a spiritual conception takes place that results in the new birth.

Here the Lord makes another analogy, in this case between the wind and the Spirit. That is not surprising because same the Hebrew and Greek words refer to both. Perhaps at the time of their conversation, a gentle wind was felt. Of course one obvious comparison is that both are invisible, but real. I know you can't see the Holy Spirit, but don't say He is not real. You can't see the wind but you sure can see the effects of the wind. So it is with the Spirit. I can't tell you exactly how the Spirit of God operates, but I can surely tell when He is moving in the lives and hearts of His people. I know He is real because I know of His work in my life! I have seen what He has done in the lives of others. People's lives have been dramatically changed by the work of the Holy Spirit and the new birth experience. And so the wind is a fitting illustration to help us understand the workings of the Spirit better. So note with me the following truth about the Spirit that I see in v.8:

1. His Work Is Sovereign - Note in v.8 that the wind blows where it "wishes." It is an element altogether beyond man's control. The wind neither consults man's pleasure, nor can it be regulated by his devices. So it is with the Spirit. We cannot manipulate Him. We cannot choose our own timetable for Him to create this divine life within us. If the Spirit is working in your heart today, let Him complete His initial work by allowing Him to give you new life.

When can you fly a kite? You do not fly a kite just any time you want to. You do it when the wind is right, usually in the spring. Even so, you will not be saved just any time you want to. You must be saved when the Spirit of God is convicting you of sin, and your need of Jesus.

So don't put off salvation, thinking that you can be saved just any time *you* want. You need to be saved when the Spirit is at work. There have been too many who have postponed salvation, who at the end of their life and found that they just cannot seem to trust Christ. There are really very few deathbed conversions.

2. His Work Is Strong – Wind can be a strong force. So it is with the Spirit. God changes humanity by His powerful Spirit, who convicts of sin, enables us to believe, overwhelms our resistance, and then transforms us. Brothers and sisters, if we will pray and seek the work of the Lord in our midst, the Spirit can powerfully work to overcome man's prejudices and subdue his initial resistance to being saved.

Now I want to apply this to Christians here today. Do you want to see more folks saved through the ministry of this church? Well, let me tell you what it will take. As I have already mentioned, we must get the Word of God into the hearts of more unsaved people. We must also pray for the Holy Spirit to work in and through us. Furthermore, we must not do anything to hinder the Holy Spirit from working powerfully in our midst! We must not grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), or quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Unconfessed sin and unbelief will hinder the Spirit. Prayer, confession, and faith will release the power of the Spirit.

Dr. David Jeremiah told the story of a church that was divided over whether they should have a piano. Half the church wanted it, and the other half did not. One day they showed up for church, and lo and behold, there was the piano! Needless to say the half that didn't want the piano got upset. The next week people showed up for church and the piano was gone! Now the other group was upset. They looked for it, but could not find it. Finally, someone found it 6 months later. It was in the baptistery! What does that tell you? No one was being saved by the Spirit of God while they were arguing over a piano!

Conclusion: We have seen that it is absolutely essential that you experience the new birth. Have you been born again? If you have, there should be some evidence in your life of the Spirit's

presence. If you're not sure that you have, let me share with you what you must do to be born again. We have clearly seen that the new birth is the work of God, not man. It is not the result of your good works or attempts at moral reformation. Now if you will turn back to Jn. 1:12-13 we will see what you must, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." V.13 refers to the new birth, and v.12 describes what we must do to be born again. You receive Christ by believing in His name. I'm not talking about just an intellectual faith. I'm talking about trusting in Jesus, whose name means "The Lord Saves," to obtain a new life that is eternal, based on His sacrificial death on the cross.

Did Nicodemus ever become born again? He spoke up for Jesus on one occasion (John 7:50) and helped to bury His body (John 19:39), but we have no record that he every truly became a disciple of Jesus Christ. He is not mentioned in the book of Acts. I'm afraid he never stopped trusting in his religious accomplishments. He represents many who are religious, even interest in what Jesus had to say, but never truly repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

So again, let me ask you, has there been a time in your life when you heard the gospel about Christ dying for you, and rising from the dead. Has the Holy Spirit ever convicted you of your sin? Have you truly trusted in Christ as your Lord and Savior? Has there been a change in your life that can be likened to a new birth? Do you have the love of God in your heart for God's people (I Jn. 3:14)? Are you growing in righteous living (I Jn. 2:29)? If not, obey the command of Jesus. Let His Spirit create in you new life and be born again. Trust in Him now!

Sources: Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); C. Wade Freeman, *New Life for You* (No Publisher or Date), [25G.39]; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); Herschel H. Hobbs *John: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); D.L Moody (his sermon on this text); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); Dr. Adrian Rogers (notes from his sermon on this text dated 12/13/92); Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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