

The Blueprint for Being Born Again

Scripture: John 3:3

Code: 43-12

For now, I want to encourage you to open the Word of God to the third chapter of John as we continue to look at this very important portion of Scripture on the new birth, being born again. We are returning to what is the definitive text in the gospels on the new birth. Our teacher here is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This, of course, is for most of us who have been in the church any length of time, a very familiar portion of Scripture. The terminology “being born again” is part of evangelical lingo and has been for a long, long time.

But in spite of the fact that it's familiar terminology and it's thrown around a lot and has been certainly all through my lifetime, there seems to be a failure on the part of most Christian people to understand what new birth means. It's not obscure, not difficult to figure out; it's all bound up in the analogy itself, being born.

Let me read the passage for you, verses 1 through 10, and then we'll take another look at it. I told you last time, and I'll tell you again, we have to go slowly through this because it is so important, it is so critical. So we're not going to finish these ten verses this morning, but we'll dig down deep enough so that you'll be greatly enriched and encouraged by what you learn.

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these things that You do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘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?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed 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’s going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you *the* teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?’”

Now our Lord’s message is very simple. The kingdom of God is entered only through being born again. The kingdom of God is the sphere of salvation, it’s the people ruled by God who have eternal life and are on their way to heaven. The only way to enter the kingdom of God is by being born again.

That's the only way. Apart from that, no one enters the kingdom of God.

Now as I said, this is a common idea. We even talk about born-again Christians; that is very familiar to all of us. But we don't seem to get a grip on the essence of this analogy. The point of our Lord's analogy is simply this: being born is not something that you have anything to do with. You didn't have anything to do with your physical birth, nor do you have anything to do with your spiritual birth. Being born physically is something that happened to you, completely out of your control. And being spiritually born is something that happened to you completely out of your control. In both cases, God created you by the means of your parents, but nonetheless God created you. Your parents could give you physicality, but only God could create your spirit. And in the spiritual sense, being born again is an act of God by which He recreates you. It's a new birth. And that's the point of the simple analogy. This we call the doctrine of regeneration. What does it mean? It is simply a term that describes the necessity that a person receive a new birth, a new life, a new nature, a new disposition, a new character, a new mind from God and that person makes no contribution to that.

As I told you last time, spiritual birth is the second work of God in salvation, if you want to sort of split them out. The first work of God was election when He wrote our names down in the Lamb's Book of Life, chose us before the foundation of the world and predestined us to become His children. That was the first act of God. The second is to regenerate us. The work of election took place in eternity past; the work of regeneration takes place in time present.

Now to understand the doctrine of regeneration is to understand the essence of salvation as a work of God. And that's the point here. This analogy is very instructive, very simple, very basic; really should not be misunderstood at all. To enter the kingdom of God, whatever it is you may have accomplished morally, religiously, ritually, ceremonially in terms of human goodness is immaterial because you can't contribute anything to your birth spiritually, any more than you contributed to your birth physically.

Now all of this comes out in this discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. And I would remind you that this is a cryptic account, that is to say it's a summarized account. Nicodemus came to Jesus, you remember, "at night" it tells us in verse 2, and no doubt the conversation lasted for hours if not all night. And what you have here is a summation and a representation of the dialogue that was there, but there was so much more that must have been said than just this. So I'm going to take the liberty to fill in what might have been discussed. How can I do that since I wasn't there? I can borrow all of that from the writers of the rest of the New Testament to whom the Holy Spirit brought to mind in the great work of inspiration and revelation, the truths that they needed to know. What Jesus says here only introduces the subject of being born again, of regeneration, and the rest of the New Testament enriches and expands and elucidates on that subject.

Now as we approach this particular portion of Scripture, let me give you a little bit of a running start. I always like to do that. So go back to chapter 2, verse 23. Jesus is in Jerusalem; you know what's

been going on there. He attacked the Temple and threw everybody out of the Temple because they turned it into a business and corrupted it and dishonored God. He is still in Jerusalem at the Passover in verse 23. And following the Passover was the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasted another week. So He's there for a couple of weeks, at least. And according to verse 23 He's doing miracles called signs, and they're so convincing that many believed in His name. So the first thing that I want you to note is that Jesus in Jerusalem is doing miracles, visible miracles to this massive crowd that have assembled there for these very important annual festivals among the Jews. And they're so powerful, these miracles, and we would know what they would be, miracles of healing, miracles of casting out demons, things like that, because that's what marked His entire three-year ministry. And they're believing in His name. People are believing in His name.

However, this faith is not saving faith, and that becomes clear in the next two verses because Jesus on His part was not entrusting Himself to them. And the verb is the same. It says in 23, "Many believed in His name." The same verb is used in 24, "But Jesus was not believing in their believing." He had no faith in their faith. In other words, He knew that it wasn't saving faith; it wasn't full faith; it didn't have enough content.

How did He know that? "Because He knew all men. He didn't need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man." So you have two things working here. You have superficial faith at work, or initial faith, or beginning faith. And then you have the omniscience of Christ. So you have a description of the people who are there who have this kind of an initial, basic, non-saving kind of faith. And then you have the Lord Jesus who is obviously God because only God knows how people think and what their thoughts are. So the omniscience of Christ demonstrating His deity and the condition of the soul of man of superficial faith. Those two things are indicated there in verses 23 to 25.

Now when you come to chapter 3, those two things come together. Here in this illustration you have one of the many who believed. They are mentioned in verse 23; here's one of them. And he speaks not only for himself, but he speaks for the rest of the group who believed that he knows about because he says in verse 2, "Rabbi, we know." And so he's speaking not only for himself but those others who believe that had, you know, met each other and recognized that they had this common response. "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." So that tells us what they believe. What did they believe? That He was a teacher, that He had come from God. He was at least a prophet. They knew not in their lifetime because there hadn't even been a prophet for 400 years, there hadn't been miracles for a long time. You have to go way back into the Old Testament to find miracles happening, way back past the post-exilic prophets. So they weren't used to miracles, but they did know Old Testament history that God did mark out His prophets like Moses and Elijah by miracles. And so they know at least this is a prophet, a teacher from God, which is short of saying He's the Son of God and the Messiah, and the Savior, and the Lord and so forth. That's why it's not a saving faith. So he gives us what they believe,

that this is a teacher from God and we know that because nobody can do the miracles you're doing. They're clearly miracles; they're clearly designed to demonstrate His deity and the power of God. So they recognize that.

Then when you come to verse 3 Jesus ignores what Nicodemus says and reads his mind and says, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he can't see the kingdom of God." What was in Nicodemus' mouth was an affirmation that's recorded in verse 2. "We think You're a teacher come from God because of the miracles You do." What was in his mind was, "I don't know how to get into the kingdom of God." And so Jesus bypasses His initial, I guess, polite introduction "rabbi" and confession of what he believed—goes right to the issue of his heart. So here you have an illustration then of the supernatural omniscience of the Son of God who reads a man's mind accurately, and you have an illustration of superficial faith, just as was indicated at the end of chapter 2.

Now as we dig into this chapter, I want to split it down to three simple parts. Number one is the sinner's worry, and that looks at the anxieties in the heart of Nicodemus, and we dug into that last week. And then the Savior's Word to Nicodemus that brings an answer to that worry. And then finally the Spirit's work, which will show up particularly in verse 8. But again, let's go back to the analogy here of new birth.

Salvation is not gained by those who try harder. Salvation is not gained by those who live better. Salvation is not gained by those who become more moral, more religious, take religion to its highest level, forsake certain vices. No, the kingdom of God is not gained by anything a person does. The kingdom of God only opens to those who are born again; or the term again is *anōthen* in the Greek and it means "from above," "down from above." You have to be given life from above, and that's not something that you can do spiritually any more than you can do it physically. The kingdom of salvation, we said last time, opens its doors only to those who abandon all human effort as a means of salvation, who cease trying to earn their way in and literally are born from above by the power and will of God.

Now let's go back to the text with that sort of in mind. Looking again at the sinner's worry. Nicodemus is introduced in verse 1 as a Pharisee. Pharisees were...were literally archetypal hypocrites. They were models of what hypocrisy was. In fact, they are condemned by Jesus in the most blistering malediction on the pages of the New Testament, Matthew 23, where He calls them sons of hell who produce more sons of hell, where He repeatedly calls them hypocrites and pronounces damnations and curses on them, one after another, after another, after another, after another, Matthew 23. They tell people to do things that they don't do. They put burdens on people of legalism that they don't help them carry. They essentially are liars. They are phonies; they are frauds described as whitewashed tombs on the outside, inside full of corrupt dead men's bones. He was one of those. He was a man who was like the apostle Paul—zealous for the law, traditional, kosher, blameless before the law, externally fastidious about keeping every law, every ritual, every little minute kind of tradition that had

developed and he lived as a hypocrite. And hypocrites know that there's a difference between the outside and the inside because the spirit of a man, 1 Corinthians 2 says, knows what is in the heart of a man. So he knows what's going on. He's a hypocrite.

Now he's climbed the hypocrite...the hypocritical pile to the very top because he is a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of seventy people, and to be in that group you had to be one of the most elite of all hypocrites. He was also labeled in verse 10 as *the* teacher of Israel, which means that he had climbed the pile of academia and biblical knowledge and was regarded as *the* teacher. So here is a man extremely religious, extremely fastidious. He is...he is at the pinnacle of what would be called a Pharisaical, Judaistic nobility. He is elite when it comes to that, devotedly moral, externally following every detail of the law and on the inside he knows he is not in the kingdom of God. He has no assurance that his eternal soul belongs to God. He has no assurance of forgiveness of His transgressions and his sins which are many, the least of which is certainly the most common of sins, and that is his hypocrisy. The greatest of which is his rejection of the way of salvation, which was always by faith and grace and penitence. He is a hypocrite. He has no relation to God, no place in the kingdom, no assurance of forgiveness, no hope of heaven, and he knows all that because the spirit of a man knows what's in a man.

So he comes to Jesus. And what is he doing? He comes by night; he needs some help. And the help that he wants is how do I get in the kingdom. And you know what his approach is going to be. His approach is going to be, I'm not in the kingdom. I know I'm not in the kingdom. What do I need to do? I've done everything I know to do. I've kept every law I know to keep. I've kept every biblical law I know to keep. I've kept every rabbinic traditional law I know to keep, I've dotted every i, crossed every t, my whole life, that's why I've achieved what I've achieved religiously. In a sense you could say he may well be the pope of Jerusalem. I mean, he's hit the top of the pile.

What do I do? Where do I go? What more do I need to do? What other thing do I need to do? Or what thing do I need to delete out of my life? What am I doing that I need to stop doing? What am I not doing I need to do? And Jesus says to him this: "If you want to enter the kingdom, you've got to be born again." Which is to say, "Nothing you've ever done makes any contribution. Everything you are needs to be dead. Everything you have achieved needs to die, is dead—dead works as we read in Hebrews 9." Because the kingdom of God, verse 3, the kingdom of God, the realm of salvation is only for those who are born again, or you can't see it, meaning you can't participate in it, you can't be a part of it, both in your life here and forever in the glories of heaven. He ignores the greeting. He doesn't comment on the greeting, at least John doesn't record his comment on it if he did. He reads Nicodemus' mind. He goes right to his mind because He knew everyone's mind. He knew what everybody was thinking 'cause He's God. And He shatters in that one statement to bits all the stained glass ideas of religion. All religious works, all moral works are useless, impotent to provide anything by which a man can enter the kingdom. This is the truth of regeneration. And is predicated on the fact that the best that a man can do is wretched, that all our moral works, and all our religion is useless to

satisfy or please God.

Ephesians 2 says, "You're dead in trespasses and sins." Ephesians 4, "You're cut off from the life of God." This is a dead man, a blind man, an ignorant man, a hopeless man and on top of that, a hypocrite. From there you can't get to God's kingdom. You can't. Unless you're born from above, born again, have another birth that comes like your first birth from above. You need to be created by God again spiritually. This introduces to us the truth of regeneration.

Now I want you to get this, going to give you a little theology this morning. When you look at salvation, you could say when I say I'm born again, you mean by that the full orbs of salvation. You could say I'm regenerate and you could mean by that fully the reality of salvation. If you said I was converted, you could mean the same thing. If you said I'm redeemed, you could mean I'm speaking in general terms of my salvation. You could say I've been justified. You could say I've been sanctified, and all of those could be general terms to describe your salvation.

But at the same time, they can all be broken down as individual components in the panoply of realities that make up salvation. Regeneration is different from justification. Justification is different from sanctification. Sanctification is different from conversion. Conversion is different from faith. And faith is different from repentance. Those are all a way to describe the whole, but they can also be broken out as component parts. So let's talk about regeneration not in its general sense, the way we would throw it around when we say I'm born again. Let's talk about it in its specific sense and see what it is in terms of its biblical, narrow definition.

Now let me help you with this. Some of you who have studied theology. When you come together to this term "regeneration," when you bring yourself to visit this declaration, this great doctrine of regeneration, you're touching the truth of irresistible grace. Now you will remember that phrase if you know Calvinism, total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance, the little tulip acrostic. So irresistible grace is where you are when you come to the doctrine of regeneration. Okay? Some would call it the supernatural subpoena. Some would call it the unyielding summons, the saving call. But this is where God draws you to Himself, out of your deadness. This is where God drags you out of the grave. This is regeneration. This is what enables the dead sinner to believe, to repent, to call out to Christ. This is what enables us to come to Christ in faith.

Now the New Testament is crystal clear on this and it's everywhere and not I'm not going to take you everywhere, but am going to take you somewhere. Second Corinthians 5:17, "If any man be in Christ he is"...What?... "new creature," "new creation," "new creation," okay? If any man's in Christ, he's a new creation. You've been born again; it's a new creation. Now remember, I told you what Jesus said to Nicodemus when He said to him, "You must be born again," was that everything you've done in the past is useless. It's all dead works. It doesn't matter, it's useless. It wouldn't make any difference if

you were a prostitute or if you were *the* teacher in Israel, you're in the same condition. Because none of that counts; none of that matters. You have to be born again. Born from above. This is a powerful truth. We'll come back to this at a later time, but in 1 Peter 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again." Blessed be God. We give Him all the glory, all the credit. He caused us to be born again. He birthed us. He birthed us. And the New Testament says this repeatedly, one wonderful comment is made in the sixth chapter of Romans by Paul where it says, "Present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead." "Present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead." Ephesians 2:4, "God being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead, in our transgressions, made us alive." It's always God who makes us alive, who creates us, who gives us life.

Now I want to leave Nicodemus and Jesus for the moment, and I want you to go to James chapter 1, because this is where I'm going to fill in some of the gaps that may well have been in that conversation. And I say that because they're all over the New Testament and the Spirit of God revealed them to the other writers, but I want you to go to James chapter 1. There might be a number of places to go, but this one is especially condensed.

There's a lot of conversation about sin and temptation here, starting in verse 13. Temptation, evil, God doesn't tempt, verse 14, "Each one is tempted when he's carried away, enticed by his own lusts, and lust"...follow this..."lust when it conceives does"...What?..."gives birth to sin. Sin when it's accomplished gives birth"...same terminology..."gives birth to death."

So here you have the fallen condition of man, it's just the reproduction of temptation—he goes from temptation to lust, to sin, to death. In contrast to that you come to verse 17. In contrast to all those bad things, temptation, lust, sin, death, "every good thing given, genuinely good, truly good, every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."

So there's a tremendous shift between verse 16 and 17. Every good thing given, every spiritually good thing, this is inclusive, comprehensive, all that is holy, all that is righteous, every good thing given, every perfect gift is from above, *anōthen*, the same term that's used in John 3 for born again. And it all comes down, *katabaino*, "it comes down from the Father of lights." "The Father of lights" is an ancient Jewish title for God because when God began His creation, God said, "Let there be light." He's the Father of light—the Father of light and the Father of lights. He attached that light once He created light. He attached it to the moon, the sun, the stars, either in the way it's in the sun, as germane to its own entity, or the way it's in the moon as it's reflected. So God is the Father of lights. He's the Creator and that's the very important point. Every spiritual thing, every holy thing, every righteous thing given, every gift that can be deemed perfect because it is holy and righteous is from above. It's *anōthen* and it comes down from the Father of lights. Everyone—that's comprehensive and inclusive—God who sovereignly created the light that comes down from above, has given every good perfect gift in the category of what is holy, what is good, what is righteous. And then this

interesting comment. And with whom in that area, there's no variation or shifting shadows.

God did create light but light creates shadows, doesn't it? It creates variations. God created light but we don't have...we don't have perfect light all the time; we have light and darkness. We have everything from a blazing, blinding sun at mid-day to pitch black, crowded skies—darkness at night. And we have everything in between. We have the shadowy times as the sun rises, as the sun sets. There are all these variations in the physical light that God has created. But there are no variations in the spiritual gifts that He gives. That's James' point. Really a magnificent point because he ends verse 17 by saying, "With whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow." Literally from turning, there's a Greek verb here, it's a very interesting verb. Literally when it says a shifting shadow, it means turning. The rotating earth, the turning earth is what creates the shadows. The sun's not going anywhere but the earth is turning and creating shadows. But when he says there's no variation, he uses a verb *paralego* from which we get the word *parallax*. Studied that in a science class? A parallax means the apparent displacement, or the apparent difference in something by virtue of the perspective you have on it. For example, you look at something from this angle like columns in a building and it has a certain appearance, and you move somewhere else and look at it and it has a different appearance. That's a parallax. From different perspectives, you get a different view.

So, in the world that God has created, in the light that He has created, you have all kinds of shadows because the thing is turning and you have all kinds of parallax because perspectives change all the time. But when it comes to God in the realm of spiritual gifts, of holiness and righteousness, they never change from any perspective; they never vary. There are never any shadows, and no matter the vantage point you take, they're always the same, always the same.

And what is His best gift and in what...and to whom...do these gifts come? Well, they come in the kingdom to those who belong to it. And He describes that in verse 18. Here's His best gift, and here's the entrance to all His gifts which never change. "In the exercise of His will." Do I need to stop there and emphasize that? "In the exercise of His will He birthed us." "He birthed us." Well you can stop right there. He brought us forth. It's exactly the same verb as back in verse 15, "sin gives birth to death." In His kingdom He gives birth to us.

The glory of this divine gift is really stunning and it is the starting point for all His other gifts, for every good gift, every perfect gift follows. Having given us this, Romans 8 says, "How will He not freely give us all things in Christ?" Or Ephesians 2, where He saved us that He might dispense to us "the riches of His mercy forever and ever and ever and ever."

So we want to look at the starting point here in verse 18 and understand how it is that we are birthed by God into His family and hence into His kingdom. So let me ask the simple questions, what, who, how, why? What is regeneration?

Well, go back to verse 18, He brought us forth, He gave us birth. He birthed us. He gave us life. He made us live, brought us out of death. Regeneration is simply that. “The wages of sin is death,” Romans 6:23, “but the gift of God is”...What?...“eternal life.” The New Testament is just packed with revelation about God giving us life. That’s what regeneration means. Ephesians 2:1, “And you being dead in trespasses and sins”...that’s the condition of every human being; we need life, spiritual life.

Let’s see how John deals with it. We can’t deal with everybody, but look at John, 1 John 1, 1 John chapter 1, verse 1, John identifies Jesus as “the Word of Life and the Life was manifested.” And then he says, “The eternal life, and it was manifested to us.” So John has had this wondrous experience of receiving life from God through Christ who is that life.

Now go down to chapter 2 and let’s follow up what John has to say. Chapter 2, verse 28, he identifies believers as little children. He does it numbers of times through this one chapter alone. It starts that way in verse 1, talks about it again in verses 12 and 13, talks about it again in verse 18 that we are children because we’ve been born into the family of God. And then he says, in verse 29, “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.” That’s how He describes what it is to be a believer. What is it to be a believer? It is to be born of God, to be born from above, to be spiritually given life, to be dragged, as it were, out of the grave, to be awakened from the dead.

Chapter 3, and by the way, when you’re born of God it shows up because you practice righteousness. Why? ‘Cause you’re a new creation. “Old things have passed away, new things have become”—common, standard, normal. You’re a new creation. Chapter 3, verse 9, “No one who is born of God”—again, that’s how John refers to what it means to be a Christian—“no one who is born of God practices [goes on habitually practicing] sin.” Why? “He has a new seed of life abiding in Him. He can’t sin because He’s born of God.” Again you can understand that John, who wrote the account of Nicodemus, got the point about new birth, and it becomes the theme term by which he describes salvation in his epistle.

If you drop down to verse 14, “We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren.” Again this is how he describes what it means to be saved. You pass out of death into life and your life...you’re new, you’re a new creation. You follow righteousness. You don’t choose a practice of sin. You love your brother. Whoever doesn’t love his brother is still dead.

Chapter 4, verse 7, “Beloved, let us love one another. Love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God.” And again, the same terminology. He doesn’t say saved; he doesn’t say justified; he says, “Born of God.” Because these are the characteristics that are inevitable in the person who has been recreated. Ephesians 2:10 says, “We were literally recreated unto good works.” Chapter 5, verse 4, “Whatever is born of God overcomes the world,” “overcomes the world.” We overcome the

world, that is to say we “no longer love the world, the things that are in the world, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life.” We don’t love those things. We’ve overcome the world. Verse 12, “He who has the Son has the life. He who doesn’t have the Son doesn’t have the life, because the life,” verse 11, “is in His Son.”

So you can see just from looking at the wonderful little epistle of 1 John, which a lot of folks think is sort of a basic thing on the Christian life. Well, if it is, you start with the doctrine of regeneration, and you can declare yourself born of God as evidenced by the fact that you’re a completely new creation and the things that used to be part of your life are no longer the dominant forces of your life. You’re not perfect but the direction of your life is dramatically changed. You move toward righteousness, away from sin. You walk as Christ walked, or you desire to walk as Christ walked. You follow in that path. You love your brothers. You have no interest in the passing world ’cause you have been given life.

Peter says it this way in 2 Peter 1:4, “You became a partaker of the divine nature.” “You became a partaker of the divine nature.” What a great statement. The very life of God, you have the life that comes from God. You’re not like the rest of the human race. “The glorious manifestation of the children of God is not yet...has not yet appeared.” They don’t know what we are. They don’t know that walking around in this world, though we look like everybody else, we have the life of God in our souls, divine life.

So that’s what regeneration is. Who regenerates us? Go back to James 1. Who regenerates us? Who does this? Is there something we can do to pull it off? No. “In the exercise,” verse 18, “of His will, He birthed us.” John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the New Testament writers never tell anybody to do something to be born again, to say something to be born again, to pray something to be born again. They preached people to repent and believe. But they never told people to be born again because there are no steps to recreating yourself. Of His own will, monergistic not synergistic. You know, you’re not a believer because you took all the things that you wanted, all the desires that you had, all the bad feelings about the way you were living, threw them in a blender, God dumped in some of His own power and you drank the elixir of salvation. It’s not how it works. “Of His own will,” “of His own will”—monergistic; He chose you; He determined; He gave you life. This is a unilateral work of the Creator God. Only He could do, as John says in John 1:12 and 13, “It’s not by blood, genetics, it’s not by flesh, not by sexual relationships, or anything like that, it’s not by the will of man, not because you want it, not because you desire it; but it’s by God that you are born.”

Go back to the light analogy and look at 2 Corinthians 4. If I signed any of your books or anything along the way, you might see that I use this passage ’cause it’s so important. Second Corinthians 4:5, “We do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your bondservants [or slaves] for Jesus’ sake.” And then notice verse 6. Now we’ve heard what John had to say; we heard

what Peter had to say. Now let's hear what Paul has to say about this new birth. "God, for God who said, Light shall shine out of darkness." That's a reference to Genesis 1. God who said, "Let there be light is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." The reason that you have come to salvation is because God sovereignly turned on the light in you, dispelled your darkness, gave you life for death, light for darkness, sight for blindness, truth for ignorance. Paul says this also in Colossians 1, a wonderful verse, chapter 1 and verse 13, "He rescued us...He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son." He grabbed us from the domain of darkness and death and pulled us into the kingdom of His dear Son." This is a work of God. Colossians 2, verse 13, "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive. He made you alive, having forgiven you all your transgressions."

Again, the testimony of Scripture is that this is a work of God. Regeneration is re-creation, new life, being born again. It comes from above; only God can do it. He has already decided to whom He will give life and in His own time He gives that life sovereignly. In fact, in John 6:44 it says this, "No man comes unto Me unless the Father draws Him." It's the verb *helkuo* and that verb means "to compel." It's a compelling force, unless God drags him out of the grave, drags him out of the darkness, drags him out of the kingdom of Satan. That verb *helkuo*, the Father draws, is used in John 21 of dragging a net. In John 18 of drawing out a sword. In Acts 16 and Acts 21, of dragging a reluctant person into court. It means to compel, to force, to pull, to overwhelm. This is power grace, and that's why theologians call this irresistible grace. This is a work of grace not based on merit. This is grace and omnipotence, power grace, a work of God.

Once again, to hear from Paul, Titus chapter 3, and we're touching only some of the passages in the New Testament that address this. I don't know how it could be more clearer than this, in chapter 3, verse 5; let's go back to verse 3, "We were once foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in *kakia* [that's general evil], envy, hateful, hating one another. That was us. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us." He saved us. Follow, "Not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy by the washing of" ...What?... "regeneration." Regeneration is a birth that wipes out, that washes away all our transgressions and renews us in the Holy Spirit. He saved us.

You know, you contributed no more to your regeneration than Lazarus did to his resurrection. Lazarus was dead, several days dead, stinking dead, wrapped up corpse and Jesus came and said, "Lazarus, come forth." He made no contribution and neither did I and neither can you. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Nicodemus, your problem is not that there are a few things you still need to do. Your problem is not that there are a few things you need to stop doing. Your problem is nothing you have ever done or not done has any bearing on this. You need all of it to stay in the grave and you need to be recreated from heaven."

So you say, "Well how do I...what do I do? I want that. How does that happen?"

Well let's answer the question then, how? What? New birth, new life. Who? God in the exercise of His own will. Go back to James now, we keep bouncing back to James, that's our...that's our base; follow this, "In the exercise of His will, He birthed us"...here it comes..."by the Word of truth," "by the Word of truth." What's that? The gospel, the gospel: "Faith comes by...hearing." Repentance and faith come by hearing the message concerning Christ, Romans 10. "How will they hear without a preacher?" "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Whoever calls will be saved. How can they call on one they've not heard? How can they hear without a preacher? How can they have a preacher unless somebody is sent?

So we go and we preach because regeneration takes place by means of the Word of truth. It doesn't happen in a vacuum. Theologians through the centuries have said, "Regeneration can happen days, months, years before salvation." I don't think so. I mean, somebody...somebody can actually believe that you're regenerate but not saved? No. You have to understand this: regeneration is an element of salvation. Justification is an element of salvation. Redemption is an element of salvation. Sanctification is an element of salvation, and they all happen in one instantaneous miracle. And two other things are always there: repentance and faith. We're only sorting them out in terms of what's called the *ordo salutis*. Sorting them out from the perspective that one leads to the other. There can be no repentance. There can be no faith. There can be no embracing of Christ until the heart has been recreated.

So, how long does that happen before? I don't know. A sort of divine, heavenly millisecond? Let's put it this way. You can't be regenerated apart from hearing the Word of truth. It doesn't happen weeks before, months before. In the mighty power of God, He works to regenerate upon the hearing of the Word. He gives the gift of repentance. He gives the gift of faith. He justifies, He redeems, He sanctifies, and it's all one-moment miracle.

But understand this, faith doesn't produce regeneration. Repentance doesn't produce regeneration. That regeneration comes first and only when you're made alive can you repent and believe. And it comes only with the Word of God. Listen to 1 Peter 1:23, "You've been born again," Peter writes, "you've been born again not of seed which is perishable, but imperishable, so you've been born again unto eternal life, you won't perish, through the living and enduring Word of God. The Word which was preached to you," Peter says. Regeneration then is this mighty work of God giving life to the dead, but it doesn't happen in a vacuum, it doesn't happen in isolation, it happens only upon the hearing of the Word.

Now go back to James 1, one final point to make in James 1 and that's why...why? The what of regeneration—new life. The who of regeneration—God, the exercise of His own will. The how of

regeneration—through hearing and believing the Word which is part of the regenerating work of God to enable us to do that. And why—why does God regenerate? End of verse 18, “So that we would be”; “so that” is *eis* with *einai*, which is a purpose clause in the Greek. “So that the purpose is this, we would be a kind of firstfruits among His creatures.” Remember in the Old Testament—Deuteronomy, Leviticus—you read about the firstfruits? Exodus even. The firstfruits, the best of the crop, the cream of the crop, the off-the-top which the farmer gathered into himself. And that’s exactly what you have here. Why did God do this? The answer is, He wanted a gospel harvest. He wanted from all of humanity to pick off a gospel harvest, to bring to heaven for His own joy and His own glory. This is John 6, “This is all that the Father gives to Me will come to Me.” These are the gifts, the redeemed sinners that God gives to His Son as a love gift, that the Son gives back to the Father in eternity. This is a gospel harvest. Out of all humanity, why is God doing this? Why is He giving life to the dead? In order that He might gather together a gospel harvest to become His own possession, to love Him and to adore Him and serve Him and worship Him forever and ever and ever in fellowship with Him in heaven.

Well, that’s the doctrine that Jesus was talking about to Nicodemus. You must be born again or you’re not going to be in the kingdom.

What would my question be at this point? Well, how do I do that? I mean, how does it happen? You can’t make it happen. And Nicodemus says that. How can a man be born when he’s old? He gets the analogy. How can I...how does this happen?

Let me tell you what you can do. You can do what any sinner can do, you can ask...you can ask God in His mercy and in His grace to give you life. And mystery of mysteries, Jesus said, “Him that comes to Me, I will never turn away.” “Seek and you shall find. Ask and it shall be given. Knock, the door will be opened.” That’s the mystery of it all.

So what was Nicodemus’ response? Amazing response? Be here next Sunday.

Father, we thank You for this amazing account. Thank You for this glorious, overwhelming truth of regeneration, the gift You’ve given us so that we can repent, believe, follow You, manifest righteousness, holiness, flee from sin, love each other. And most of all love and worship You forever and ever and be blessed beyond comprehension. There are no words. This is the unspeakable gift for which all the words of eternity piled together in a cacophony and a chorus coming from the lips of the glorified and the redeemed could never, ever fully praise you for such a gift. Thank You for this salvation. We pray, Lord, for those who have not asked, who haven’t come like Nicodemus in their heart, knowing they’re alienated, isolated, separated, dead, blind, darkened, and said, “How do I get in the kingdom? Please tell me,” and cried out, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner, and save me.” May there be some today here in this place who come before You, pleading that You would give them life. May the Spirit convict their hearts to that end.

Lord, be honored and be glorified today as we celebrate and worship You for this gift of life. And may we be willing and eager to share it with others, proclaiming Your glory. We pray in the name of Your Son.

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