

NEW BIRTH AND THE CROSS

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Key verses: John 3:1-21

INTRODUCTION

We need to be Born Again to be a Christian and participate in God's Kingdom, but faith in the New Birth does not save us – faith in Jesus and His work on the cross saves us – this results in the New Birth by the power of the Holy Spirit.

John 3:1-7 ESV

(1) Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. (2) This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." (3) Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (4) Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (5) Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Jesus Challenges the Need for New Birth

Eternity hangs in the balance when we are talking about the new birth.

Jesus confronts religious mindsets and exposes the spiritual condition of mankind.

- **Man's Hopeless Condition**

Jesus's teaching about the new birth confronts us with our hopeless condition apart from God's regenerating grace. Before the new birth happens to us, we are spiritually dead and are guilty before God's law and under his wrath.

- **Man Cannot Cause the New Birth**

We do not cause the new birth. God causes the new birth. Any good thing that we do is a result of the new birth, not a cause of the new birth.

John 1:12-13 ESV But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

1 Peter 1:3 ESV Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

Just like Nicodemus, you can have faith in Jesus for miracles but still need to be born again! Good religious niceness is not enough to bring us into the kingdom of God.

When Jesus said we must be "**born again**" He was not referring to any kind of literal or physical rebirth. He used the term "**reborn**" to affirm our need as individuals to be redeemed and

spiritually transformed, refashioned, and remade through God's saving grace and His death on the cross.

To participate in God's Plan (God's Kingdom Rule) man must be remade spiritually because he is dead in his sins.

John 3:3 ESV Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

John 3:5 ESV Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Faith in the Cross Leads to the New Birth

To explain this to Nicodemus, Jesus connected His mission on earth to an Old Testament story with which Nicodemus would have been familiar.

John 3:14-15 ESV And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus was referring to Numbers 21 and the plague of fiery serpents that spread through the camp of Israel because of their frequent complaining and lack of faith. To save those infected, Moses was instructed by God to place a bronze serpent on a pole at the centre of the camp. All who looked upon the bronze serpent would be miraculously healed from the poison.

The point of comparison Jesus was making to Nicodemus was that, at our core, we too are corrupted by the deadly poison of sin. Paul writes:

Romans 3:23-24 ESV ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...

Romans 6:23 ESV For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As God provided a way out for the Israelites, He provided the perfect Saviour, His Son, Jesus Christ. As the bronze serpent was raised up to save the children of Israel, so Jesus Christ was raised on the cross to be our saving grace.

Faith in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ always brings salvation.

God Loves – He Gave – Have Faith in His Son

John 3:16 ESV For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

We are invited to trust Jesus' cross because God loves us. God wants us to trust Jesus. It makes no difference how bad we are. God loves the world (even though it is in rebellion against Him).

The Reasons to Respond in Faith

John 3:17-21 ESV For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (18) Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (19) And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. (20) For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. (21) But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

God's purpose in sending Jesus was not judgement, but salvation.

Judgement is brought about by unbelief. Perishing is the result of refusing God's offer.

Some run from the light, but others run to the light!

Look to Jesus, lifted upon the cross, run to Him and move from darkness to light!

Connect your faith to the payment Jesus made for your sin through His blood shed on the cross. Connect your faith to victory over death and the curse of sin through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a free gift from God!

Let us return and have a closer look at...

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE NEW BIRTH?

Three statements.

1. What happens in the new birth is not getting a new religion but getting new life.
2. What happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself.
3. What happens in the new birth is not the improvement of your old human nature but the creation of a new human nature.

1. New Life, Not New Religion

What happens in the new birth is not getting new religion but getting new life.

John makes sure that we know that Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. The **Pharisees were the most rigorously religious of all the Jewish groups. All of Nicodemus's** religion, all of his amazing Pharisaic study and discipline and law-keeping, cannot replace the need for the new birth.

Even though Nicodemus is alive, breathing, thinking, feeling, acting, and created in God's image, Jesus says he's dead. There is no spiritual life in Nicodemus and therefore needs to be born again...

What happens in the new birth is that life comes into being that was not there before. This is not religious activity or discipline or decision. This is the coming into being of life.

To participate in God's Kingdom man has to be remade...

2. Experiencing the Supernatural, Not Just Affirming It

What happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself.

In verse 2, Nicodemus says, *"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."*

In other words, Nicodemus sees in Jesus a genuine divine activity. He admits that Jesus is from God. Jesus does the works of God. To this, Jesus does not respond by saying, *"I wish everyone in Palestine could see the truth that you see about me."* Instead, he says, *"You must be born again or you will never see the kingdom of God."*

Seeing signs and wonders, being amazed at them, and giving the miracle worker credit for them that he is from God, saves nobody. This is one of the great dangers of signs and wonders: You don't need a new heart to be amazed at them. The old, fallen human nature is all that's

needed to be amazed at signs and wonders. And the old, fallen human nature is willing to say that the miracle worker is from God. The devil himself knows that Jesus is the Son of God and works miracles.

The new birth is supernatural, not natural.

Verse 6 emphasises the supernatural nature of the new birth: *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

The flesh is what we are naturally. The Spirit of God is the supernatural Person who brings about the new birth.

Jesus says this again in verse 8: *“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

The Spirit is not a part of this natural world. He is above nature. He is supernatural. Indeed, He is God. He is the immediate cause of the new birth.

Jesus says, what happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Him but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. God the Holy Spirit must come upon you and bring new life into existence.

NB! The Gospel of John makes something else clear as well: Jesus is the life that the Holy Spirit gives. Or we could say: the spiritual life that He gives, He only gives in connection with Jesus. Union with Jesus is where we experience supernatural, spiritual life.

John 14:6 ESV Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 6:35 ESV Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

John 20:30-31 ESV Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; (31) but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So there is no spiritual life — no eternal life — apart from connection with Jesus and belief in Jesus. In the new birth, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ in a living union. Christ is life. Christ is the vine from where life flows.

The new birth is the creation of spiritual life, not the imitation of life.

3. New Human Nature by the Holy Spirit

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and had lots of religion. But he had no spiritual life. And he saw the supernatural work of God in Jesus, but he didn't experience the supernatural work of God in himself.

We have life by being connected with the Son of God who is our life, and we have that life by the work of the Holy Spirit.

What happens in the new birth is not the improvement of your old human nature but the creation of a new human nature — a nature that is really *you*, and is forgiven and cleansed; and a nature that is really *new*, and is being formed in you by the indwelling Spirit of God.

John 3:5 ESV Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

What does Jesus mean by the two terms “by water and the Spirit”?

Some believe that this is a reference to water baptism as the way the Spirit unites us to Christ. I do not believe it is true. So what then does Jesus mean?

Why “Water” Is Not a Reference to Baptism in John 3

Born of *water-and-the-Spirit* means *born by the cleansing, renewing power of the Holy Spirit*.

Here are several reasons why I think the reference to water here is not a reference to Christian baptism.

1. Christian Water Baptism did not exist at that time. It was not ordained until the time of Matthew 28:18-20.
2. Nicodemus knew about what Jesus said from the Old Testament. Christian baptism is not mentioned in the Old Testament.
3. It cannot possibly be maintained that water baptism is indispensable to salvation. People often come to salvation before being baptised. Many people are water-baptised but are not born again.
4. John 3:5 refers to the promise of Ezekiel. *“I will sprinkle clean water on you... you will be clean... I will give you a new heart... a new spirit...”* (Ezekiel 36:25-26) Not every mention of *“water”* means water-baptism.

I conclude that *“water and Spirit”* refer to two aspects of our newness when we are born again. And the reason both are important is this: when we say that a new spirit, or a new heart, is given to us, we don't mean that we cease to be the human being — the morally accountable self — that we have always been. **There is continuity. That's why there has to be cleansing. If the old human being were completely obliterated, the whole concept of forgiveness and cleansing would be irrelevant. There would be nothing left over from the past to forgive or cleanse.** The way to think about your new heart, new spirit, and new nature is that it is still you and so needs to be forgiven and cleansed — **that's the point of referring to water. My guilt must be washed away.** Cleansing with water is a picture of that.

But forgiveness and cleansing are not enough. I need to be new. I need to be transformed. **I need life. I need a new way of seeing and thinking and valuing. That's why Ezekiel speaks of a new heart and a new spirit.**

CONCLUSION

What happens in the new birth? In the new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith. Or, to say it another way, the Spirit unites us to Christ where there is cleansing for our sins, and he replaces our hard, unresponsive heart with a soft heart that treasures Jesus above all things and is being transformed by the presence of the Spirit into the kind of heart that loves to do the will of God.

Since the way you experience all of this is through faith, I invite you now, in the name of Jesus and by the power of his Spirit, to receive him as the sin-forgiving, transforming Saviour and Treasure of your life.