

You Must Be Born Again

John 3:3–9 • Part Two

This morning we look at an amazing passage that I pray will drag you from unbelief and separation from God to belief and faith, and adoption into Christ. We are looking at the very essence of what it is to be made alive by God. I want us to celebrate the wisdom and love and grace of the Lord seen in his sovereign, monergistic saving of souls he chooses. I want us to worship him for who he is and what he has done. I want us to *stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how he could love me, a sinner, condemned, unclean*. As we set our sights on that, let's hear the words of our God, who is sovereign in electing those to salvation whom he will, by reading from **Isaiah 55** and **Matthew 11**. [Stand in honor of the reading of God's life-giving word.]

Isaiah 55:1–3a — “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live...

Matthew 11:28 — Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

And now our preaching passage today, **John 3:3–8** — 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.’ 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.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

PRAY — Oh God, we need your power and special grace in this hour. No one can make himself alive. But through the reading and proclamation of the gospel, you are revealing salvation in Christ. So Lord, stir every heart in this room to seek you while you may be found, and call on you while you

are near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Have compassion on us as we turn to you— and we plead with you to abundantly pardon to the eternal praise and glory of the Lord Jesus. AMEN

Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, “Oh Lord God you know.” Where does that exchange happen? [Ezekiel 37, the Valley of Dry Bones.] The Lord told Ezekiel, “prophesy over these bones and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: behold, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.” And so he did prophesy, and God made what was dead and dry with no life in it **live**. And so it is when God causes every spiritually dead, dried up and hopeless soul to live, he blows the breath of his Spirit into their soul so that they are born again, they are born from above. It’s a heavenly birth that descends from God; not something originating on earth of human effort.

Why must I be born again?

Last week we drove the point that Nicodemus with all of his honors, all of his accomplishments and achievements— which were distinguished and extraordinary by any measure — his money, his standing, his position, his influence, his respectability, his moralistic uprightness, his self-imagined obedience to God’s law, his theological degrees, his brilliant and inquisitive mind, his sincerity, his eloquence, his genuine spiritual curiosity... none of these gained him entrance into God’s Kingdom. In response to all that Nicodemus was, and the best of what he represented, Jesus cut through all of that to address the great peril and danger that Nicodemus and everyone will face, which is our accounting to God and entrance into his Kingdom. You must be born again, Nicodemus, or you will not enter God’s kingdom. You don’t just need to be improved, or coached up— it requires total renovation of the whole being, starting at the heart, the core of who you are, and consuming the whole person. As the sinful nature is comprehensive, so must be the work of redemption, right down to the core. Jesus is bringing him to despair of his spiritual poverty so that he will turn to Christ and experience his eternal riches. So it is for every soul here, and every soul ever conceived: Despair of your spiritual bankruptcy and turn to Christ. You must be born again in him.

The reason is that we are dead in our sin. Holy God is the author and only source of life. There is no life apart from him. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. He made you for himself, just as he created our first parents for himself. He made Adam and put the breath of life in him. For some period Adam and Eve lived in communion with God,

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obeying what he commanded. But by the time we are little more than two short chapters into God's revelation, they rebel and sin against God, who is holy and without sin. That sin separated them from the Author of Life, because Jesus, the author of life, is holy and can abide no impurity, no sin, no defilement. Indeed, because he is holy, he consumes, destroys sin and sinners. And God delights to show mercy through Christ, whom he crushes as a substitute for those who turn to him.

Since the beginning, the cosmic rebellion of our first parents, we have all come with the fatal flaw of sin woven into the fabric of who we are. We are born dead in trespasses and sins, as Ephesians 2:1 says. Even at conception we are terminally tainted with sin — Psalms 51:5. Sin is what we want, what we love to do, and it is **what we do**. Jeremiah 17 diagnoses your heart apart from Christ as sick and beyond repair. We are born following Satan in rebellion; we do it by nature as well as by choice. (Ephesians 2) As a lethal injection administered in our criminal justice system contains three poisons, our being born sinners, our loving sin, and our actual sinning compose a just spiritual punishment by a spiritual God against spiritual sinners. The default position for every human soul is **autopsy dead** in sin. When we get to the end of the chapter, we will have it reinforced that God's lethal judgment against sin is not something we will receive if we don't do better; apart from being born again, we are right now in the grip of condemnation and spiritual death at this moment and have always been.

What then can I do to be born again? How odd that sounded in Nicodemus's ear. There seems to be some indignation on the part of this scholar about what sounds so outrageous to him: "Can a man crawl back up in his mother's womb to be born again?" He may be indignant, but in his indignation, he grasps the human impossibility of being born again. What if I were to say to you this morning that in order to enter the kingdom of God, you must swim entirely underwater from the US to Europe, grasping the ocean floor every inch as you go, with no help, no air, no gear. Whatever you might think of my mental state when I said that, the only reasonable response, ultimately, is, "That is not humanly possible." What then can you do to be born again?

What did the bones in the Valley do? Did they cry out? What can a corpse on an autopsy table do to "decide himself alive?" How can that corpse choose to live? Can he revive his own dead heart? Well, obviously, a corpse cannot choose to live **physically**, nor can a spiritually dead soul choose to live. If a dead corpse is to live again, it will first take a miracle. Secondly, that miracle will have to come from an outside source. That source is God — specifically it is the Spirit of God that breathes life into souls — as he did at the creation in Adam. As he did to the bones in the Valley. And as he does to

everyone who enters his Kingdom, and only those who enter his Kingdom. Only those born of water and the Spirit will see the Kingdom of God. God makes us alive by the breath of his Spirit.

We are not certain what the term **water** means. Scholars debate its meaning. It cannot mean baptism. We are not saved by baptism, but by grace through faith. Further, Nicodemus would have no concept of New Testament baptism. I don't think it means natural birth, as when the water breaks. The focus here is spiritual birth from above; flesh gives birth to flesh, not the things of the Spirit. I think the reference to **water** is refers to **repentance**, a gift which God also gives in the new birth. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. There are Old Testament instances of water baptism that marked a turning from sin. Or it could picture atonement, or cleansing from sin, as described in Ezekiel 36. Whatever it is, it remains a work of God that he accomplishes in his child whom he brings into his kingdom.

Nicodemus asks how one can be born again; how can these things be? What is impossible with man is possible with God. No doubt Nicodemus has read the prophet Ezekiel over and over and is familiar with it in ways that probably none of us in this room are. But there is more than the Valley of Dry Bones that he did not grasp in Ezekiel 37. He did not grasp what just before that in **Ezekiel 36: I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.**

See how God undertakes to act and redeem! He cleanses from sin. He changes their affections from pursuing idols and everything other than God. He causes them to love his Law and obey his rules. He does this by giving a new heart, putting a new spirit in them. In the Hebrew mind, the heart is the center of the will – it is what we love and pursue by volition. This is what God changes in us. He removes the dead heart of stone that pursues more death, more uncleanness, more idolatry, more rebellion. He takes that out and gives a new heart that loves the things of God. He puts his Spirit in his child to make them live and empower them both to will and walk in ways of love and obedience. That is the miracle of salvation. This is what it is to be born again. It is not a repeat-after-me prayer — though prayer is certainly part of coming to faith in Christ. It is not a decision made to walk the straight and narrow and claim to be a Christian. The requirement to be born again is accomplished by

God, who requires us to be born again, and it occurs at the heart level where he makes his elect new creations.

This is shocking to the natural mind still in the death-grip of sin. It utterly annihilates human pride. What kind of incredulous look did Nicodemus have on his face so that Jesus said, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” By grace are you saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus. Salvation is of the Lord. To everyone who is offended by this text, to everyone immediately responds with, “How dare you tell me there’s something that I cannot do”— to those never confronted with this truth that it is not in your hand to open the door to God’s kingdom, Jesus says, “Do not marvel at this.” Do not marvel at this. Take an honest inventory of your heart. Open your eyes to fully grasp the terrifying holiness of God and lay hold that he brooks no rebel, tolerates no sin, excuses no violation of his Law. You need a Savior. You must be born again.

How is it that God causes one to be born again? We will deal more with that in the weeks ahead, but to put it in a very concise and direct way, one is born again when God gives the dual gifts of repentance, that is turning from sin, and placing one’s faith in Christ. Faith is the vehicle God uses to move us into Christ. God uses the means of Gospel proclamation — that Jesus came to redeem and resurrect ruined sinners, and he accomplished that by paying the price for their sin on his cross. He shed his blood as an atoning sacrifice for the sin of those who come to him in faith. This is the Gospel, and it is the power of God. God uses it to make your dead heart be born again. This is why we preach the gospel. We believe God’s word that it will make alive those whom God has chosen to be born again. He uses the means of prayer. He uses the means of praying saints who plead for the souls of those yet in the death-grip of sin. He sends his Holy Spirit to open spiritually blind eyes to see their need of a Savior, and behold the beauty of his grace-effusing sacrifice. The Spirit opens your ear to hear his call, even as we read at the beginning of the sermon.

Many may despise the doctrine of election and protest that God did not grant them a choice in the matter. But those who raise an angry fist to God over this doctrine only display their contempt of God and expose the rebellious and foolish nature of their heart against him, unless he intervenes.

How is it with your soul? Do you hear him? Do you hear him calling, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters! Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Is the

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Holy Spirit applying the power and the beauty of the Good News of Jesus the Savior drawing your heart to turn from the death and wreckage of sin to faith in Christ? Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. There is mercy with the Lord, and today is a day of grace. All who receive him, all who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God, born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but born of God.

PRAY — Thank you that, according to your great mercy, you have caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.