

## John 3:1-15 The New Birth

Today's topic from John 3 is certainly nothing new to us: "***You must be born again,***" the "*New Birth.*" This is also called "regeneration," the sovereign work of God upon a sinner to make one fit for the Kingdom of God. As I looked back through sermons over 18 years, I found at least 30 times in my manuscripts where I use the term regeneration, and I am sure I mention the term way more than that in my preaching. I think this is good! Why? Because right at the beginning of John's Gospel, he speaks to a Jewish religious teacher and leader about the most important topic, not just for the Jews of Jesus' day, but for the entire world: "**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**" This means no one will enter the Kingdom of God without the new birth. Therefore, we NEED to be reminded and encouraged and convicted and taught again today from the Word of God on the New Birth. Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:17: "**If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation.**" Today, I have 4 truths from this text about the new birth: 1) The new birth is about being clean (pure), 2) The new birth is about new life, 3) The new birth is mysterious, and 4) The new birth is observable. Before seeing these truths, let's think about the context of for a few minutes.

There is a lot we could say about the kingdom of God from both the OT and particularly the NT. Often we see the word kingdom used in a generic way to refer to God and his kingdom. It belongs to Him. He is the Lord! He is the King! He is the Ruler! He is the Founder! He is the Sovereign! Etc. (in one sense there is no other kingdom. In other words all things belong to God). We also see "kingdoms" as belonging to nations, like the "kingdom of Babylon" (1 Chr. 29:11, Ps. 103:19, etc.). Often, we see that the "kingdom" is God's kingdom as He relates to Israel and not the rest of the world 2 Chr. 13:8. For example, David's kingdom is called "God's" kingdom. Also, in the OT we see the word "kingdom" used in reference to the Messiah (his "kingdom") the Messiah Is. 9:7 (lots); To see the "kingdom" of God used in all these cases see especially the Book of Daniel. There is another sense in which the "kingdom," particularly in reference to the Messiah, speaks of something yet future, reserved for those who have "faith."

So, I think, as a good religious Jew, Nicodemus would have read the OT and would have known these things and he would have been looking for the kingdom of God to come. And he wanted to be a part of THAT kingdom; he wanted to get THERE. I think of the rich young ruler (also a religious Jew) who asks Jesus, "***What must I do have eternal life?***" And in this same passage, Jesus equates entering the "Kingdom of God" with "eternal life" (Luke 18:18-30). These two men represent all the Jewish people of Nicodemus' day; they are looking for a kingdom. And they do not want to be left out; they want to be part of "that" kingdom, the kingdom above all kingdoms (like the kid on the playground who says "pick me, pick me, don't leave me out). They would have agreed with King Nebuchadnezzar, who, after his humiliation said, "**Blessed be the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation . . .**" (Dan. 4:34). I believe Nicodemus truly wanted to be a part of that kingdom. One day, he wanted to be there!

(I think of playing putt-putt, the goal is to get the ball in the hole. I think of your our kids favorite place at night: in mama and daddy's bed.)

Well, Nicodemus was looking forward to this kingdom and eventually arriving there, there was no better place or goal. (I think in some way or another, this is the majority of the world. Can you think of a more noble goal?) I believe this is why John places this story right at the beginning of his Gospel. There is no greater question to answer than "*HOW to enter the Kingdom of God!*" I believe Nicodemus saw his miracles, he heard his teaching, etc. And so, he comes at night and asks Jesus "opinion." (I believe his motive was good.) Now, look at Jesus' answer in v. 3: "**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.**" He is saying, "something must happen to you (outside of yourself)." This is none other than the new birth: **YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN!** This term can be translated as "born again" or "born from above." I think John's meaning falls closer to "born again" because of the way Nicodemus responds to Jesus' words. But, there is truth to the fact that to be "born again" is to be "born from above." This is a passive verb! The same is true for us! If we/you are to see the kingdom of God (eternal life) we/you **MUST** be born again. So, what does this mean? We see at least 4 truths from this text to answer this question.

1. The new birth is about being clean. In v.4, Nicodemus says, "**How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?**" Well, immediately answers in v. 5: "**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.**" I get this truth from Jesus' use of the word "water." You see, in the OT, water is used as a picture of purity, of being clean, being "washed" in regard to sin. The main context for this truth is probably Ezek. 36:25. In cp. 36-37 Ezekiel is speaking to Israel as a people who had sinned continually against God and had been conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile. And Ezekiel, says "**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.**" Israel would have understood these words; their entire system of worship had example after example and command after command about how to use WATER to purify animals and persons, to make them CLEAN. So, through Ezekiel, God is saying in this picture, *I will pour water on you; it will be water that ONLY I can pour. And this water will make you clean! And, not just clean so you can climb under clean sheets at night after a hard days work, and not just clean for the date you have with your spouse tonight. No, I will clean you thoroughly, you will be clean enough for HEAVEN. And it will be what ONLY I can do!*

Have you seen the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*? In that story, Eustace finds a treasure under the water that must not be touched. But, he goes in and removes a gold bracelet and puts it on his arm. He soon turns into a dragon with this bracelet still on his arm. This bracelet becomes a great source of pain; as much as he tries to take it off, he cannot. Nor, can he rid himself of his dragon skin (etc). But, later when the king and his shipmates cannot find him and realizes the dragon IS Eustace, Aslan approaches him and breathes on him, the bracelet comes off, his form returns. And suddenly Eustace is clean.

Brothers and sisters, we are sinners! We are unclean! We are not pure! Since the fall of Adam, all the water of all the baptismal pools of all the worlds and oceans cannot make us clean. This is why sinners from that time have been trying to clean themselves with whatever means possible. Adam and Eve knew they were naked; so they clothed themselves with fig leaves. King David, after his sin with Bathsheba, says, **“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”** (Ps. 51:7). Isaiah says, **“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts”** (Is. 6:5). So . . . Jesus is saying to Nicodemus (and all of us), if you will see the kingdom of God, you MUST be washed, you must be clean. But there is more!

2. The new birth is about new life. I get this from Jesus’ use of the word “Spirit” also in v. 5. *“Nicodemus, you must be born of water (pure) and of Spirit (life).”* There is more to the new birth than purity; there must also be new life. This truth gets at the heart of what it means to be “born again.” God must also give you life, the kind of life that permits you entrance into his kingdom. This truth also comes very clearly from the OT. Look back to Ezek. 36. See vv. 26-27: **“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.”** Here Ezekiel continues God’s promise to Israel. He will give a “new heart” a “new spirit.” Instead of a heart of “stone” God will give them one of living “flesh.” Look over at v. 6: **“Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.”**

Here, we see that to be born again is not only to be “pure” but to have “life.” Also in the context of Ezek. 36 we find Ezek. 37. Here, Ezekiel sees a vision. As he stands in a dry forsaken valley, he sees that it is full of bones; dead, lifeless BONES, laying on the ground. And God says to Ezekiel, *“Can these bones live?”* And he says, *“Lord, you know.”* And God says, **“Speak to WORD of the Lord to them . . . And I will cause breath to come into them and flesh to cover them.”** This kind of languages is ALL OVER the OT! In Jer. 31: 31 ff.: **“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”** This is the language of the new birth. Instead of death, there will be life! THE ENTIRE BIBLE TEACHES THIS TRUTH! This is why Jesus says to Nicodemus in v. 10: **“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”** (So many doctrines do not make sense in the Bible unless we get this truth!)

Brothers and sisters, to be born again is to be pure AND to have life. They go together. And God must do it! Again, the verb is passive! God must “pour” water on us! God must “breathe life” into us. Brothers and sisters, the new birth is nothing less than becoming a new person!

3. The new birth is mysterious. I get this from v. 8: **“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”** I won’t say much here. But, it makes sense that if God is the one who “pours” the water (cleanses) and God is the one who “breathes” life into dead bones, then, of course this action is mysterious. In a manner of speaking, we know that our prevailing winds come from the west. But, there are prevailing winds from all around the world. And there are many factors that cause wind and dictate in which direction the wind blows. So it is with the new birth. Think of your own salvation. How did you believe? Did you just wake up one day and say, “I believe.” Did you contemplate the Bible for many years and then realize its truth and believe? Did you hear a preacher explain to you the gospel and believe immediately? What about the 80-year-old that hears the good news for a lifetime and remain obstinate. But, on his deathbed, he repents? What about our children? It seems that they aren’t making any strides toward the gospel. Then suddenly, they are alive with faith. I could go on and on. Brothers and sisters, the new birth is a result of the sovereign work of God in this world. And we cannot control it. Yet, at the same time, Christ will build his church. And the only way to enter the church is through the new birth. So, God works . . . mysteriously! Let’s move on.

4. The new birth is observable. Though it is mysterious, we know it is true. I also get this from v. 8 where Jesus says of the wind, **“you hear its sound.”** How do you know a baby has come out of the womb? It cries. And he/she does what babies do: eat, sleep, poop, cry, look around, etc. How do you know that dead bones have life? As was read in Ezekiel, God blows into them and forms ligaments and tendons and then bodies which become full of life.

So how do we know a person has been born again? Well, the first thing we know is this: those who are born again believe in Jesus. Look at vv. 9-15: **“Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”**

In Jesus there is life (life eternal); life that ONLY God has. So, our new birth is tied to him. And we see it played out through faith in the Lord Jesus. Those who are born again believe in Jesus. Let me describe this in other ways. If you are a Christian, you have “received” the Lord Jesus. You have trusted him. You have put “faith” in him. You believe everything the Bible says about him. You believe he died on the cross as a sacrifice for your sins. You believe he took the wrath of God upon himself. You believe he rose again and the same power by which he rose is the same power of the birth. And even more, you love him. You want to follow him. You want to be with him. You want to tell others about him . . . Is that what your life is like? Paul says, that all of us are **“dead in our trespasses and sins” But . . . God . . .** (Eph. 2).

Jesus is telling Nicodemus, the ONLY ONE who can give you life is the one who “descended” from heaven. This is the Son, the ONLY ONE who has life in himself, the same life as God. Think back to John 1:3-4: “**All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. 4 In him was life . . .**”) As God has breathed life into you, you will love the Son and in Him you will have life. As Israel in the desert were being bitten by snakes and were dying, if they looked to the serpent that Moses had lifted up, they would be healed. In the same way, by looking to the Son we are healed, and not merely from a snake bite, but healing from sin and death and separation from God. In this text, there is great mystery! God is sovereign! And God works in us. But, the means to eternal life is belief in the Son; this is faith. The new birth and faith are not the same. The new birth is the power of God unto salvation. But, belief is what we do as we will see next week with John 3:16: “**For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.**”

Before finishing up with some applications I must also emphasize the truth that the one who is born again produces fruits that flow from faith in Jesus. What kinds of fruits? Well, “fruits of the Spirit.” In Gal. 5:22 we read: “**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . .**” Another place to see this truth is the Book of 1 John (go and read). Over and over he says that if anyone is “*born of God*” loves God, loves the Son, loves God’s people, etc. In Matt. 7:15-20 Jesus says, “**Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.**”

The New Birth is Observable!

3 Applications:

The Church is a place of supernatural power. I think back to Jeremiah as he looks forward to the new covenant in Christ: “**Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more**” (Jer. 31:31-34). I think of 2 Cor 5:17 which says: “**if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation . . .**” (2 Cor. 5:17). I think of Paul’s prayer in Eph. 1:19-20: as he prays that they (us) might know “**the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to**

**the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places . . .”**

The one who is not born again does not understand the things from the Spirit of God. In 1 Cor. 2:14 Paul says: **“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.** (See John 3:11-12 with Nicodemus). This means there will never be any true spiritual growth unless a person is born again. And, we cannot expect the world to believe without the new birth.

Therefore, we must tell as God works through the power of the Word.