

That Which Is Born of the Spirit Is Spirit

by John Piper

John Piper emphasizes the essential role of the Holy Spirit in the new birth and the pursuit of a deeper relationship with God.

Duration: 34:54

Scripture: Romans 6:17

Topics: "Spiritual Rebirth", "Salvation Transformation"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the need for a radical change in our lives in order to experience God's blessings and salvation. He highlights several metaphors and images from the Bible that illustrate this transformation. These include changing slave masters from sin to God, dying with Christ and rising to newness of life, putting off the old self and putting on Christ, repenting and turning away from trusting in men to trusting in God's mercy, receiving a new heart and spirit from God, becoming a new creation in Christ, becoming like children to enter the kingdom of heaven, and being born again. The speaker emphasizes that without this change, there is no hope or salvation, only wrath and fury.

Transcript

Unless God gives me a very strong indication to go another way, I intend to preach in these last four Sundays of winter on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. I feel a tremendous yearning in my own heart to know more of the power of the Spirit of God for holiness and for witness. I have a tremendous need that I feel for guidance by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of wisdom and truth.

And I believe that God's life-giving, renewing Holy Spirit is blowing on this congregation in a remarkable way. And my desire, and I hope it's yours too, is to unfurl the sails in that holy wind and watch them billow out so that I can say I'm being borne along in His direction, at His speed, by His power. That's what I want for all of us in this church.

The wind blows where it wills and we don't see it, we hear the sound of it, but we don't know where it comes from or where it's going to. And so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. James says, draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

We're going to see this morning there's a paradox in that statement because you can't begin to draw near to God until He's already helped you, which means that in our efforts to draw near to God, we find that He is already near to us. But that doesn't negate the promise. If we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us.

Let your sails unfurl in the holy wind of God and He will cause them to billow out and bear you along in His direction. We need the Holy Spirit here at Bethlehem in these next weeks. So much is in the offing, it worries me that I can't keep a handle on it, which is great because I'm not supposed to handle it anyway.

For example, we have our sights set on doubling the number of Laotian and Hmong people that we minister to on Sunday morning, and you'll be hearing more in the weeks ahead on how we can do that without disrupting our own ministry in this service. Here's another one. In four weeks, we're going to enter on an income expansion program that I am praying will supply the needs to do what needs to be done to be a powerful ministry in the shadow of the dome.

We want to close off that 13th Avenue and turn it into parking instead of a street. We want to raise 1212 8th Street and make an entrance onto 8th Street and more parking, block off all the back entrances and beautify and secure the area and anything else that needs to be done to make this church able to go on and grow in the shadow of this dome, which I view as only opportunity. Here's another example.

I plan to propose to the deacons this Wednesday night that we move to two services on the first Sunday of spring on Sunday morning and call for an all-church forum on Wednesday, March 4th for you to pray with me and discuss that recommendation. Here's another example. On April 4th, I plan to lead all the leaders of the church, all the major boards in a retreat to discuss our long-range plans together and to pray together in an out-of-the-way place on that Saturday.

And I anticipate that in this spring, there's going to start to emerge in this congregation many small groups scattered around this city for prayer, for Bible study, for mission and outreach. And on top of all these structural changes that are in the offing, there remains the ongoing week-by-week transformation of individual lives, more important than anything else we could possibly do as the word goes forth from Sunday school classes and in conversations and from this pulpit, begetting faith and love and joy. We need, I need, the Holy Spirit in these weeks.

They are too much for mere human planning and mere human effort. I want to be able to say in six months as we look back, we worked, we planned, but no, it was not we, but the Holy Spirit willing and doing his good pleasure within us. So join me, I pray.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to us. Unfurl the sails of your heart and let the wind of the Spirit billow them out and give us direction. Open your hearts wide to God.

Go hard after God, like my pastor out in California used to say. Wrestle with him till dawn, till he give us the blessing of his fullness. Take Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3, verses 14, and turn it into a prayer for you.

Here's the way it goes. Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, I pray that according to the riches of your glory, you might grant me to be strengthened through your Spirit in the inner man. That Christ might dwell in my heart by faith, and that I, being rooted and grounded in love, might be able with all the saints to know what is the love of Christ, to know the height and depth and length and breadth, and to comprehend the love of Christ which passes knowledge and be filled with all the fullness of God.

Pray that with me in these next four weeks. Make it your prayer every day. We're going to come back to it, but if it means anything, it means this.

There is more of God to be had than we now have. There is more to be had. Conversion is the end of a quest.

We have found the Savior and Shepherd of our souls. We have found peace and fellowship with God. We have all drunk of the same Spirit, but conversion is the beginning of another quest that we might be filled with all the fullness of God.

And I think that quest will never end, never, to all eternity. No matter how much of the Spirit of God that is poured into our hearts from the ocean of His love, that ocean is forever being replenished by the springs of infinity. We will never absorb and experience all of God that can be experienced because He is infinite beyond our knowledge.

And so don't worry. In pressing hard after God, you will not reach the goal and find yourself frustrated. He is infinite.

Come with me, then, as we go hard after God in these next weeks. But remember, and this is our theme for today, there must be a beginning. There's got to be a beginning.

Nobody by nature loves the character of God so much that he or she goes after God naturally. We are by nature children of wrath, Paul says in Ephesians 2. David said it this way, Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity. In sin did my mother conceive me.

We come into the world bent on independence from God and love for the world. Something's got to happen. A change has got to take place that we might escape the wrath of God.

Now, the Bible talks about this change that has to take place in order that we can make a beginning in many different metaphors and images. Let me mention a few so that you won't think the one that I isolate is the only one. And I think these all refer to the same reality.

One, we must change slave masters. Once we were slaves of sin, we must become slaves of God. We must, secondly, die with Christ and rise to newness of life.

Third, we must put off like a coat, put off the old man and put on Christ, the new man. Fourth, we must repent, turn around, get a change of mind, stop trusting men, start trusting the mercy of God. Fifth, we have to get a new heart like Ezekiel said, I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them.

I will take that stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. Six, we must become a new creation. As Paul said, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature.

All things have passed away. The new has come. Seven, we must become children.

Unless you turn and become like children, you cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. And finally, we must be born again. You must be born again from cover to cover.

The Bible says a change must happen in the human being before we can go hard after God or experience any of his blessing. If that change does not take place in our lives, there is no hope, no salvation, only wrath and fury. So there's nothing more important in all the world than in every one of us here experience that new birth.

Last Wednesday night when I got home from the prayer meeting after staying here to do some counseling, Noelle was shaken and she told me that on the way home, the boys had almost run out in front of a car on 11th Avenue, Karsten and Benjamin. And as I lay there trying to go to sleep, that image kept coming before my mind. What would it have been like if a car had taken those two boys away from me? You try to go to sleep.

And then the last thing I thought of before I went to sleep was this. My mind shifted to the long view, to eternity. And the last thing I prayed to God was, if it means losing all of them, that none of them fail to be born again, take them! Rather that I lose all of them now than that one of them fail to be born again.

And I believe that. God forbid if the choice came to it that it were between life with me now or life with you forever, take them! That's how important the new birth is, in my view, for my sons. There is no more important thing that can happen to them than that they be born again.

I told them this and asked them if I could tell them this story. They're with Noelle up with the Laotians now, so they won't hear it, and I really pressed on them. I said, you know, guys, I'd rather lose you to a speeding car than that either of you not be born again.

That really made an impact on them. I suggest you say that to your children if you believe it. Now what I want for all of us in this church is that we be filled with all the fullness of God.

But in order to get there, we've got to make a beginning. Before a person can experience or even desire that fullness, he's got to become a new kind of person. And so the specific question I asked myself for this morning's message was, what does the Holy Spirit have to do with this new birth? What's the role of the Holy Spirit? The reason I'm focusing in on the image of new birth as opposed to one of those other seven, is that in John 3, which you can turn to, in John 3, the new birth and the Spirit are brought close together.

And I want to talk about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and this change that has to happen. The question now is not what becomes of us through the new birth, but who causes the new birth? Who brings it about? We're going to talk for three more weeks about what becomes of us through the new birth, what results from the new birth. But today the question is, what causes the new birth? And the teaching that I want to try to persuade you is biblical, and therefore true and precious and worthy to be believed and cherished is this.

The new birth is the cause of our first act of faith. And it is the result of the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. I'll repeat it another way.

The new birth is the result of the free and sovereign work of the Holy Spirit on our hearts, enabling and preceding the first act of saving faith. We do not cause the new birth. God causes the new birth.

The cry of faith is the first sound that a new baby in Christ makes, not the other way around. We do not get God to make us new by trusting him. We can trust him because he has made us new.

He has done it already. There are three theological catchphrases for this doctrine. Prevenient grace, grace that precedes and enables faith.

Irresistible grace, grace that overcomes the perverted, resistant will of man by transforming his nature. Third, effectual calling, not the general call that goes out through the gospel or through nature, but that peculiar, powerful, creative call of God that creates what it demands in the heart of a person. Turn with me

to John 3 and look at verse 5 as we begin to look at the biblical basis of this doctrine.

And then at the end, I'll give you four reasons why I regard this as a very precious doctrine to me personally. Verse 5, Jesus says to Nicodemus, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Now, whether or not you regard the water here as referring to the bag of waters which breaks at the first and natural birth or baptism or a spiritual cleansing that happens to our hearts, it seems to me that in any case, the main point remains the same, namely.

Our first birth, baptism, do not guarantee salvation. We must be born of the spirit from above anew. Those things may be good, but they do not create a new person.

Verse six. Gives the reason why this spiritual birth is necessary. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.

Flesh in John's gospel means human. Chapter one, verse 14, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Chapter 17, the son of man has been given authority over all flesh that is overall mankind that he might do judgment.

So Jesus is saying here in verse six, your human birth makes you merely human. But when you are born of the spirit, then a new dimension of supernatural life enters in a new principle of being, a new spiritual life comes into existence. New loves, new inclinations, new allegiance, a new person is born.

When the Holy Spirit begets us, Paul had this same view. He referred to man before the new birth and after new birth with these terms, natural man, spiritual man. And he says this in first Corinthians two, 14, the natural man does not welcome the gifts of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him.

The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. So Jesus and Paul are saying the same thing, essentially that which is born of the flesh is the natural man, a person with no spiritual inclinations at all and no receptivity to the things of God. And that which is born of the spirit is a spiritual man who is wide open to the things of God.

Now, the connection between verses five and six in John three is this. We have been born of the spirit because until we are, we are unfit for the kingdom of heaven. We are mere natural persons who do not, as Paul says, do not welcome the things of the spirit.

We resist them before a person is born of the spirit. He has no inclination to trust Christ and therefore no inclination to be saved and cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Faith.

Now, listen carefully to this. Faith is the most beautiful, the most God honoring, the most humble of all acts than a human being can perform. Therefore, we must not imagine that a natural man who cannot even receive the things of the spirit would have the inclination to do the most wonderful, beautiful, God honoring, humble act that can be performed by a human being before a person can perform that act.

The best of all possible acts. He must be born again. Thorns do not give forth figs.

An apple tree does not give forth olives and natural men do not believe. They cannot listen to what Paul says in Romans eight, five to seven. Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh.

Those who are according to the spirit set their minds on the things of the spirit. For the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the spirit is life and peace. And now the most important sentence for the mind of the flesh is enmity towards God, for it does not submit to his law, for it cannot.

Fallen human nature is so hostile to God and his demands that it cannot submit to God in faith. We must be born again. We must be born by the almighty sovereign free work of the Holy Spirit before we can even approve of the gospel, let alone believe in it.

Faith is not the means or the cause to the new birth. Faith is the result or the fruit of the new birth. Jesus uses the analogy in verse eight of the wind.

This the wind blows wherever it wills. You hear the sound of it. You don't know where it's coming from.

You don't know where it's going to. What is he trying to teach with that verse? The sovereignty of God. The absolute sovereignty of the wind of God.

It blows wherever it wills. And our will is impotent at that. We can't turn the wind and we can't make it get going.

It goes where it wills. And the new birth, therefore, is not a result of our decision or our act of will. It precedes and it enables that first act of faith and all subsequent acts of faith.

There's another place in John's gospel where this doctrine is taught with even greater clarity. Turn to chapter six. Chapter six of John's gospel, starting at verse forty one.

The situation in John chapter six is similar to the situation in John three. It's similar in this regard. He's got in front of him an audience who is murmuring.

Nicodemus stumbled over. You must be born again. This crowd is stumbling over.

I am the bread which came down from heaven. Hard sayings. So he's got in front of him a resistant and unperceptive crowd.

And look what he says to them in forty three and forty four. Don't murmur among yourselves. Here's what's happening.

No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him. No one can come to Jesus unless drawn by God. The natural man cannot submit himself to God until the supernatural work of the grace of God by the agency of the Holy Spirit comes in behind his will and changes its route.

But someone may say you can't equate the new birth of John three with the drawing of God in John six, because he draws everybody. My answer. Yes, there is a drawing that God sends out to everyone.

This sermon is a drawing to everybody in this room. Go hard after God. But that's not what Jesus means here.

And it's very clear that that's not what he means here when we drop down to his own explanation of the verse starting at verse sixty one. Jesus has in mind a drawing. That cannot be resisted again, some of his disciples murmur John sixty one.

Do you take offense at this? I might ask that, too. Then what if you were to see the son of man ascending where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail, the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you that do not believe, for Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe and who it was that would betray him.

And he said, this is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted to him by my father. Here he repeats verse forty four and just changes one word, he changes drawing to giving. No one can come to me unless it is given to him by my father.

But notice the connection between the first part of verse sixty four and verse sixty five, the meaning then becomes unmistakable, leave out John's parenthesis. There are some of you here that do not believe and then pick up his words. That is why I said no one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the father.

Why do I tell you that no one can come to me unless the father enable him to explain to you why it is that some of you do not believe? Because the father has not given it to you to believe. He has not drawn you like he has drawn Peter, James and John. And therefore it follows clearly that saving faith does not precede and cause the new birth, but rather God the father by the agency of the Holy Spirit regenerates freely whomever he pleases in this world and draws them to the son that they may be saved.

That's prevenient grace, grace that precedes and enables the first act of faith. It's irresistible grace. There are influences of God that can be resisted, but there are also influences of God that cannot be effectually resisted.

And the new birth is one of those because it is God's sovereign and free work beneath and behind a person's consciousness, transforming the root of his affections and overcoming his resistance to the gospel that he might then see and delight in the promise and believe. And it is effectual calling, not the general call that goes out to all through the gospel and in nature, but that creative call that when it sinks in by the gospel begets anew and creates what it demands. Now, what's the role of the Holy Spirit then in conversion or in this new beginning that we all want to make that we might go hard after God and his fullness? What is the role of the Holy Spirit? The answer Jesus gives is this.

The new birth is the result of the free and sovereign work of the Holy Spirit enabling and preceding all our acts of faith. We do not bring about the new birth. On the contrary, the Spirit creates a new person and that new person, the spiritual man, believes in God.

And now let me close with those four reasons that I mentioned why to me this doctrine is the most precious of all doctrines, or at least one of the most precious to me personally. First, this doctrine makes sure that God gets all the glory and I am kept broken and humble. It prevents me from robbing God and arrogating to myself and taking credit for something that he, by his sovereign grace, has accomplished.

It reminds me that I am so corrupt and so hardened in my sin that never in a million years would I have cried out to God for salvation, put my faith in him, except for the sovereign creative power of the Holy Spirit in my own life. It keeps before my eyes that all the obedience and all the virtues that I might perform are all the result of faith and that faith is a gift and that therefore I can take credit and boast in nothing that I perform. Nothing! What then becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.

By what principle? By the principle of faith. For faith is the gift of God. Therefore I cannot boast at all and he gets all the glory.

If there is any doctrine that will keep a church humble and humility leads to patience and patience leads to forbearance and forbearance leads to unity. If there is any doctrine that will keep a church one, it is this one. Oh, I hope you believe it and hold to it with all your might.

Second reason why I love this doctrine. I cannot pray for the lost without it. I have tried time and again to imagine what I would ask God to do for a hardened, resistant neighbor if I did not believe in irresistible grace.

Every prayer I come up with sounds like a joke. God, provide my neighbor with some allurements to faith, but don't make those allurements irresistible. God, work, work in my neighbor's heart, but don't work so much that he feels an overwhelming urge to believe.

No! I will not pray like that. On the authority of God's word, here's what I'm going to say to my neighbor. God, give him a new heart.

Reach in there and take that heart of stone and yank it out. Put a new one back in so that he loves to believe. Ravish him with your glory.

Put irresistible inducements in front of him. Save him. Don't let him go to hell.

That's the way the person who believes in irresistible grace prays for the neighbor. Third reason why I love this doctrine. It is great encouragement for witness.

What could be more encouraging in our daily witness, especially among people who are hard-hearted, than the thought that nothing, absolutely nothing, can stop the Holy Spirit when he intends to beget a person anew. That's encouraging. There are sheep in Minneapolis waiting to be called.

And nothing can stop the Holy Spirit of God from begetting those sheep anew. Here's what Paul said to Timothy. Chapter 2 of 2 Timothy verses 24 to 25.

The Lord's servant, listen carefully, this is so good. The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kindly to everyone. An apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

And God may perhaps grant repentance unto a knowledge of the truth. Ours is to witness with life and word. God's is to grant repentance.

And that is freedom, isn't it? Freedom for witness and power and confidence. God Almighty goes before you and unlocks every door. And there's one more reason, and I'm done, that I love this doctrine.

I love it because right now it gives to you who are not born again tremendous encouragement to close with Christ. There are people here who are not born again. You know it.

And this doctrine is a tremendous encouragement to close with Christ. You do not need any other witness that the Holy Spirit is after you, but that inkling of a desire you feel right now to go after God. If there is one spark of inclination in your heart to draw near to God and to trust Christ for salvation, it is of God, and you may be encouraged and take heart that He has not left you to yourself, but He's pursuing you for your good.

Therefore, go forward with Him. Confirm His work by your faith. Make your calling and election sure, as Peter said.

Cleave to Jesus, and He will never let you go. And now I commend this teaching to you all. And I urge that nobody take credit for His new birth, and that nobody take credit for His faith.

And I am persuaded that if we miss this note today, everything we have to say about the Holy Spirit in the weeks to come will be off-key. Let it not be so. May God root us deeply in the glory of His sovereign grace.

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