

“The New Birth”
(John 3:1-8)

Introduction: The new birth, or regeneration, is the greatest blessing which is bestowed on anyone by God. It is that which brings with it all the blessed fruits of the Spirit’s work, causing there to be faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ and repentance from sin. And of course with these comes forgiveness, justification, adoption, and its final result, glorification. It is that act of the Spirit of God in making us alive from the dead, in giving to us the life of Christ. Without the new birth, one is forever lost. But the one who has received it will never be lost. It is a precious blessing indeed. And this blessing, and the way in which it comes to us, is what I want us to reflect on this morning.

Our text is one of the most familiar in the Bible, the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. In it, Nicodemus comes to Jesus, seeking something from Him. What it is, we are not told. Nicodemus, as a matter of fact, never even asks Jesus a question. But what Jesus tells him plainly reveals to us what was on Nicodemus’s mind and that of our Savior’s, entrance into God’s eternal kingdom. What Jesus tells us in this passage about it is,

The new birth is the sovereign act of the Holy Spirit by which we are given entrance into the eternal kingdom of God.

I. First, let us take a look at this man, Nicodemus.

- A. John says that he was of the Pharisees and that he was one of the rulers of the Jews.
 - 1. The Pharisees you are already familiar with.
 - a. They were the religious zealots of the time, the experts in the Law. Yet they did not have a correct understanding of the Law.
 - b. They believed that salvation came through the keeping of the Law. They believed that salvation was through works. There were even some of them who were doubtless sincere in their adherence to it, thinking that they were pleasing to God.
 - c. But their lowering the standard of God, that they might appear righteous to themselves and might view others with contempt was obnoxious to God.
 - d. They yet stood in need of instruction themselves, as this encounter of one of them with Jesus shows.
 - 2. Nicodemus was also a ruler, a member of the great Sanhedrin.
 - a. The Sanhedrin was the chief governing body among the Jews. It was their supreme judicial and administrative council. Oftentimes in the Scriptures it is called, “the council.”
 - b. It was composed of seventy-one members, the high priest being the president. There were three other groups present as well that made up its membership: 1) the chief priests, who were the heads of the twenty-four priestly courses, which is detailed for us in 1 Chronicles 24; 2) the scribes, those who were copyists of the OT MSS and who thus became very learned in the Law of Moses; and 3) the elders, those who were chosen out of the families of Israel to rule and govern.
 - c. Nicodemus was one of these rulers, and therefore had a very prominent position of

authority in the Old Covenant community, a position which rendered him all the more accountable to God.

- B. This Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.
1. We can only speculate as to why he came by night and not during the day.
 2. Perhaps it was because he had heard Jesus in His public discourses and wanted to learn more about what He taught when there were not as many people around.
 3. Or it could have been that he wanted the cover of night so that his associates on the Sanhedrin would be less likely to know about his interest in Jesus.
 4. The first reason would be virtuous, the second cowardice.
 - a. There were others in Jesus day who were secret disciples. Joseph of Arimethea was one of them. But there are those today who also follow in their train. They will not publicly own that they are followers of Jesus. But we must beware of this secret disciple mentality. It really betrays that we fear man more than we fear God. Granted we should never betray ourselves willingly into the hands of our enemies so as to be destroyed by them, we should also beware that we would deny the Lord who bought us to everyone.
 - b. Don't forget what our Lord has told us, "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33).
 - c. Not confessing or denying is not strictly mentioned here. But we must be careful that our silence is not a implicit denial that we even know Him.
 5. The second possibility is far more virtuous. Be an open disciple like those who openly owned the Savior in the midst of the worst opposition.
 - a. Don't be afraid to be identified as a Christian. Don't be afraid to be one of His disciples. And don't be afraid to seek to excel in the thing of the Lord. Continue to search, continue to seek for knowledge, for then it is that you will find.
 - b. But in all your seeking, do not forget to put into practice what you learn. Put off the deeds of the old man, and put on the deeds of the new. "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts" (Rom. 13:14), that you may be clearly identified as one of His.
- C. The last thing we can note about Nicodemus was that he was attuned to what Jesus was doing and who He was. He said, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."
1. Notice that Nicodemus was not alone in his interest. There were others who were either openly or secretly following the teachings of Christ. "We know."
 2. And why were they doing this? It was because they were convinced that He was sent from God to teach them things they needed to learn.
 - a. How was it that God distinguished those who were sent by Him from those who were not?
 - b. After all, there have been many who have come in the name of the Lord throughout the history of His covenant community who were false prophets.
 - c. There were basically two ways. One was that the person coming would perform

signs and wonders which would stop traffic. They would produce terror in the eyes of those who behold them, because what they were seeing was obviously beyond the ability of any mere man to do. Nicodemus said, “No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

- d. But another way they could tell was that the message they brought was according to the previous revelation which they already had.
- e. Moses writes, in Deuteronomy 13:1-5, “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you.”
- f. If the false messenger is given the ability to work these signs and wonders by God, but yet counsels or teaches something contrary to God’s revealed will, God is testing His people, to see whether or not they will follow Him in what He has revealed. He even warns them ahead of time that He will.
- g. Jesus, in what He was about to teach Nicodemus, was really not telling him anything which had not already been revealed. He says in verse 10, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?” These were old truths -- which were certainly not as clear or as bright under the Old Typological Covenant-- which Jesus was bringing to light.
- h. If this test were applied to all that which is called prophecy today, that alone would be sufficient to disqualify most of it. The rest, on the other hand, if it is verified by the Word of God as being according to the Word, doesn’t really add anything to it.
- i. Revelation is complete. There is need of nothing else. Paul tells us as much in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. He says that even the Old Testament is sufficient for us. Those who would go beyond it, or add anything to it, had better give careful attention to the canonical curse which is applied against doing so to God’s Word. Moses writes, “Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it” (Deu. 12:31). And the entire canon of Scripture closes with these words of the apostle John, “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev. 22:18-19).
- j. It is a very serious sin to add the words of man to the Words of God. Therefore, let everyone beware!

II. Jesus’ authority having already been established in Nicodemus’s eyes, Jesus now instructs Nicodemus.

- A. He begins by cutting right to the heart of the matter. “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”
1. Nicodemus, doubtless through his study of the Scripture, knew the importance of God’s kingdom and had a great interest in entering it.
 2. And here was Jesus, an attested messenger of God, One who had announced the coming of that very kingdom. Surely this One sent from God would have the definitive answer on how to enter it.
 3. Jesus said that Nicodemus needed to be born again, and anyone for that matter, if they were even to see the kingdom of God, let alone enter into it.
 - a. We must not forget that the kingdom of God is an invisible kingdom. It cannot be seen with natural eyes. Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here *it is!*’ or, ‘There *it is!*’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:20-21).
 - b. A natural person therefore can only know it intellectually, he may only know it as an idea, but he cannot see its glory or beauty, unless his eyes are first enlightened by the spiritual rays of the Holy Spirit’s light. And this comes only through the new birth, from being born again.
 - c. I would note here that the word in the Greek for “again” may with equal validity be translated “from above.” Jesus is telling Nicodemus that if he would even see the kingdom of God, he must first be born from above. He must have the new birth which comes from God.
- B. Nicodemus replies, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”
1. Nicodemus is trying to understand these words of Jesus in terms of earthly things. That is why he cannot grasp it. He had never seen anyone enter into his mother’s womb a second time. Such a thing is humanly impossible. And although it may not be impossible for God to do even this, if everyone who would see the kingdom must go through it, and undoubtedly there must have been some who have seen it and entered it, then why had this phenomenon never been seen before?
 2. But Jesus was just using an earthly analogy for a heavenly reality. Jesus says in verse 12, “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”
- C. And so Jesus responds again to clarify.
1. He says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (v. 5).
 - a. Now Jesus is beginning to be more explicit about what He means.
 - b. He is not referring to the natural birth process which brings a human life into the world. He is talking about something above nature.
 - c. The condition for entering into the kingdom of God is that one must be born of water and of the Spirit of God.
 - d. To be born of water and the Spirit is probably a reference to the one act of the spiritual cleansing of the Spirit. Sprinkling with water was often used as a symbol of the inward cleansing of the heart.
 - (i) It was used in the ritual purification of the Levites for service in the tabernacle

of the Lord. In Numbers 8:5-7, we read, “Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take the Levites from among the sons of Israel and cleanse them. And thus you shall do to them, for their cleansing: *sprinkle* purifying water on them, and let them use a razor over their whole body, and wash their clothes, and they shall be clean.’”

- (ii) The purifying symbol of water is also seen in connection with the red heifer, whose ashes were used to remove impurity and to purify from sin. Again, the Lord said to Moses, “Now a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, and the congregation of the sons of Israel shall keep it as water to remove impurity; it is purification from sin” (Num. 19:9).
 - (iii) But the clearest correlation of the two is seen in Ezekiel 36:25-27, where the Lord, in speaking of the blessings of the New Covenant, says, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit 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 you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”
 - (iv) The sprinkling of water symbolized the cleansing work of the Spirit in regeneration, the same thing which the sprinkled waters of baptism do in the New Covenant economy.
 - (v) This is the thing that is necessary before a person may enter into the kingdom of God.
2. In reply to Nicodemus’ understanding of this birth, Jesus says, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”
- a. Jesus is saying, “Nicodemus, even if you were able to enter the second time into your mother’s womb, you would still come out with the same nature you had before. That which is born of flesh will still have the nature of flesh, no matter how many time you go through the birth process.”
 - b. The point is, that there is nothing in your nature which has the power to change its own nature. Everyone born of the flesh has a fleshly nature. Sin may only give birth to sin.
 - c. But, on the other hand, “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” When the Spirit of God causes us to be born again, there is a change of nature, from that of flesh to that of spirit. Jesus says in John 6:63, “It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh profits nothing.” And Paul writes, in Romans 8:9, “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.”
 - d. Think also about how this would apply to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He was not conceived by the flesh, but by the Spirit. Therefore, He was not fleshly, but spiritual. The Holy Spirit is the author of holiness. He perfectly sanctified Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary.
 - e. *Jesus is saying that you must be born again, you must be born from above by the Spirit of God, or you will not see, let alone enter, the kingdom of God.*

3. But how does one obtain this new birth? Jesus says, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
 - a. Here again Jesus speaks with a double meaning. The word for “wind” and “Spirit” are the same in the Greek, as it is with the words “blow” and “breath.”
 - b. The wind blows where it wills, although we understand that the wind doesn’t have a will. This is personification.
 - c. But it makes all the more sense when we consider the meaning behind it: the Spirit breathes where He wills. That is, the Spirit is sovereign in the work of regeneration.
 - d. Even as God breathed into the nostrils of Adam the breath of life, and Adam became a living soul, even so, the Spirit of God breathes where He wills and brings about life, spiritual life. Jesus breathed on the disciples and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22).
 - e. Jesus says that you can hear the sound the wind makes, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It is the same with the Spirit. His presence is invisible. You don’t know where He will be at work. But you can see the results, you can see the effects that he produces. The wind blows the leaves of the tree. The Spirit changes the hearts of men to produce within them a love for Christ.
 - f. But how does one obtain this gift of the Spirit of God so as to enter the kingdom of God? It must come sovereignly from above. Just as you had no hand in the first time you were born, so you cannot in the second. Being born again is something which happens to you, it is not something you do.
 - g. But you must be born again before you can even see God’s kingdom to desire it. And you must desire it before you can enter it.
 - h. This is important for you to realize whether you are a Christian or still outside of Christ. As a Christian, you need to know that you cannot convert anyone by your witnessing, only Christ can. But Christ promises to give His Spirit to all whom the Father has given to Him, and when He does, He normally does so through the preaching of the Gospel. It is for this reason that you can evangelize with the utmost confidence, knowing that Christ will gather in all who are His as you tell others the truth about Him.
 - i. But it is important also for those who are being evangelized to know about this sovereignty of God. For unless they know about it, they may very well perish.
 - j. They need to know that it takes a power beyond theirs to change their heart. Salvation is not a change of mind, but primarily a change of heart. And if they are led into thinking that they can come to Christ whenever it suits them, they may very well never come at all. But, if they are aware that God, and God alone, can change their hearts and give them the ability to savingly embrace Christ, then you will set them to seeking the only One who can save them.
 - k. I am not saying that the Lord has never saved anyone who was ignorant of His sovereignty. *But I am saying that God usually saves those who are aware of it.* The reason is, that God is more greatly glorified when those who are saved by Him recognize their absolute dependence upon Him. This is why God created and why He saves, so that He might be glorified. Arminianism takes part of the God’s glory

and gives it to man. These things ought not to be so. God must receive all the glory, and He will have it.

- l. And so if you are outside of Christ this morning, realize that you cannot save yourself. You cannot make yourself love that which you do not love. Only God can give you a new heart. And so you must come to Him and beg that He might change it.
- m. If you have not done so yet, seek the Lord while He may be found. Seek Him for His mercy and His grace. No matter how great of a sinner you are, God can greatly glorify Himself in your salvation. Amen.