

New Birth

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 September 2017

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] Birth is an amazing thing, isn't it? I don't know if you've ever had the privilege of witnessing a birth. I was at the birth of my two children.

And anybody who's witnessed a birth knows just what an incredible event it is. It seems surreal when you watch a new human coming into this world and taking their first breath with lungs that have been filled with liquid for the last nine months.

And when you think as well of all the biology behind a birth and all that needs to happen at that moment in that little body for it to survive in the big wide world.

It is truly incredible. And it's no wonder that even though it's happened on earth roughly 108 billion times, each one of those 108 billion births is still considered to be a miracle, isn't it?

It's an obvious work of a life-giving God. You can't deny that if you watch a birth. Despite all the biology and the blood and the slime and the screaming and all of that, it's a miracle.

[1 : 1 1] It's an incredible event. It's a work of a life-giving God. And it's a miracle that each one of us has experienced. I might not know you and your history, but I know one thing about you is that you were born.

You needed to go through that same process and take that same first breath. Otherwise, you wouldn't be sitting here today. You had to undergo a miracle just to have life on this earth.

And so it's not that far-fetched to believe that another miracle needs to happen to you if you're going to have life in eternity, is it? And that's what Jesus teaches us here in this very important chapter of John, chapter 3, when he talks about something called being born again.

And he talks about how just as every single one of us needed to go through their first birth in order to enter this life, we all still need to go through a second birth, a spiritual birth, to enter the life to come.

And it's one of the most important truths that we learn in the whole Bible, here in John, chapter 3. So I hope you are paying attention this morning. As we look at this conversation that Jesus had with a man called Nicodemus.

[2 : 3 0] Now, the fact that they're having this conversation at all is quite a surprise because Nicodemus was a Pharisee, we're told. And now the Pharisees, as you probably know, were a group of religious leaders who really didn't like Jesus one bit.

They were quite hostile to Jesus. In fact, they were the ones who ended up planning to have him killed. But here is one of them, Nicodemus, as a trained scholar of Scripture.

And he's here because he sees something in Jesus that he just can't ignore in the signs that he's been performing up until now. And so he visits Jesus, we're told at night, probably so that his fellow Pharisees didn't find out.

And he opens this secret conversation by saying this, Rabbi, 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.

Now, that is quite an admission for a Pharisee. It really is this early as well in Jesus' ministry. For a top Jewish religious leader to admit that Jesus has been sent from God is a huge thing.

[3 : 32] We mustn't underestimate what he's saying here. And because of this, because of this Pharisee having come to the conclusion that Jesus is from God, you'd expect Jesus to be pretty chuffed, wouldn't you?

You'd expect Jesus to welcome him with open arms, say, well done, Nicodemus, for working that out. I'm really impressed. But he doesn't. Rather, he says something completely unexpected in reply.

Have a look. Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Now, where did that come from? I mean, Nicodemus wasn't talking about the kingdom of God.

He didn't ask Jesus a question. Why does Jesus here start talking about seeing the kingdom of God? Where does that come from? Well, to understand that, we've actually got to go back a few verses in our Bibles and see what happened just before this conversation.

Go back to the end of the previous chapter, chapter 2, from verse 23, and look what it says. Now, while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name, but Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people.

[4 : 44] He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person. And so lots of people at this point are coming to believe in who Jesus is.

That's what the text tells us. But Jesus isn't impressed at all. Why? Well, because we're told he knows people. And he knows that just people believing in who he is intellectually isn't enough.

He knows that true faith in him, saving faith, is more than just believing in who he is. And that is such an important truth for us to understand today.

Because so many people come to church thinking that everything's okay because they believe in who Jesus is. And they think that's fine. That's enough. I believe in who Jesus is. But so did these people here.

They believed in his name. They believed in who he was. But that wasn't enough. In fact, we see later that these very same people rejected him, turned away from him, despite knowing who he was.

[5 : 52] And that's why Jesus says what he says to Nicodemus in the very next passage. You see, Nicodemus is given here as a case in point of one of these people who intellectually have come to believe in who Jesus is, but that's not enough.

And no matter how religious Nicodemus is, no matter how much he understands, or he's come to work out through reading scriptures, not even he will see the kingdom of God unless he is also born again.

And the same is true of all of us. Just because you believe in who Jesus is doesn't mean that you're born again.

And so what does it mean to be born again? That's a very important question we need to answer this morning. What is this rebirth that every one of us needs to undergo if we're to have eternal life one day?

Well, there's three things that we learn about in this passage that I want us to see this morning. Firstly, the need for it. The need for rebirth. Now, Nicodemus doesn't really get what Jesus is talking about.

[6 : 59] We see that in verse 4. He says, How can someone be born when they're old? Surely they can't enter a second time into their mother's womb and be born? Now, you can kind of detect a note of scorn in his response here.

Like, Jesus, come on. Stop being ridiculous. What are you talking about? Born again? It's kind of like people today, when they hear about being born again, how they often respond.

I've heard lots of believers being referred to as those born-again. You know, like a little bit wacky. A little bit on the fringe. What does it mean to be born again?

Come on, Jesus. What are you talking about? So, Jesus explains to Nicodemus just what he means by being born again. In verse 5, he says, Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Oh, thanks, Jesus. That makes it much clearer. Now, it doesn't make any more sense to us than what he said before, this being born of water and the Spirit. But to Nicodemus, to Nicodemus who knew his Old Testament, this is starting to ring a note of recognition for him.

[8 : 08] It's probably starting to make sense now because he would have recognized that Jesus is referring to a prophecy spoken by Ezekiel many centuries before.

It was read for us by Alan earlier. And this is the promise that God had made to his people, that Ezekiel prophesies about, that God speaks to his people through Ezekiel.

And he says this, listen again to this prophecy. For I will take you out of the nations. I will gather you from all countries and bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean.

I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit in you to move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Now you see the Old Testament is the story of God's people repeatedly failing him.

[9 : 11] And that's why it's so big. Because they failed him over and over again. Because of the sin that was in their hearts. Because of the sin that is in every human being's heart.

Our natural inclination to turn away from God. Our natural inclination to live for ourselves rather than God. No matter how hard they tried they kept failing. They couldn't obey God.

And so through Ezekiel God promises that one day he's going to solve that problem. That broken relationship between him and people. By firstly forgiving them.

That's what he means by washing them with clean water. Sprinkling clean water on them. It's a symbol of being washed of sin. Being forgiven.

But notice that's not all they need. They don't just need to be forgiven. Because they had been forgiven previously.

[10 : 06] And you know what they did? After they were forgiven? They went out and did exactly the same things. Again and again. No.

What they also need more than being forgiven is to have a change of heart. To solve the underlying problem that was causing them to sin against God in the first place.

That's what they needed. And that's the second thing God talks about through Ezekiel here. When he talks about changing their very hearts. Changing them from the inside out. That's what they need.

That's what people really need. You may know that I have a car that I'm often fixing up. When things go wrong. I'm not fixing it up quite as much as Adrian's fixing up his Landy.

But there are things. It's an oldish car. And there are things that go wrong. And I suspect that God gave me this car to provide me with an endless string of sermon illustrations.

[11 : 02] Because the other day Jean was driving this car and it started overheating. Steam started coming from the bonnet. And so she pulled into a service station and they opened up the bonnet.

And they realized that the water level was really low. And so they topped it up with water. And off she went. And not 100 meters down the road it happened again. The car started overheating. And she pulled into the next service station that was just down the road.

And they topped it up again with water. And sure enough off she went. And it happened again. And so she basically crawled from service station to service station until she was home.

Because just topping up the water was not enough. You see the problem was deeper than that. There was a deeper underlying problem. Which because I have a mechanic next door.

I managed to find out what it was and replace the faulty part. And I'm glad to say that the car is working well now. But I think many people are like that faulty car.

[11 : 57] Crawling from one church service to the next. Getting topped up. Getting some forgiveness from the priest or the rabbi or the prayer of confession. Or whatever.

But then they go out and do exactly the same thing as they've just asked forgiveness for. Don't they? Don't we? Because they're not ever solving the underlying problem.

Which is in their hearts. And that's why God knew for the situation to change he would need to do more than just forgive people. See coming to church is not just about getting forgiveness.

Jesus would need to change their hearts from the inside out. And that is what he is referring to here when he's talking to Nicodemus. And he tells him about being born again.

He's talking about the same thing Ezekiel was talking about. That all people need if they're going to have a new life. Not just to be forgiven. But to have a new heart as well.

[12 : 59] And so that's why we need to be born again. That's why Jesus is so insistent in saying that you cannot see the kingdom of God. Unless you are born again. But how does this happen?

How does one become born again? Where does it come from? Well that's the next thing we learn in this passage. The source of rebirth. Not only the need for it but the source of it. Now I'm assuming here that you had no control over your first birth.

Right? You didn't have a conference with your parents before and decide when you were going to get born. And under what circumstances. You had no control over your physical birth.

You had no choice in the matter. It didn't come from you. Well Jesus goes on to tell us here the same is true of your spiritual birth. It doesn't come from you.

Or from me. Just as you didn't give yourself physical life you don't give yourself spiritual life. Look what Jesus says in verse 7. You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again.

[14 : 04] The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear it sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit. So Jesus uses the wind as an illustration here.

And he says it is a mystery where the wind comes from. Especially of course to first century Jews who didn't know about high pressure systems and isobars. And didn't have synoptic charts.

To them the origin of the wind was a total mystery. Well so Jesus says is the movement of the spirit in bringing people to new birth.

There's nothing we can do that can determine who becomes born again. And we don't get born again by doing a whole bunch of religious stuff like Nicodemus.

This great religious teacher thought. You see he thought he was fine. He thought he was right up there with God. That he was born again. I mean not born again.

[15 : 05] He thought he was right with God. And then Jesus says well you're actually not born again. You're religious. You know the scriptures. You serve at the temple. But you're not born again. So in Jesus' eyes Nicodemus is really no better than anyone else.

Because there's nothing we can do. Religious or otherwise. To make ourselves born again. You know and it's frustrating to me as a pastor. I would love to be able to tell you.

Here's a list. Follow these steps. You know follow this process. Here's the formula. To be born again. But I can't. I can't. It's out of my hands.

Whether you are born again or not. As much as it's out of your hands. And that is one of the most frustrating things. To me as a pastor.

I would love for there just to be a switch that I can flip. To make you born again. But I can't. What I can tell you though.

[16 : 06] Is how you can work out whether you are born again or not. Which is the third truth we learn in this passage. The evidence of rebirth. So we've seen the need for rebirth.

We've seen the source of it. But now what's the evidence for it? How do you see rebirth in someone? Because notice when Jesus was talking about wind. And not knowing where the wind comes from.

He also said something else about the wind. Did you notice? He said that despite not seeing it. You can still hear its sound. So the wind. Invisible as it is. Still has a noticeable effect.

And as the storms in Cape Town. At the beginning of winter showed. And as the recent hurricanes in America have showed. Wind can have a very powerful effect.

Even though it's invisible. Even though you can't see it. It can have a huge effect. Well the same is true of spiritual birth. Jesus says it is invisible. You can't tell just by looking at someone.

[17 : 09] Whether they are born again or not. Another huge frustration I have as a pastor. And yet we can see the effects. Of being born again.

And so what are these effects according to Jesus? Well for one. In what a person believes. Look at verse 11. Very truly I tell you. We speak of what we know.

And we testify to what we have seen. But still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things. And you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

Now this is quite something. Because he is saying this to Nicodemus. The guy who came and started the conversation. By telling him that he believes. That Jesus is from God.

And yet Jesus says. Well no Nicodemus. There is a whole lot that you don't get. There is a whole lot that you are not believing about me. And that is how he knew. That Nicodemus wasn't born again.

[18 : 05] That because he and the other religious leaders. Don't believe the testimony of Jesus. And what the prophets said about him. So even though he believes that Jesus is from God. There is a lot that he obviously still doesn't believe about him.

Why? Because he is not born again. You see for us to believe everything God has said in the Bible. Through the prophets and the apostles.

And of course Jesus himself. For us to believe that this book is in fact God's word. That it is not just the words of men. But that every word in this Bible is truth.

And inspired by God. And without error. That needs to be a work of God. You see we can't convince ourselves that the Bible is God's word.

Without him opening our hearts to believe that truth. And that is the first and foundational part of being born again.

[19 : 05] To accept the testimony of scripture as God's word. I mean imagine you're writing letters to someone overseas. I know they used to do that in the olden days.

Actually write physical letters and post them. You can't have a real relationship. If you're depending on these letters. For your relationship with this person long distance.

You can't possibly have a relationship with them. If you don't believe that the letters you're receiving are actually from them. Can you? If you always harbor this doubt in your heart.

I'm not quite sure these letters are from them. You can't have this relationship. Well neither can you have a relationship with God. And start new life. Unless you truly in your heart of hearts believe.

That the word of God is really of God. And that is the first sign of spiritual rebirth. It's a new understanding.

[20 : 00] It's seeing the Bible in a whole new light. It's realizing that this is not just another book. But it's realizing the power of this book. That this is the word of God.

And that will come out in how we treat the Bible in our daily lives. Whether it's gathering dust on the shelf or not. Because that will show what we really believe the Bible to be. And the first evidence of rebirth is believing the Bible to be the most important thing in this world.

The only perfect thing in this world. And the word of God. Secondly rebirth is seen in what you rely on. Verse 14. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness.

So the son of man must be lifted up. That everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. Now Jesus here is referring to the time recorded in the book of Numbers for us. You can read that when you're at home.

When the community of Israel sinned against God. And in punishment for their rebellion he sent snakes amongst them to bite them. I'm sure Alan's heavy metal star would have actually enjoyed that.

[21 : 07] But most of the Israelites didn't. Because these snakes were venomous. And they killed many Israelites. And of course they realized this was a punishment from God.

So they repented. And God sent salvation by telling Moses to make a bronze snake. Wrap it around a pole. Hold it up. And miraculously anyone from Israel who was bitten by a snake who looked at this.

Would be cured by God. And they wouldn't die. All they had to do was look at it. All they had to do was realize they had no way of curing themselves. And lift their heads and look at the way that God had provided to heal them.

Well Jesus is saying that's what someone who is born again does with Jesus. That's the attitude they have towards Jesus if they are born again. They realize they have a deadly disease called sin.

They realize they cannot cure it by themselves. And they simply put their trust in Jesus by looking at him on the cross through eyes of faith.

[22 : 08] Believing that there he took their sins. As opposed to those who try to cure themselves through religion or good works.

Those who trust in their own goodness to be right with God. No. Someone who is born again is someone who simply trusts in Jesus to take their sins away.

Who look to him not to themselves for salvation. Who look to him not to themselves for being right with God. That's the second sign of rebirth. And then finally rebirth is seen in how you live.

Listen again to how Ezekiel describes this rebirth that Jesus is talking about here. This is back in Ezekiel. The words of God. He says, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

[23 : 15] Okay. So spiritual rebirth. The spiritual rebirth that Ezekiel was talking about. That Jesus is talking about with Nicodemus. Is seen in a new desire to obey God. A new desire to really obey God's laws and decrees in scripture.

To pursue, in other words, what he wants in your life rather than what you want in your life. That is the evidence of a new heart. But note, obedience to God is not a way to become born again.

It's a result of being born again. It's proof that you are born again. And not perfect obedience either, which is impossible in this life. But a movement and a desire towards becoming increasingly obedient to God in every area of your life.

Is that a desire you have? Or are you quite happy living how you are right now? Because these are what will be true of someone if they have been born again.

Which leaves one question. Are these true of you? Have you been born again? I'm not asking do you come to church?

[24 : 23] Or how long you've been coming to church. I'm not asking you if you know your Bible well. Or even if you believe in who Jesus is. So did Nicodemus. What I'm asking you this morning is have you been born again?

Not are you a member of council? Not do you serve up front? Not do you play music? Not do you serve communion? That's not what I'm asking you. I'm not asking you if you teach the Bible to other people.

I'm not asking you if you serve tea. I'm not asking you if you serve at the back in the technical department. I'm not asking you if you've been coming to church since you were a child.

What I'm asking you is are you born again? Have you, has God changed your heart yet? A woman once came to George Whitefield, the great preacher.

And she said to him, every time I've heard you preach, all you say is, you must be born again. Why don't you say anything else? Whitefield looked at her and said, because you must be born again.

[25 : 25] And so must you. And so must I. Are you? Has God given you a new heart yet?

One that truly believes his word. One that truly trusts his son. And one that is careful to obey his laws. If not. Pray.

And ask God for a new heart. Because only he can give you that new heart. I can't. You can't. Only he can change your heart and give you new birth.

And if so, if you have been born again, then praise God. Realize what he's given you. Praise him this morning. Thank him for the miracle of life.

Eternal life that he's given you in Jesus. Not just thanking him for the life on earth and the things of earth, which we so often thank him for. But eternal life.

[26 : 20] Thank him for the life to come. And the promises of heaven that he has given to those who believe. Realize what a privilege it is that you believe what you believe this morning. And pray that he would do the same miraculous work in the people you know.

Well, let's pray to him now, shall we? Lord Jesus, we do thank you not only for coming to this world, but for teaching us in the way that you do.

We thank you for not holding back when Nicodemus came to speak to you, but telling him the truth that he needed to hear. We thank you for telling us the truth that we needed to hear this morning.

Lord, we do pray that you would cause new birth to happen in our hearts. Lord, I pray for all who are here this morning who have not been born again.

Lord, there's nothing I can do for them. There's nothing they can do for themselves. But Lord, we know that you, you can do miracles.

[27 : 24] And you do and you have done miracles in people's lives. And we pray that you would do a miracle in their life today. And Lord, we do pray that you would move our hearts to be careful.

To follow your decrees. To follow your will. To live for you in our lives. And we pray, Lord, that you would lead us on the road that leads to everlasting life. In Jesus' name.

Amen.