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Series: People In Step With The Spirit
Message: The Holy Spirit and Salvation

Transcribed Message
October 21, 2018
John 3/Acts 16

There's an old movie that our family used to enjoy watching when our kids were young. It's called *Ollie Hobnoodles Haven of Bliss*. The thing that we enjoyed about it probably the most is when the mom would go out on the back porch and she would call the children home from wherever they were playing in the neighborhood. The reason it was so funny is that she would begin calling them at one frequency and at one tone. As the urgency for the children to get home increased, that frequency would increase with each step out on the back porch. The tone of her voice would change as well until she finally hit the frequency and the pitch and the kids knew this is the last call. They would go home then. There was in a sense a call and then there was an effectual call. I believe there is spiritual truth in that lesson as well because there is a call and then there is the effectual call of God's Spirit on our life.

We are going to look this morning at this matter of how and why it is that people come to faith in Christ. How and why do people come to faith in Christ? We're going to see from the Scripture this morning this truth. Our responsibility is to share the gospel. Clearly that is the commission that God has entrusted to us. The Holy Spirit is the one who opens the heart to believe. According to our theme verse in this series, it is the Spirit who gives life. I would suggest to you that every Sunday at Covenant Community Church and at churches like ours all around the country and all around the world, and in conversations that take place every day of the week with people, the gospel of Jesus Christ is presented. The gospel is shared and it is heard. In some cases, it is embraced and it is believed and it is welcomed. The question I ask you this morning is why and how does that happen?

I would like to start this morning by really addressing that basic issue and question. How and why is it that people come to faith in Christ? I think as you look at that question it can be answered in four simple ways. The first way I would suggest is

somebody might very well say I came by myself. I came by myself. There was a British monk named Pelagius who lived in the 5th century. If you had asked him that question, that's the answer that he would have given you. he said I came by myself. Now the problem with Pelagius is of course that he denied the need for the grace of God in his life. He denied the very fact of Original Sin. He denied the fact that we're born separated from God. He truly believed in his heart that he could of his own initiative and will save himself. Thankfully the Council of Carthage in 418 labeled him a heretic as did many councils after that.

The second way that that might be answered is someone might say I wanted to come and God helped me. I wanted to come and God helped me. I would suggest to you that is a small step away from Pelagianism. when someone says I wanted to come and God just helped me come. That's what we might call semi-Pelagianism. Last time I read my Bible, Romans 3 still says there is not one person who seeks after God. No not even one.

The third one is when somebody might say God gave me sufficient grace and I cooperated. God gave me sufficient grace and I cooperated. As I look at that third statement, the question that comes to my mind: what is it that enabled you to even make that move to cooperate with God? Is it in fact something within you that enables you to cooperate with God? Is there a little spark within you of goodness? Is there something that was ready and waiting and all it took was just a little sufficient grace and you cooperated with God in that process? Apart from the work of God? Apart from the grace of God? As I read my Bible, I read repeatedly that the Bible says salvation is of the Lord. Salvation is of God. That third answer seems to suggest that salvation is of God and man.

I would suggest to you that the right answer if I can be so bold is this last one that God in His grace moved me from unbelief to belief. God in His grace initiated towards me and He moved me from a place of being unwilling to a place of being willing. It really gets back to how seriously do I take God when He describes my condition before Him. Again the Bible says to us that apart from Christ, we are dead in sin. We're not just not feeling good. We're not even on life support. We're actually dead in sin. It would seem to suggest that my spiritual condition is such that I'm going to need something from

outside of myself to bring about this transition from unbelief to belief. I am separated from God. I am dead in sin. I am lost and without hope in this world.

The key point that I want to make this morning as we come to this lesson is did my salvation begin with some kind of self-movement on my part, self-movement toward God, or did it in fact involve God's movement toward me by the work and means of His Holy Spirit? I would suggest to you if it is from God, it is all of grace. If it is in fact from me and God, then it seems to me that it's a mixture of grace and works. Look at those four answers and here's what I think. I think no matter which one of those you initially thought might be the right one, I think most people who are reading their Bible land on number four. They may not pick number four for a variety of reasons, but I think at the end of the day you end up with number four and here's why.

I say that because how is it that we pray for people that God has put on our heart that we're burdened for their salvation? How is it that you pray for a family member that you long to see come to faith in Christ? How is it that you pray for God to use you in your neighborhood? How is it you ask God to use you at your place of work and business and your interactions socially? What do you want from God in the lives of those people? If I listen to you pray, I'm pretty sure what I'm going to hear is something like this: God, would you please work in John's life? Would you, God, please arrange the circumstances so that in Brenda's life you bring into her path other people who know you and love you, who may share the gospel? Most of the time we're praying, we're asking God to do what only He can. We're asking Him to intervene in people's lives. We're asking Him to change an unwilling heart to willing, to move somebody from unbelief to belief.

Do you think for a moment that when we're in heaven we're going to be doing anything other than giving praise to God and our Savior Jesus Christ for this work of grace in our life? Do you think any of us are going to spend any time at all patting ourselves on the back in heaven because we believed and we cooperated with God? I don't think for a moment that we'll do that and I'm sure that you don't need either. I'd love to have two passages of Scripture that would support what I just said and you know what? I've got two. All right, so here we go.

Let's go to two central passages that I believe show us how the Spirit works in salvation. Let's go back to John 3 where we read just a few moments ago. John 3 is a very familiar passage but let's jump in and spend a couple of minutes looking at the background of this passage. This familiar story to most of you begins with an encounter with a man named Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus is described for us in these opening verses as being a Pharisee. Now whether you know what a Pharisee is or not, this is the important thing. A Pharisee was the most religious person in Israel at that time. All you have to do is think of a religious person and that's describing for us Nicodemus. He is a religious man. In his mind, he is a lover of God. He reads the Bible, the Old Testament Scriptures. He prays I'm sure every day. He goes to the synagogue, to the Temple. He does all the things that would be expected of anybody who is religious. In addition to that, he had the best education that could be offered in the 1st century. He is also described as being a ruler so that means he's not just a Pharisee but he was part of an elite group of people, 70 of these men who make up what's called the Sanhedrin. They were the ultimate authority underneath the civil government for the religious life of Israel. So he is a significant person in terms of religious life in Israel. He is a part of the ruling body of the Sanhedrin.

Thirdly, he is described as being a teacher which would fit with being a Pharisee and in the Sanhedrin. He was charged with teaching his fellow Jews the Old Testament law. He would be very much of what we would think today and in the vernacular of our day, he's a preacher. He's a pastor. He's a priest. He's supposed to be and is viewed as being a very religious person. He comes to Jesus we're told at night. Now here's where we get to use a little sanctified imagination because we aren't told why he came at night. Most people say he came at night because he didn't want anybody to see him and that may very well be the case. I mean after all he's a Pharisee. He is a religious leader in Israel. He's a teacher of the law and Jesus has already at this point stirred up enough opposition for one of these guys to go to him during the daytime would just raise a lot of questions and probably create trouble for Nicodemus. So it may very well be that he came to him at night for that reason. But maybe he came at night because he wanted the most uninterrupted time that he and Jesus could have together. Maybe he came because that's what their schedules allowed, but in any event he and Jesus have

this encounter. Nicodemus starts off as we might expect he would and he makes some very kind comments about Jesus. Jesus in response to this religious man and to his kind comments basically says to this religious man, if you don't undergo the change that I'm talking about, you're going to hell. You're going to experience eternal separation from God. You're not going to enjoy and enter into the kingdom of God and the blessings of God.

Notice secondly the need for regeneration that Jesus brings up. Look again at verse 3: "Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" That term "born again". We don't hear it a lot today. If you were alive in 1976 and you had the capacity to understand what was going on in our country, you will remember Jimmy Carter in a national interview said he was born again. It was like the American people woke up and said, what did he just say? He was what? Most people honestly at that point had not heard even the terminology to be born again. Jimmy Carter kind of elevated the language of John 3 into the public awareness because he said he had been born again. It wasn't very long in which about 50 million other Americans said they had been born again too. We had a national awakening to biblical language if you will. If you look at this verse, Jesus says this is absolutely necessary. Jesus says truly, truly. That is just a way of awakening Nicodemus to some eternal, weighty truth. Every time Jesus uses that expression He is wanting His audience to sit up and pay attention because He is going to bring them something that He considers to be of absolute, essential nature. He says "truly, truly, unless..." There's no other way. This is an absolute necessity. You have to be born again. No exceptions. This is true of everybody. Just like you have to have oxygen to breathe and to stay alive, just like your car has to have gas to run, everybody who would want to see the kingdom of God, Jesus said, has to be born again. If you're not born again, you're not a Christian. When we say I'm a born again Christian, that's redundant. I'm a Christian. I'm Christian. I'm born again. I'm born again. They're saying the exact same thing. You can be a member of the church and not be born again. But you can't be a member of God's family without having been born again. Jesus says it is absolutely essential that without regeneration there is no eternal life.

When Jesus says you must be born again, He said you must experience a regeneration. Genesis. Beginning. Regeneration. A rebirth. You must be born again. The reason you need to be born again is because the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2 that we are by nature the children of wrath. In other words, we are born into this world with an independent heart and spirit in rebellion against God. You do not have to teach your children to be independent of your authority. It's there at the earliest age. It is simply because that's the condition into which they're born into this world. We don't come into this world as a blank slate and we write all kinds of messages on it and that becomes the person that we become. That of course happens, but we're born into this world separated from God. That's why Jesus said you have to be born again.

So what is needed is the work of God's Spirit. Now look at this. The Spirit's free and sovereign work. I want to come back and I want to pick up at verse 4: "Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?'" Bible teachers are not sure if Nicodemus is pushing back against Jesus almost in a way of being borderline ridiculous, or if he is truly expressing his absolute lack of understanding. It is probably the latter. "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter 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 marvel that I said you, 'You must be born again.' 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."

What you have in those verses is Jesus speaking about the divine initiative of the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit of God. He links it with this analogy of both birth and of the wind. Just as physically you are born and you are given life by a sovereign God, I believe you can speak as we did at the very beginning of the work of the Spirit in creation. The Holy Spirit is the giver of life, so the analogy is there even in physical life. The Holy Spirit giving life biologically is the same Spirit who gives life spiritually and brings about this rebirth, this regeneration. We can no more take credit for our physical birth than we can take credit for spiritual birth. How silly would it be for somebody to lay claim to the fact that they in some way had a part in their physical birth. We know that that is not true. No more can we say that about our spiritual birth. Martin Luther, the

great reformer, was debating about the utter dependency of the Holy Spirit in this work of regeneration. and he quoted our theme verse John 6:63 “It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is no help at all.” He said this: “The flesh profits nothing and that nothing is not a little something.” I just think that's great. It's the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is no help at all. That flesh can no more claim that it had a part in your spiritual regenesis, your spiritual birth then you can claim a part in your physical birth. That nothing is not a little something.

Jesus is going to go on in John 16 and he's going to tell us about how this works and what this looks like. In John 16, remember Jesus is talking about the coming Holy Spirit. and He said the Spirit when He comes is going to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. So the Holy Spirit is the one who's going to bring about the conviction of need and an understanding. It is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to understand the gospel. The natural man does not receive the things of God and neither can he know them. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2 they're spiritually discerned. So apart from the Holy Spirit, you and I hear the gospel repeatedly without understanding. The gospel is shared in most people's lives numerous times before they come to an understanding. It is only until the Holy Spirit brings about conviction. It is only when the Holy Spirit opens their eyes to the spiritual truth of the gospel that they believe. It's the Spirit who calls us. It is the Spirit who enables us to believe. It's the Spirit who brings life. Jesus uses the analogy of the wind. We understand wind in Oklahoma. We see it. We hear it. We feel it. It is a sovereign God who directs all of those things. We have no more control over that than we do over our ability to initiate a movement towards God in belief. That, my friends, Jesus says requires the Spirit of God to open the heart and mind and understanding of a person to where they hear that gospel. They're moved from being unwilling to willing. They're moved from unbelief to belief. John 3.

Now let's look at a second passage. The second passage is in Acts 16. I'll tell you at the outset the Holy Spirit is not going to be explicitly mentioned here, but in light of what Jesus said, we can't help but bring that truth over into Acts 16 and see that it is the Holy Spirit who is the giver of life. It is the Holy Spirit who brings about regeneration. It is the Holy Spirit who calls us into a personal relationship with God. We come to Acts 16 and we've got a background to this story. Paul and Silas are on the second

missionary journey. You know that Paul went on three different missionary journeys. He takes the first one and he goes and begins ministries in various places. The second one he basically goes and he does the same route more or less and he goes back and visits those same churches. As you begin reading in Acts 16 and verse 1 he's been to Derbe and Lystra. In verse 6 he's been to Phrygia and Galatia. Begin at verse 7 with me: "And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God has called us to preach the gospel to them."

So here they are on the second missionary journey and they're clearly enjoying God's blessing. God is at work and they're reconnecting with some of these people that they had previously met. God is encouraging all of them. In the midst of this, there is a vision. The vision that Paul receives must have initially been something of a disappointment because the vision said stop. Don't go in the direction that you're going. Go over here instead. I just say that because I think Paul like any of us was enjoying what God was doing and seeing God's hand at work. He was excited to press on and go forward. Suddenly the vision comes and says stop. I want you to go somewhere else. Paul in obedience does just that. Maybe he was thinking, as I probably would have as well, I bet God's got something even bigger and better and more amazing over here waiting for us. He did but not in the way that Paul expected. He goes to Philippi in obedience to the vision of the man of Macedonia. In Philippi, he encounters an elect lady.

I want you to see beginning in verse 11 how this is described for us: "So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city in the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in the city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down we spoke to the women who had come together. One who had heard us was a woman named Lydia." I'm going to stop right there. I would say that from the

human viewpoint this is a little anti-climactic. God's blessing has been on them. They're going gangbusters on this second missionary journey. God puts up the stop sign and he says no, Paul, I don't want you to go there. I want you to go to a different place. He comes to the city of Philippi and he encounters and has a meeting with what turns out to be kind of like the Ladies' Auxiliary. So here he is. Paul, don't go to Asia. I want you to go to Europe. He goes to Europe and God has a lady from where? Asia. Waiting for him. That's just exactly the way God works.

I want us to see three things that unfold in this passage about how it is that we come to faith. What it is that God does in our life? The first thing I want you to see is this matter of the common grace of God. The common grace of God. We read of Lydia that she was a worshiper of God. She was a worshiper of God. That to me tells us of the first phase if you will of the Spirit's work in her life. She has by no means yet come to an understanding of the gospel. She hasn't put her faith and trust in Christ. She is on some level open to spiritual things, which is again a part of the Spirit's work. If you came to Christ as an adult, you can probably relate to some point in your life where you had no interest at all in spiritual things and then unbeknownst to you the Spirit of God began to do a work in your life. He begins it in His common grace to open your eyes to some things and some conversations perhaps previously you had not entertained. You'll see the same thing, remember last week in our lesson. It was Cornelius. Cornelius who was referred to as being a man who feared God. He hadn't believed the gospel yet. He hadn't placed his trust in Christ but he was open because the Holy Spirit in common grace was doing a work on his behalf. The Bible speaks often of the common grace of God. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. The Word is proclaimed. The Word is preached and on one occasion you may not hear and understand a thing that is said. On another occasion because of the sovereign work of God's Spirit, your heart is open to do that.

Notice secondly that very thing. There's the conviction of the Spirit. there's the conviction of the Spirit. She paid attention to what Paul was saying. God had in His providence and His sovereignty arranged for these two people to meet here by the river bank in an unexpected and unplanned encounter. She was listening. In fact, the actual literal understanding of that is she kept on listening. She listened intently. She could not

get enough of what Paul was saying and the things that he was sharing about the risen Christ, about the good news of the gospel. Just as in your life at some point you came to appreciate and become more interested in spiritual things, the same thing was happening in Lydia's life. It was the convicting work of God's Spirit.

Here's what I want you to understand. You and I are not awakened to spiritual truth because of the cleverness of the presentation. You and I are not awakened to spiritual truth because somebody puts forward an airtight apologetic answer to a difficult question. I'm all about apologetics and I'm all for thinking of how to give a reason of the hope that is within us. But I want you to understand the spiritual principle that is being taught here. It has nothing at all to do with the cleverness of the presentation. It has nothing to do with how well argued and intellectually sound that argument might be as you put it forward. It absolutely has nothing to do with the personality and style and power of the preacher. My friend, it has nothing to do with the length of the invitation. People are moved to faith in Christ because a sovereign Spirit is bringing conviction and understanding of the gospel of God's grace. That is a work that Jesus says is absolutely essential and vital in every person's life who is going to come to faith in Christ. We are awakened by the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who brings God's truth into our life and gives us understanding. He's the one who moves us from being unwilling to willing and from unbelief to belief. It is the Spirit who gives life. the flesh is no help at all. Now, I didn't say that. Jesus did. It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is no help at all. No help at all. That nothing is not a little something.

There is a call to regeneration that Lydia experiences, and we read this amazing statement in Acts 16:14 - and the Lord opened her heart. And the Lord opened her heart. We know from what Jesus taught that this is very likely an expression that may refer to Christ the Lord, but it is the Spirit of Christ that has been sent to do this work of conviction and regeneration. It is the Lord who opened her heart. What is that? It's a synonym for faith. That is a synonym for belief. We could just as easily read here: and the Lord opened her heart and she believed. The Lord opened her heart and moved her from being unwilling to willing. The Lord opened her heart and moved her from unbelief to belief. This is the miracle of regeneration. I hope you appreciate and marvel and rejoice in the fact that if you know Christ and you have experienced regeneration, then

you have experienced the greatest miracle this side of heaven. You have undergone a transformation from death to life and from darkness to light. You have been moved by the work of God's Spirit. You have been adopted into God's family. You've been baptized with the Holy Spirit and united into a relationship with Jesus Christ. And you had nothing to do with it. It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is no help at all.

Now look with me at what it says here. Who opened her heart? Who opened her heart? Does it say she opened her heart? Does it say she cooperated with God and opened her heart? Does it say Paul opened her heart? It says the Lord opened her heart. In opening her heart, God moves and she responds in faith and in belief. Paul says in Ephesians 2 for by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God. What is the gift of God? For by grace are you saved through faith and it is not of yourself. It is the gift of God. Faith is the gift of God. Salvation is the gift of God. It is all a gift of God. It all comes to us by grace. We respond and believe but we respond and believe because the Holy Spirit has wiggled our willer to believe and moves us to believe. It is a sovereign gracious work of God's Spirit. Lydia's heart is opened to the gospel.

2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 9 says: "Who saved us and called us to a holy calling not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." How about Titus 3:5? Titus 3:5 says this: "He saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." That, my friends, is how and why we believe and trust in the gospel.

So what do you do? What do you do when you have believed? What do you do when you have responded in faith and believed? What do you think you do? We read in the 15th verse in Acts 16 that this is what Lydia did: "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.' And she prevailed upon us." So when you believe you do two things. You get baptized and then you take the preacher out for dinner. That's what it looks like here. She believes and is baptized. Do you realize that as you read the book of Acts every time there is a story of conversion somebody gets baptized? The New Testament

response of faith and trust and belief, the first step of obedience of a disciple of a follower of Christ, is in fact to be baptized. Jesus said go and make disciples. As you're going make disciples, the first thing you do after they believe, Jesus said, is you baptize them.

If you have not believed and put your trust in Christ this morning, my first prayer for you is that the Holy Spirit of God would open your heart and your mind to understand the good news of the gospel. If you have put your faith and trust in Christ this morning and you haven't been baptized, then I hope to see you on November 4th right up here and you'll be a part of our baptism. Because to believe is then to be followed in obedience by baptism. My friends, our responsibility is to share the gospel. It's the Holy Spirit's responsibility and work to open the heart to believe. It is the Spirit who gives life.

What do we take away? When we focus on God, when we focus on what the Holy Spirit has done, that's where we want to be. We focus on God. We focus on what He has done. If we focus on ourselves, we start focusing on what we have done. I believe what God would have for us is that we would focus on Him and we would focus on what the Spirit has done in us by grace. When we do that, we finish up where we started this morning. To God be the glory because great things He has done.

As we close this morning, I want to be absolutely certain that everybody here this morning has an opportunity to hear what is the good news of the gospel. Jesus, God's Son, came to this earth and in total humility took upon Himself the form of a man and became a man. He lived a perfect and sinless life and then gave His life on a cross to pay for our sin and to make it possible for us to be in a relationship with God. God's not looking for religious people. He's not looking for good people. He's looking for people who will acknowledge that they have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He's looking for people to come to a place where they realize that there's nothing that they can do to earn or merit God's salvation, but simply to put their faith and trust in what Jesus did and know that that's all that needs to be done. So if you're here this morning and you've never done that, I urge you and I appeal to you to listen to the voice of God's Spirit and to open your heart to the good news of the gospel and receive the gift of eternal life.

Let's pray. Father, for all of us who have experienced this miracle of new birth we thank You and we praise You and we give glory to You. It is by grace that we are saved, not of works but of faith lest any of us should boast. We thank you for that gift in Jesus's name, Amen.