

## A New Birth – John 3:1-8

John 3:1-8. The Christmas season is upon us, and with it, gifts. And not just any gifts, but *new* gifts. New toys, new clothes, new games, you name it. All things new. Which is all well and good, if we don't miss the *best* gifts of Christmas. The ones that came with Jesus. Like a new *birth*; and a new *promise*; and a new *life*. Gifts that were new 2000 years ago, and still shine today.

This morning, it's a *new birth*. Just like that *first* Christmas was a new birth. "Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of Earth; born to give them *second birth*." (Hark The Herald Angels Sing) No wonder the herald angels sang. *Jesus* was born, that we might be born *again*; experience a new birth. It's found right here in John 3. And I hope that by the time we're done, you understand and appreciate it more than ever. Maybe even experience it as we speak. John 3:1-8.

➤ [1] *Now there was a man of the Pharisees* [those most knowledgeable about the Bible; the Old Testament] *named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews*. [Not just any Pharisee, but a leader. He knew his stuff.] [2] *This man came to Jesus by night* [probably for secrecy's sake] *and said to him, "Rabbi* [teacher; a title that conveyed his respect; like doctor, or senator, or pastor], *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.*" [Referring to the miracles he had been doing (2:23).] [3] *Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you* [literally "amen, amen;" an expression of certainty, and authority, and emphasis], *unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

The answer Jesus gives, implies that Nicodemus is basically asking a question about the *kingdom*. Old Testament scholar that he was, he was basically saying, "Jesus, we see the miracles, like the Old Testament prophets *said* would accompany the kingdom, but we don't see the kingdom itself. We see the sandwich, but where's the beef?" And Jesus basically said, "Of course you don't see it. You're not born again. You're not a part of the kingdom." Which totally threw Nicodemus for a loop.

[4] *Nicodemus said to him* [v4], *"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"* [5] *Jesus answered* [clarifying what he said in v3 about being born again], *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.* [He can't see it and he can't enter it.] [6] *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* [In other words, physical birth won't cut it. Kingdom admission requires *spiritual* birth; a *new birth*.]

[7] *Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'* [8] *The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound* [it's effect], *but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" (ESV) Let's stop there.

Jesus ends with an object lesson, to say, "Don't get hung up on the *how*, just believe the *what*. Because new birth is a God thing; something the *Spirit* does at the *spiritual* level. And you can't predict or explain it, any more than you can predict or explain the *wind*. But you sure can see the effect."

That's the flow of thought. But there are 3 phrases here that beg for *more* . . .

## EXPLANATION

Starting with . . .

### 1. *Born again* (v3,7)

A phrase used twice by Jesus. v3 and v7. *Unless one is born again* [v3] *he cannot see the kingdom of God*. And v7 – *You must be born again*. Or, born from above. Born of God. Born spiritually.

In order to *see* the kingdom of God, in order to experience it and know it, you have to undergo a complete transformation at the *hands* of God. A complete makeover of who you are, from the inside out.

Like when you were born the *first* time. You entered the *world*, the kingdom of *man*, at the hands of a doctor or midwife. And experienced a transformation, the likes of which doctors are *still* figuring out. And it's not as though this world didn't *exist* previous to your birth, you just couldn't *see* it. You hadn't been born.

Same for the kingdom of God. Just like the physical realm requires a *physical* birth to see it, the spiritual realm requires a *spiritual* birth. So *born again* means . . .

### – Given new spiritual life by God

*Unless one is* [given new spiritual life by God], *he cannot see the kingdom of God*. Not that you *have* a spiritual life and you're given a replacement; but that you're dead, and you get one in the first place (Eph 2:1). You get a new *spiritual* life to replace your old *physical* life. The biblical word for it is *regeneration* (Titus 3:5). Meaning re-birth; renewal; rejuvenation.

And make no mistake, it's *given*. To be born again, to be regenerated, is to be *given* new spiritual life. By *God*. Just like you didn't *conceive* on your own, or were *born* on your own, you aren't born *again* on your own. Just like your *physical* life was given to you, your *spiritual* life is given to you.

That's the first phrase that's important to understand. Unless you're born again, given *new spiritual life*, you can't see the *spiritual kingdom*; the kingdom of God.

Which is the second phrase that requires explanation.

### 2. *The Kingdom of God* (v3,5)

Referred to in v3 and v5 this time. *Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God* (3). And v5 – *Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*. Sometimes referred to as the Kingdom of Heaven, it's a theme found over 90 times in the Gospels. Referring to God's rule and reign. Because that's what kings do in kingdoms. Like it says in Ps 103:19 – *The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all*.

So when Jesus showed up saying, "Unless you're born again you can't see or *enter* the kingdom of God," Nicodemus knew exactly what he was talking about.

### – The rule and reign of God Almighty

King of kings and Lord of lords. His perfect, benevolent, omnipotent rule over all creation. But there are two aspects of God's kingdom, that if you don't understand, you'll be confused at best, and messed up at worst.

First, God's kingdom is already; and second, it's not yet. The rule and reign of God Almighty is already, and not yet. Already here, and yet to come.

Already, in that it's available and operative. It's in force. Like Jesus said in Mk 1:15 – *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand*. It's here and available. And it's in force, in the *church*; in the hearts and lives of those who have been born again; those who are saved. If Jesus is Lord of your life, if he rules and reigns in your heart, you're exhibit A for the Kingdom. *We're* exhibit A. It's already.

But it's also not yet. It's not complete; not finished. Because the whole *world* isn't yet under his sway; every last *person*. Not that God's throne isn't established, or that he's *unable* to rule; but that he hasn't yet finalized it. Over every *one* and every *thing*.

That's yet to come. When the Old Testament prophecies and New Testament promises are *completely* fulfilled. When *every* knee bows and *every* tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. Whether they want to or not. It's yet to come when the powers of darkness are banished *forever*. And the former things have passed *away*. And *all* things are made new (Rev 22:5). That's when God's kingdom will be *fully* realized.

And the key to entry, the key to being a part of it, now *and* then, is being born again. Given new life, under the rule and reign of God Almighty. That's the second phrase. Are you in?

Third, is . . .

### 3. *Born of water and the Spirit* (v5)

V5 again. *Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*. He can't be saved; he can't experience it. It's a clarification of what it means to be born again, in v3.

➤ The problem is, it's a bit cryptic, and often misunderstood. Because some people think it refers to physical birth and spiritual birth. That *born of water* means born physically, and born of *the Spirit* means born spiritually. You have to undergo both, they say. Punch *both* tickets to enter God's kingdom.

But that can't be correct. Because in v6, Jesus implies that those two types of birth lead to two separate realms. Flesh and spirit. Take a look. *That which is born of the flesh is flesh* [physical birth leads to the physical realm], *and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit* [it leads to the spiritual realm; the kingdom of God]. So in v5, Jesus can't be referring to physical birth and spiritual birth.

➤ Others misunderstand this verse, by saying that Jesus is referring to water baptism and Spirit baptism. *Born of water* they say, is water baptism; and born of *the Spirit* is our Spirit baptism; our baptism in the Holy Spirit; coming under his influence at salvation.

But that too can't be right, because that would make our salvation, our entrance into God's kingdom, dependent on a *work*. Something *tangible* we do, to earn God's favor. Which is explicitly contrary to the New Testament *teaching* about works. Like Eph 2:8-9 – By grace we are saved, through faith, *not a result of works*. Or 2 Tim 1:9 – God saved us *not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace*.

And **Titus 3:4-5** covers it all.

*[4] When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, [5] he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration [a new birth] and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*

God doesn't save us through baptism in water, but through a new *birth*. A birth brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit to cleanse and renew us.

So Jesus can't be saying in John 3:5, that being baptized in water is necessary to enter the Kingdom of God.

Rather, he's saying that we need to be . . .

– **Cleansed of our sin and transformed within**

Forgiven, and changed. Justified, and made new. In other words, water and Spirit are two sides of the same coin. Two ways of describing the work of God's Spirit in our soul. I say that, because that's what the Old Testament *prophets* said. That's how *they* described this cleansing transformation.

Like Isaiah, in **Isaiah 44:3**; quoting God.

*Fear not* [he said] . . . *For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground* [metaphors for people]; *I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants*.

It's a prophetic promise, first fulfilled by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Acts 2; and now in *all* those who believe and trust in Jesus. He fills us with *rivers of living water* the Bible says (John 7:38-39), and dwells in our hearts.

But the point, is that God used *water* and *Spirit* interchangeably. To describe his work of renewal and transformation in our hearts.

➤ Even *more* explicit, in his prophecy through Ezekiel. And I want you to see it in your own Bible. Ez 36. Because it's a pillar passage, describing the very thing Jesus is talking about. Ez 36:25-27. Ez 36 is part of God's prophecy about reestablishing his *kingdom*, after the Israelites were exiled to Babylon in 586BC.

*[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. [26] 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* [a soft heart]. *[27] And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules*.

Once again, it's a prophetic promise, fulfilled in the New Testament, when Jesus sent the Spirit. *Water*, symbolizing spiritual cleansing from sin; *a new heart* and *spirit* referring to an inner transformation; and the Spirit of God *within* us to help us live it out. All of which, are the very things Jesus refers to in John 3:5. A new birth into a new kingdom, via *water and the Spirit*.

So when Jesus says, unless you're *born of water and the Spirit* (5) you can't enter the kingdom of God, he's saying you have to be cleansed of your sin and transformed within, just like Ezekiel said 600 years earlier. And Isaiah before that.

➤ The question is, *are* you? Are you born again? Are *you* part of God's Kingdom? I hope

so. Because all the explanation in the world matters *little*, if you don't apply it.

## APPLICATION

So let me ask you some questions to discern that. To make sure. First . . .

### **Are you clean? (Ez 36:25)**

Are you forgiven? Are you washed? Because that's what God *said* he would do. Ez 36:25 – *I will sprinkle clean water on you* [a metaphor for the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit], *and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you*. Is that true of you? Have you been relieved of your guilt and the consequences of your sin? If so, you're born again.

Second . . .

### **Are you different? (Ez 36:26a)**

Are you a changed person? At the very core of who you are. Because God said he'd do that too. V26a – *I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you*. A new heart and spirit to think differently and feel differently. See the world differently. Love differently. Do you have joy you didn't have before? Peace you can't explain? If so, you're born again.

Third . . .

### **Are you soft? (Ez 36:26b)**

Soft of heart. V26b. After saying *I will give you a new heart*, God says – *I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*. In other words, you'll no longer be *hard* of heart toward the things of God, but soft. No longer calloused, but compassionate. No longer hateful, but caring. No longer judgmental, but understanding.

4<sup>th</sup> . . .

### **Are you obedient? (Ez 36:27)**

V27 – *I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes* [my commands] *and be careful to obey my rules*. If the norm of your life is disobedience, failing to do what you should, and indulging in things you shouldn't, you're not born again. Because new birth comes with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit within you, to lead you in the way of righteousness. Encouraging you, and wooing you, and compelling you to obey. Leading you, and convicting you, and causing you to obey. And causing you to *want* to obey. Are you obedient?

And last . . .

### **Do you believe? (Jn 3:2,7-8)**

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit moves like the wind, and is moving in your heart (7-8)? Do you believe like Nicodemus, that Jesus is from God (2)? That God is *with* him. And *he* is God with *us*? God with *you*? If so, you're born again. If not, the kingdom awaits.

Prayer – God, would you confirm the new birth of those who are yours? Those who believe, and walk in the Spirit? And for those who aren't born again, would you move in their hearts and deliver their soul? That first Christmas was your birth, may this Christmas be theirs. “Born to raise the sons of Earth; born to give [us] second birth.”

## **You Are Loved**