

New Birth

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[0 : 00] Last week we looked at Jesus' birth. The week before that we looked at John the Baptist's birth. And we end 2017 by looking at a different type of birth called the new birth. And Jesus in the Gospels always gives us metaphors to help us understand things that are difficult to understand.

And one of the most famous metaphors that he gives us is the new birth, or being born again. And all of us know, as Nicodemus knew in this passage, that it is impossible for us to be born again physically. Nicodemus highlights that in the passage we read.

That's not possible. And so immediately we know this is a metaphor. Jesus is talking about something different. He's talking about a new birth that takes place in the heart, in the inner self, in the deepest part of who you are in your desires. It's a different type of birth than a physical birth.

And this idea, the new birth, the new birth that takes place in the heart and associating it with Christians is famous. It's not just something that people who have grown up in the church know about, or people who have read John chapter 3 know about. This is a pop culture wide. Everybody in the 21st century, as secular as our society might be, has heard of being born again. And part of that is because in the 20th century there was an evangelical sub-movement called the born again movement that filtered out into all sorts of areas, different groups and distinct parts of Christianity and people who confessed to be Christians.

And on the inside of that movement, the insiders in this evangelical sub-movement, the born again movement, were really trying to express the idea that there's a difference between a real, genuine, life-changing experience, a conversion, and what many people would express as a nominal lifelong church-attending way of being a Christian, that there's a difference. But the movement began to be associated with all sorts of different groups and you can go find articles in the Appalachian country of the United States where lots of snake-handling cults refer to themselves as the true born-against, the truly born-against, and of course Billy Graham used the phrase all the time as well.

So it grew and became really wide and distinct and it became to me something like a very immoral person that has had a life-changing experience and become a moral person.

[2 : 40] And in the eyes of the culture, that's exactly what it was, born-again Christians are the type of Christians that are really fanatic, really radical, and they've had the deepest experiences, they're the most emotional and they are the most traditional in values, they draw the sharpest lines in the sand that nobody can come across. What we have to do today is disentangle the term, the phrase, being born-again from the 20th century, and from the 21st century because what the 20th century says about it, what the 21st century says about it, is not what Jesus says about it, we got to come back to John chapter 3 to a first-century man and listen to what he has to say about what it means to be born-again.

And so if you're a non-Christian today, if you're coming and exploring the claims of faith, I invite you to come and listen to what Jesus has to say about this idea. And this is for Christians too, this is for my Christian friends here too, there's much here that you'll see that is of help.

And so what we're gonna do is ask three things, who needs it? Who needs the new birth? What is it? And how do you get it? Okay, so first, who needs it? Now if you look at verse 7, verse 7 is the emphatic statement, do not marvel Jesus says that I say to you Nicodemus, you must be born-again.

Now there's two key words in Jesus' sentence there, the first is must. You, he says, must be born-again.

You must be, in other words, we know right out from the gate that the new birth is necessary. And he says it's necessary if you want to see the kingdom of God, which in verse 15 he equates with having eternal life.

[4 : 29] If you want to live, the new birth is necessary. And the second key word here is the word you. And he says you must be born-again. Nicodemus, you must be born-again. He's saying this to Nicodemus.

And Nicodemus, we know a few things about Nicodemus. Nicodemus is an old man, which is very important in first century culture. He's a man, which is also very important in first century culture. He's a Pharisee, more properly he's a ruler of the Sanhedrin.

And that's a big deal. He is a culture maker. He is wealthy. You were wealthy if you were in this position. He is on the top of his game when he comes here to meet with Jesus. And if he was alive today, he would have gone to Harvard. He would be a public intellectual riding a weekly column, a daily column, for something like the Times or the Herald.

He would be a mover and a shaker, a culture maker. He's the head of the religious order of his day. He's a moral guy. He's a good citizen. You should like him.

He's not being bad here. He's a good guy. He's respected. And he's coming to Jesus and showing Jesus some respect in this passage. Not only that, but we know that he was a leader among the upper class religious leaders. Jesus actually says to him, are you not the teacher later in verse eight or nine? Are you not the teacher of Israel?

[6 : 02] With the definite article there, I mean Jesus is saying he's actually amongst the rulers of the rulers in the Sanhedrin. And not only that, but don't miss this. In verse two, he says, we know Jesus that you are a rabbi teacher, come from God.

And he uses the first person plural there. We know. And what that means is that he's coming to Jesus at night and he's representing a faction. He's not coming just on his own.

He's coming as the leader of a party within the Sanhedrin and saying, there's a group of us that think you are something special. He's willing to say to Jesus, rabbi. And if you know the culture of the first century, you know that rabbi is a designation you don't get until you're old, established, you've done a lot, you're very successful. It's light becoming a professor in the modern day university. It's a big deal. And Jesus is a young man in this passage. And he has no credentials. He's a carpenter.

He's born of a poor family. And he's respectfully saying, rabbi. He's willing to go that far with Jesus and show him that much respect. And what that means, what all this means is that Nicodemus is coming at night and it's probably a stormy night of Jesus when he says the wind. You can hear the wind. It blows where it wants to.

It's probably because the wind is blowing and whistling right around him, right at the very moment. So Nicodemus, the ruler of rulers, the richest of the rich, the wealthiest of the wealthy, and the moral, and the religious of the religious, he's a moral guy. He comes at night on a stormy, dark, cloudy night to meet with Jesus secretly saying, let's make a deal. I'm representative of a faction and I want to make a deal with you. We can work together.

[7 : 59] We think you're something special. We know that we're religious, we're holy, we're moral. Let's make a deal. We can work together. I'm here to barter with you, to respect you. And Jesus says, whoa, not so fast. You don't know what you're talking about.

Just stop talking. He interrupts him. Truly I say to you, you can't see the kingdom of God. You want to make a deal with me? You can't even see the kingdom of God.

The religious of the religious, the moral of the moral. And what that means is that being born again is not about morality. It's not about morality at all. If anybody didn't need it, it was this guy. If it's about morality, it's what Jesus is saying to him is that you need it in the exact same way that the prostitutes and the sinners need it. You come from the exact same places they do. All of you need to be born again just as much as the worst of the worst and as the best of the best. And Nicodemus was the best of the best.

And so that's why commentators will say that if you know anything about the book of John and you pay attention to the structure in the book of John, John really makes clear his points just in the structure of the book.

If you look down at verse 1, John uses one little word to introduce this passage. It's translated here as now. It's a Greek conjunction day and it more often means and. And what's it doing there? The reason it's there is because John is continuing his thought from the previous two verses.

[9 : 46] This is not a new section even though that the modern English, the Medieval's put a new chapter here at chapter 3. It might have been better to start it at chapter 23 because this is not a new section. This is and.

And what is he talking about? Look at verses 23 to 25. Now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs he was doing.

Many believe they saw him do stuff, miraculous stuff and they believed. But Jesus, it says, did not entrust himself to them because he knew it was in their heart.

That it wasn't actually faith. They didn't actually get it. They just trusted him as a teacher because of his miracles. And then it says and Nicodemus. In other words, John saying, the story of Nicodemus is exhibit a in the issue of people coming and saying look at all the signs he's performing.

He's a great teacher. He's a wonder worker. He performs many signs, but Jesus did not give himself to them because they didn't actually know who he was. They didn't actually have true faith. And what John is saying is Nicodemus is exhibit a.

[10:56] That's the story I'm telling you of a person that was just like this. Commentators will also say that every single major theme that John is trying to teach us in the book of John is exhibited already in the prologue, the first 18 verses of the book of John. And just listen to the prologue verses 10 to 13. This is what he says.

Jesus came into the world and the world was made through him, but the world did not know him. He came to his own and his own people did not receive him, but to the ones who did receive him, who believed in his name.

He gave the right to become a child of God. But how? They weren't born of blood or of human will or of the flesh, but only born of God. In other words, Nicodemus, if anybody had the right to be a child of God, of the flesh, by his bloodline, by the will of man, the things that he has done, it was this guy.

It was definitely this guy. He deserved it. But Jesus comes to him and says, stop talking. You can't even see the kingdom. You haven't even started. You haven't even gotten to ground zero yet.

Because being born of God is not by anything you do, no matter how bad or how good, or by your bloodline or of the flesh. And that's what he's talking about when he says he must be born again.

[12:20] John already has introduced it, you see, in the prologue. He's already taught us what he's trying to get at at the very beginning of this book. And that's why Nicodemus comes at nighttime.

Yeah, he comes at nighttime for practical reasons, of course. He wants to make a deal in the dark stormy night. But John refers to nighttime four times in his book.

And three of them are metaphors. This is the only one that's literal. And the other three times, let me just give you an example from chapter 11 verse 10, if anybody walks in the daytime, he does not stumble because he walks in the light. But if he walks in the nighttime, he stumbles because the light is not in him. He walks in the darkness.

And J.B. Lightfoot, one of the great past century New Testament commentators, he says this, doubtless Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, but what he would find out is that his own night was blacker than he ever knew, his own heart.

He came at Jesus' night. Why? Because he doesn't want the light of the world to expose him. And that's exactly what the light of the world does. The light of the world exposes him. The moral teacher needs new birth and so do you.

[13:45] Now, I started this point to close point one, which is the longest point by the way. You'll be comforted by that. Close point one, when it says in verse seven, you must be born again.

The word you there is actually not directed directly toward Nicodemus. You can't see this in English. We don't do this in English. You can't. It's impossible to see in English. It's in Greek, it's plural.

And so what Jesus is saying is not Nicodemus, you must be born again, but he says all of you must be born again. The faction you represent must be born again. The prostitutes in the centers must be born again. The worst of the worst must be born again. And you, all of you, and me, will not see the kingdom of God unless you're born again.

The new birth is not for a type of person. It's not for a movement, a born again movement, a sub-evangelical culture. It's not, that's all secondary.

It's what you need to see eternal life. It's not for any type of person. So secondly, what is it? What is the new, what is it then?

[15:02] It's still a difficult metaphor to understand. Now verse three, this is one of Jesus's many strange interruptions in the gospels where he does interrupt people and gives what kind of seems like a non-sequitur a comment that does not follow in the conversation that doesn't, it's a conversation stopper. It doesn't really seem to make sense.

Nicodemus comes and says, I know you're a great teacher. I know that God is with you. And Jesus says, you can't see the kingdom of God. Well, how does that relate? How does that follow? It seems like it doesn't follow at all. And of course Nicodemus immediately doesn't get it.

How can a man be born a second time when he's old? That doesn't seem to, the physics doesn't make sense there. It doesn't seem to work. But what he doesn't catch, of course, is that this birth is not something that the five senses can see.

This is not a birth that's apparent or visible to our five senses. What Jesus is saying, it's not a non-sequitur at all.

Jesus is saying this, you are looking for a teacher and you think you found one. And a teacher gives moral renovation. A teacher comes to help you understand how to change, how to get better. You don't need a teacher.

[16:29] You need something much more radical than a teacher. And so commentators will say, and this is in a footnote in your Bible, should be, that the better way to translate Jesus' command, you need to be born again, is actually you need to be born from above. And we're going to come back to why it's important that it's actually from above in just a second. But this idea of being born from above, it's part of a family of metaphors in the New Testament.

Light to darkness, you must become a new creation. Your old self had to be transferred to a new self, is the one that Paul often uses. You need to have your mind renewed. You need to have the washing of regeneration. All these metaphors are metaphors that are talking about the same thing. The new birth, being born from above, the washing of regeneration, a new self, new roots, all of it. The New Testament, we're talking about the same idea. So what exactly is it? And let me just tell you three very brief things that I think it is. And we get this from all over the New Testament, really. And the first thing is that the new birth means getting new roots. In other words, it is a radical transformation, not moral renovation. You see, now when I say it's a radical transformation, I don't mean radical in the modern cool way. That radical means wild and crazy or something like that. Radical has a much better meaning and an older, classic meaning. And radical comes from the Latin term radix, which means root. So radical simply means at the root of things. So what Jesus is talking about here is you need, the first thing the new birth is, is radical transformation. In other words, you need to be replanted.

You need new roots. You need a gardener to come along and pull you up and put down entirely different plant, entirely different tree, new roots for you. Tim Keller talks about, on a different topic, about it. Think about it like this. If you have an apple farm, and you decide this year after farming apples for however long in your life that you want oranges, and you go out to your apple farm and you work harder than you've ever worked before, and you make sure those trees are clean, that the bugs aren't getting to them, you water it like it's never been watered before, you give it the best of whatever the most recent people who work on these things are saying, the best food for it.

[19:10] You pour it all into the ground, you do the best work you've ever done on your apple trees, and at the end of the season, you get bigger apples. You don't get oranges, right? It's simple, it's obvious, but the only way to get oranges, if you want oranges, is that you got to rip up the trees, and you got to put down a completely different plant all together, and that's what the new birth really is, is it's radical, radix transformation. It's transformation at the root.

It's not doing things better. It's not moral renovation. It's not simply a prostitute stopping what she does, or the worst of sinners stopping what they do. It's complete and total transformation from the root, and that's why we we talk about the difference between reformation and transformation.

What's reformation? Well, reformation is something we all want to do in life. It's change. It's renovating ourselves. It's making New Year's resolutions. That's reformation, but Jesus isn't talking about reformation.

No New Year's resolution can give you what he's talking about here. He's talking about transformation, and that means you can't do it. A gardener has to come and do it for you. Okay, so the second thing that the new birth is, is it's not only getting new roots, but when you get new roots, you get what Paul talks about in relation to the new birth.

You get a new self, and when Paul says that what he's talking about is a new identity, a new consciousness, a new way of thinking, new desires, a new heart, wanting things differently, being totally new in your identity. I was recently, I was reminded this week of a famous story that comes to us by tradition, not through primary text research, unfortunately, but hopefully it's true, of St. Augustine, the great bishop of Hippo in North Africa, who many people regard as the best

theologian that's ever lived in the fourth and fifth centuries.

[21 : 15] Augustine was a mess of a person before his conversion. He was, he says this himself, that he was a sex addict. He was, he was a man that was pretty wild, and he slept with many different women in his younger years, and he gets radically converted, and he comes to a city after he's converted, and one of the women that he had had a relationship with for over a year, ongoing comes and sees him, sees him in the streets in the city, and she says, you know, waves at him, and he walks past her, and he doesn't acknowledge her, and she supposes that he just simply didn't see her, and so she says, Augustine, Augustine, it's I, it's I, and he turns around and says, oh, I know, but it is not I. It's no longer I.

It's no longer I who live, but Christ lives within me. It's an, I'm a new self. That man that I was is gone. My desires are different. I don't want it anymore. I don't want what we had. I want transformation. I want a new self and a new identity.

The new birth is new roots, and it's a new identity. It's new desires. It's a new self, and then thirdly and finally, in this point, and the centerpiece, actually, of what Jesus says here about the new birth, is that the new birth is a new vision. Now, so he tells Nicodemus here, you cannot see the kingdom of God unless you are born again, and this is why I mentioned that it's so important that we see that it's actually, or should probably be translated as born from above, instead of born again, because what Jesus is doing here is he's not, he's saying that the new birth is not an end to it in itself.

The goal of the new birth is not the new birth. You see? He's saying, you need to be born again if you want to do what? See the kingdom. And so the new birth is a means to actually getting the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the ultimate goal, not the new birth.

And so the kingdom of God is actually the most primary aspect, the most central concept that's in this passage, and he mentions it over and over again. The whole talk about the difference between the flesh and the spirit, what's born of flesh is flesh was born of spirit to spirit.

[23 : 43] He's talking about the difference in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. And so the fundamental difference is that you must be born from above in order to have a vision to see the kingdom of God. What he's saying here, in other words, is that all of us are born children of a particular kingdom.

The kingdom of this world, as John puts it in another place. Now, you need to know this, that what's being talked about here is not an antithesis between flesh or physicality and spirituality. That's not what he's talking about at all.

So he's not saying, you're born of the flesh, you're born of material, you're born of flesh and bone, but flesh and bone is bad. You need to be born of the spirit. No, he's not setting flesh, corporeality, against spirituality, not at all. What he's doing is he's setting two different kingdoms against each other. The kingdom of God, which is the kingdom of light and life, what the ancients thought of as the kingdom above, which is why we need to say born from above.

The kingdom of life, where God reigns in the heavenlies, versus the kingdom of this world, which is the kingdom of a world that is broken by sin, by darkness, by the dominion of Satan.

And so that's the antithesis that he's talking about here. He's setting these two, Augustine called it the two cities, the city of God and the city of man, the two kingdoms that's been talked about in the past, and he's setting them against each other. And so being awake and being born again gives you a new vision to see the kingdom. What is seeing the kingdom mean? It means understanding the missio day, the mission of God, understanding the purpose of this world, that the ultimate end of this world is Ephesians 1, 10, one of the best verses in the New Testament, that Jesus Christ came to unite the kingdom of heaven with the kingdom of earth. Not to set them against each other, but to bring them together ultimately, fully, and finally.

[25 : 54] And so what he's saying is you need to be born again if you want to see the ultimate purpose of all existence. The unity of the kingdom of God with the kingdom of this earth. That's the ultimate purpose from creation to recreation, and that's what the new birth is about. It's about seeing it.

It's about giving eternal life. It's about getting the kingdom of God. And so just to close this point, he says it this way just as a nice little pithy summary. You have to be born of water and spirit.

Now what in the world does that mean? Roman Catholic theology and Eastern Orthodox theologians have always taken that to mean you need to be baptized to be born again. But what they've missed is that this is actually a citation of Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 25 to 27, the passage we read earlier, where God comes down and says, I will wash you in water.

The water of regeneration and I will give you my spirit. In other words, getting the spirit and being washed with water for giving your sins is the exact same thing.

It says Ezekiel 36. And that's why it's only the spirit that can do this. Only the wind, the wind by the way in Hebrew is the exact same word as the spirit in Greek is the exact same word as spirit.

[27 : 30] So Jesus is playing, he's the pund here. You can't see the wind, you can only hear it, it blows where it wishes, but you can also translate it as you can't see the spirit. It's the same word, the spirit goes where he wants. Only the spirit can do this. Now we know this just to close with our final point very briefly.

Why does he use the metaphor born again? Well born from above. How much do babies contribute to their birth?

I've been to three births so far in life and I can tell you that the mom does all the work. The baby doesn't do anything.

And that's precisely why Jesus chose this metaphor. Because you can't do anything to get this. So how do you get it?

Just two or three minutes and we'll be finished here. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and says, you're a great teacher. I recognize that. And Jesus says to him, you can't even see.

[28 : 45] You don't know what you're talking about. And what Jesus is saying to him is, you don't need a teacher. Teachers are for moral renovation. You need a savior. You don't need a teacher. You don't simply need to get better. You need a savior. That's what he's saying to him when he says you need to be born again. And so the passage closes with an enigmatic allusion to Numbers chapter 21. Jesus closes the passage and says, just as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.

What is he saying here? In the wilderness, people because of their sins had been bitten by poisonous snakes, the Hebrews, the Israelites.

And God told them, if you will look up and look at the serpent, the representative, the bearer of poison up on the pole, you will be saved from this physical death.

And so the Son of Man too, Jesus' favorite phrase for himself, the Son of Man, must be lifted up like a dead serpent on a pole. And you must see him if you want new birth, new roots, the kingdom of God, eternal life.

In order to see the kingdom of God, what do you have to see? You got to see the King. You got to see the King of the Kingdom. And where is he? Jesus is forecasting it. It's a foreshadow.

[30 : 23] You need Nicodemus. You'll need to look up, but not all the way to the heavens, not yet. You'll need to look up and see a Savior, not a teacher, die for you. And look, John chronicles the story of Nicodemus through the rest of the book. Did you know that? Two more times, very subtly, Nicodemus is mentioned. In chapter seven, Nicodemus stands up in the middle of the Sanhedrin and defends Jesus and says, we need to give this guy hearing. I'm not sure if we need to just cast him away.

But then at the end of the book in chapter 19, Nicodemus was there. He was at the cross. And he looked up, and he saw the Son of Man lifted up, and he finally got it.

This is what he was talking about. And you know how we know he got it? Just listen to what he does at the crucifixion, at the end of it. After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for the fear of the Jews, asked Pilate if he could take away the body of Jesus. And Pilate said yes, he gave him permission.

So he came away at night, took his body, and Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night. And he came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes and about 75 pounds in weight, and they took the body of Jesus together. Not just Joseph, but Nicodemus too.

And they bound it in linen cloths with spices, and they buried him as was the custom of the Jews. Now you got to understand that this is the ruler of the Sanhedrin, and this is the Passover, the holiest day of the year.

[32 : 09] And you cannot be unclean on the holiest day of the year. And Nicodemus touches a dead body on the holiest day of the year.

The most important day that you are never to do anything that makes you unclean. And this is the day Nicodemus does it. You see what he's saying? I reject the customs. I'm born again. I believe. I saw the Son of Man lifted up.

He's mine. He's my savior. He's not my teacher. He's my savior. I confess it. I will be unclean. I don't care, because he became unclean for me on that cross. You see? He got it. He was born again.

Now you're sitting here, and this is literally the last minute, saying, am I supposed to simply twiddle my thumbs until some spirit comes and saves me? Is that what you're saying? And I'm saying this. The Bible says yes, and the Bible simultaneously says something else. Listen to how John puts it in another verse. Everyone who has been born again of God has victory in this world, overcomes the kingdom of this world.

That's what we just learned from this passage. And this is the victory that overcomes the world. Your faith. So John equates the two. You want to be born again?

[33 : 26] You can't do it. How are you born again? What does it mean to be born again? Your faith. To be born again, it means you have victory over the kingdom of this world. Faith means you have kingdom over the victory of this world. Believe. Look up. Be willing to be like Nicodemus, and you will be born again. And both are true at the same time.

Look, Christian friends, if you're not a Christian today, obviously this is for you. This is a call for you. This is eternal. This is what it means in the Christian witness to have eternal life. But, Christian friends, this is not just for non-Christians.

You don't just say, I am a born again Christian. You have to see the kingdom. And seeing the kingdom means living like a born again Christian. You know, when Jesus becomes your savior, he can also be your teacher. The Sermon on the Mount is kingdom ethic.

Seeing the kingdom. Once he becomes your savior, you have to live like you are born again. It's for all of us. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this passage.

We pray now for anybody that's struggling or doesn't have faith, that you would give them the gift of faith through the new birth, and for us Christians that we would desire to live like kingdom citizens. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.