

What Happens in the New Birth? Part 2

by John Piper

John Piper explores the miraculous nature of the new birth, emphasizing its necessity for spiritual life and connection to Jesus through faith.

Duration: 38:09

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:8, Ezekiel 36:25-27, John 1:12, John 3:5, John 3:7

Topics: "Spiritual Rebirth", "Holy Spirit"

Description

This sermon delves into the concept of the new birth as a supernatural miracle initiated by the Holy Spirit. It emphasizes the need for a new life, not just a new religion, and the experience of the supernatural within oneself. The sermon explores the significance of being born of water and the Spirit, highlighting the cleansing and forgiveness that precede the transformation of the heart into one that treasures Jesus above all else. The message concludes with an exhortation to receive Jesus as the sin-forgiving, transforming treasure of life through faith.

Transcript

Father, the new birth is a miracle. It's supernatural. It's not something we make happen.

It happens to us. We experience it in faith. And so I am again so needy.

I'm laying my kindling down. I'm trying to lay it straight. I'd like to lay it in such a way that lots of air from the Spirit could flow, blow through it.

But if you don't send the fire, nobody will feel the heat. Nobody will get the light. Nobody will be purified.

So God, I ask that you would come and make my sticks burn. Amen. I pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. So today we complete last Sunday's message. And the topic is what happens in the new birth.

We run this series on the new birth, and the question is what is it? Before we ask why is it needed, or what does it produce, or how can you experience it, or how does it relate to other doctrines, we're asking what is it? Verse 7. Chapter 3 of John. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. Verse 3. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.

In other words, we're not on the edges of things here. We're at the center. Because seeing the Kingdom of God is at stake.

Going to heaven is at stake. The doctrine of the new birth is not marginal, or optional, or cosmetic. It's not like those cosmetics that... what are they called? The name just goes right to my mind.

People who embalm others. Whatever. You know what I'm talking about.

Funeral home directors. It's not like the cosmetics they use to help dead people look more like they're alive. The new birth is not like that.

It is creation of life, not imitation of life. So that's from last week, and that's clear. We began with two answers to the question, what happens? One, what happens in the new birth is not getting a new religion, but getting a new life.

Second, what happens in the new birth is not affirming the presence of the supernatural in Jesus, but rather experiencing the supernatural in yourself. Nicodemus had lots of religion, right? He was a Pharisee. And he affirmed the supernatural in Jesus.

And Jesus said, unless he was born again, he wouldn't see the kingdom. He needed new spiritual life imparted supernaturally by the Holy Spirit. We call it spiritual life.

We call it supernatural life. And the reason we call it spiritual and supernatural is because it is quickened, awakened, created by the Holy Spirit. That's what spiritual means in the New Testament.

Worked by the Holy Spirit. That's kind of a vague, ethereal feeling of something above the normal. Spiritual has a concrete focus on God the Spirit, and He awakens.

And what He awakens is spiritual and it is supernatural. Verse 6. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. So you need to be born of the Spirit if you have spiritual life.

You're dead if you don't have the Spirit doing this. Now, everybody knows that flesh has a kind of life. Everybody in this room, everybody on the planet who's breathing is alive.

That's what the flesh can produce. It's that kind of life. And that's not the kind of life, obviously then, that he's talking about.

We need a second birth with a new kind of breathing that is spiritual and supernatural and above what the resources of the universe as they are naturally can produce. And then, we related this conclusion to two things. The Spirit must quicken us and give us spiritual, supernatural life.

That's what happens in the new birth. And how does it relate to Jesus? And how does it relate to faith? That's the way the sermon ended last time. Here's the answer with regard to Jesus.

Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. John said, God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life.

Whoever does not have the Son does not have life. And therefore, if new birth by the Spirit produces life, then we concluded the work of the Spirit must be to bring us into connection with Jesus. John 6.63, it is the Spirit who gives life.

And over and over again, he says, the life is in the Son. Life isn't in the Spirit merely. We have life because we're connected with Jesus.

But the Spirit is the one who gives the life, so He must do it by bringing us to and uniting us to Christ. And so, we said the work of the Spirit in regeneration is to impart new life by connecting us with Christ. Now, that's the relationship with Jesus.

What's the relationship with faith? We'll talk more about this later, but I don't want to leave it behind now. John 20:31, these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name. Believing have life in His name.

1 John 5:4, everyone who has been born of God, everyone who has been born of God, overcomes the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Born of God, victory over the world.

Faith, victory over the world. Because, our conclusion from last time, the way we experience the new birth is consciously by believing. That's what the Holy Spirit does in us.

We believe. So, here's my summary from last week, and then we move forward. In the new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us to the Son of God through faith.

That's last week's message. I said there were three things that I wanted to use to describe what happens in the new birth, and we've now talked about two of them. Not new religion, but new life.

Not just seeing and acknowledging supernatural out there, but experiencing supernatural in here. And here's the third one. What happens in the new birth is not the improvement of your old human nature, but rather the creation of a new human nature that is really you, cleansed and forgiven, and really new, being shaped by the Holy Spirit's presence in your life.

That's number three. And everything else I have to say is to unpack that. I promised you we would look at verse 5. That's where I'm getting all of this.

Verse 5 pointed me to a text where I got that idea. I didn't come to these two sermons with some systematic idea. Oh, there are three things that you read in all the books that this is.

I didn't have any idea what I would say. And I hope that I have found these three things here in John, and where John points me. So here we are, verse 5. Truly, truly, I say to you, Jesus talking to Nicodemus, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now, what does Jesus mean by those two things? Born of water and born of the Spirit. And, of course, if you ask most Minnesotans, they will tell you baptism, because Minnesota is mainly Lutheran and Catholic. I went to the A website.

I won't tell you where this comes from, because I want you to think generically here. I don't want you to think merely about denominations that talk this way. I want you to think generically, so that wherever you run into this, you won't believe it.

Here's what I found. Holy baptism is a quote now from a major representative, not by a person who doesn't like somebody telling you what they think, but rather what those people say they think. Holy baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments.

Through baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God. We become members of Christ, are incorporated into the church, and are made sharers in her mission. Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the Word.

Now, millions of people have been taught that their baptism causes them to be born again. Millions of people around the world have been taught that their baptism causes them to be born again. And if it's true, then I don't understand this text.

And if it's not true, it is a global tragedy. Which it is. Great tragedy.

So what does he mean? If born of water doesn't mean baptismal regeneration, born again by the baby being sprinkled, or the adult being immersed or poured over or sprinkled, if that's not what this means, water, what do you think it means? There are first four reasons why I don't think it means baptism. Christian baptism. And the last two lead me to the text where I find what I think it does mean.

So I'll give you these four reasons you can ponder. You must decide this for yourself. You have grown up, most of you, in a milieu where you're surrounded by people who believe that their baptism was the point at which they were born again.

First, if this were a reference to Christian baptism and it were as essential as Jesus says this is, you won't enter the kingdom without it, and as essential as those who teach baptismal regeneration say it is, it really is strange that after you pass this verse, it disappears as far as how you get into the kingdom in this chapter. Verse 15, whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. Verse 16, whoever believes in Him will not perish.

Verse 18, whoever believes in Him is not condemned. It's just so odd to me that if it's that essential alongside faith that it would be mentioned instead of just boring in right on faith, faith, faith. Number two, second reason I stumble at this suggestion.

Verse 8 would seem strange to me. The wind analogy would seem strange to me if baptism and new birth are locked. When the baby is sprinkled, new birth happens.

There it is. It's right there. This analogy of the wind just doesn't seem to work anymore if that's the case.

It says, the wind blows where it wishes. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. And so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Now what that sounds like to me is that God is radically free where and when He causes anybody to get born again. Like the wind just kind of, whoa. And if you lock it down and say, I say the words, I put the water on, it happens.

That's not a lot of freedom for the wind. That's my second reason. Number three, verse 10, if it's referring to Christian baptism, which is going to be unfolded and explained by Jesus and the cross and the blood and how it all works, then this criticism of Nicodemus seems to miss the mark.

Are you a teacher in Israel and you don't understand these things? It just seems like Nicodemus would have a legitimate beef here and say, baptism, sprinkling Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I'm supposed to know what that is because of my Old Testament? It doesn't sound like that's what Jesus would say if He's trying to help us see Christian baptism in the word water in verse 5. Number four, and this one will take me

to where I see an alternative and I think more contextually helpful, fitting interpretation. He says in verse 10, are you a teacher in Israel and you do not understand these things? Now that seems to send us back to what teachers in Israel studied, namely the Old Testament. You've been reading your Old Testament, you memorize your Old Testament, and you don't understand what I'm talking about here? So I feel, by that verse, I feel pushed to go look for water and Spirit in the Old Testament.

Born of water, born of the Spirit, where in the Old Testament might something like that show up so that Jesus could say to him, you don't get that? Why don't you get that? And the clearest illustration, there are others, the clearest illustration is Ezekiel 36, and I invite you to turn there with me. Ezekiel 36, and we'll read verses 24 to 28. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, three big prophets, and so open your Bible about halfway through and you'll bump into one of them and just keep going until you run into Ezekiel.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. I guess I left out limitations there. Ezekiel 36, 24 to 28.

I will take you. Now this is Ezekiel telling the people on God's behalf what God will do after the exile in Babylon. And it's much bigger than that.

It's part of the New Covenant promise, and Jesus said, this cup is the New Covenant in my blood, and so Jesus considered his own death to be a purchase of New Covenant promises for all those who are in him. We are the true Israel. We are in Christ, and therefore these New Covenant promises apply to Christians.

Verse 24 of Ezekiel 36. I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you.

There's water. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols. I will bless you.

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. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.

You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be My people, and I will be your God. I think that's the passage to which Jesus would have pointed Nicodemus when he scratched his head about water and spirit. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he can't enter the kingdom.

To whom, in verses 26 to 28 of Ezekiel 36, to whom does God say, You will be My people and I will be your God? Because that's salvation. If you're not His people and He's not your God, you're lost. You're not in the kingdom.

Who does He say that to? He says it to those who I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses. It's the water-washed, forgiven, cleansed people. It's the people to whom He says, I'll put a new spirit within you and your flesh, your heart of stone I will take out and I'll put in the heart of flesh.

So, why does He refer to both water and spirit here? And why does Jesus feel obliged to pick them up? Now, what's the difference between the expression of you need to be forgiven, symbolized by water, making the uncleanness go off of you, and you need a new spirit? Let me try to put the two together for you. The reason both are necessary 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 that we were before the new birth.

The human being, the morally accountable, responsible self of John Piper, before I was born again, is the same human being, the same morally accountable human self as after I was born again. That's why the imagery of water and cleansing is necessary. Because if we conceived of the newness of the new creation or the newness of the new life, to obliterate the human being that was before, there'd be nothing there to forgive.

There'd be nothing there to cleanse. The whole concept of you need cleansing means you're there. You're not gone.

And you're always going to be there. It's you. You and me bring to this thing our record.

And we don't just need to be fixed up, made new. We need some cleanup and some forgiveness. Now, I know that Paul says things like, Our old self was crucified.

We have died with Christ. Consider yourselves dead to sin. Put off the old self.

But, there's no reason to take that in some kind of philosophical stretch to mean the human being who was there that just got born again is not that human being anymore. We have an old character that needs changing, an old principle that needs abolishing, old nature that needs renewing, an old bent that needs to be pushed in another direction. But as far as obliterating the John Piper who was born of the flesh, he doesn't.

You could just go back and look at the pictures. So, I think the way to think about the new heart and the new spirit and the new nature is that it's still you, and you need to be cleansed and forgiven for all the stuff you did when you were four. Ten.

You need forgiveness for that. That's why he died. They didn't disappear out of existence.

Well, we don't have to deal with that anymore. That's gone. Nothing needs to be forgiven there.

That's poof! It's annihilated. No way. We desperately need that forgiven today.

I need to walk in the consciousness that everything I brought to this humanity and everything I've performed in this humanity is forgiven, cleansed. Jeremiah 33.8 clarifies, I think, what is going on here in the water thing. It says, I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.

That assumes, right now, I'm dealing with a person with a record as I put my new spirit within him. I've got to deal with the record, and I'm dealing with it with this imagery of water. I'm cleaning him up.

I'm canceling it out. I'm going to have my son die for these sins. But forgiveness and cleansing are not enough.

It's why both, water and spirit, water and spirit. They're not enough. We need a new way of seeing, a new way of thinking, a new way of valuing.

If we're going to end up in heaven and want to be there, we need to be new, not just forgiven. Forgiven people who hate spiritual things won't be happy in heaven, and therefore they won't be there. Now we're at verses 26 and 27 in Ezekiel 36.

So important. I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. So now he's moved away from the water thing of forgiveness and cleansing and all of that imagery, and now he's got another kind of imagery, heart transplant.

Heart of stone coming out, heart of flesh going in. You see that? I will remove the heart of stone, verse 26 at the end, I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. Here's how I understand this heart transplant.

The heart of stone in verse 26, the heart of stone means John Piper was dead spiritually. Stone means you touch it, it doesn't feel anything. Bang on it, resist, break your knife.

Stone, cold, hard, unresponsive, unreceptive to spiritual reality. This stone, very strange stone that I was, could feel many things. No, did it have desires.

Food, sex, popularity. So this stone has desires. It's just stone when it comes to Jesus.

He's boring, he's uninteresting, he's not beautiful, he certainly isn't my treasure, thank you very much. Money, popularity, you name it, whatever your treasure is with Jesus, that's signaling you've got this stone for a heart. Everybody has desires, but only people who have that heart taken out and another heart put in feel that.

Now, why does he call it a heart of flesh? I mean, that mixes us up, right? Because flesh is not what... I mean, in John 3, that which is born of the flesh is flesh. The word flesh there means what you are by human nature apart from any divine intervention. That's not the meaning here.

The meaning here is contrasted with stone. And what is the contrast with stone? Soft, alive, easily pricked. This imagery of, I'm going to put in you a heart of flesh, simply means a heart that's now responsive, receptive, it feels spiritual reality.

When Christ is lifted up, it says, yes! It can feel the worth of Jesus. Once Jesus was not worthy, now He's everything. That's the difference between stone and flesh.

That's what happens in the new birth. We need more than forgiveness. We need more than cleansing.

We need to be new. New thinking and new feeling and new valuing and new treasuring. And that's what the new birth is designed to do here.

Then, He says in verse 27, And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes. Hmm. I'm going to give you a new heart and a new spirit, little s, and I'm going to move in Myself.

Coming in. My Spirit's coming in. How are we supposed to think about that? Let me try a picture on you.

This is my best shot of how my newness relates to His presence. Okay? Because they're both there. I've got to figure this out.

Is it just Him or am I new? Well, clearly I'm new. I've got a new heart. But He's there, so that's important.

How does the presence of the Spirit relate to my new spirit? Here's my best shot. I was going to use a lava lamp, but I figured nobody would know what they were. So I'm just going to say you've got this big, big ball

of soft, warm clay.

And it can do like this. It's no particular shape, or it might be shaped like a dollar bill. That's your heart.

And the new heart is soft. It's not hard. And the Holy Spirit, take my fist, He's pushing Himself up into this clay like this.

Like this. And in there, He's starting to flex His character. He's got things He loves, and things He hates, and things He does.

He starts to just kind of form Himself. And you, this clay, is starting to take on the form of what's forming in you. Oh, that Christ would be formed in you, Paul said.

And it's you who need to be formed. Not just Christ. Christ doesn't want to get in there and be Himself and have you stay old.

He's being Himself in you so that as He stretches out His love finger and His... I didn't think of all the details. You add the details. He's stretching out His character in all His wonderful ways.

That's you. You're shaped that way. That's who you are.

That's your heart. And it can happen to your heart because it's soft. It's flesh.

It's not a stone anymore that was keeping Him out and saying no thank you to Jesus. So let me try to sum it all up. I'm finished.

We'll try to put the closing touches on it here and end with an exhortation. The last two weeks, I think, can be summed up like this. What happens in the new birth? The Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us a new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith.

Now let's say that with all that we've just heard in this message. Say it another way. The Spirit unites us to Christ where there is cleansing.

And cleansing is understood as forgiveness according to Jeremiah 33. There is cleansing and He replaces our hard, unresponsive heart with a soft heart that treasures Jesus above all things and is being formed. I hope this gives you hope.

Don't be an all or nothing person here. You'll go crazy. You'll bail on Christianity if you're an all or nothing person.

If you say the new birth has to produce that entire form immediately, you will die. You'll kill yourself or you'll bail on the faith. The Spirit is in you and He's being formed in you.

He's taking that brand new, soft, responsive, touchable, sensitive heart and He's giving it form. And oh, we'll have lots to say about the battles there when we talk about how do the newborn people live eventually. And thus, picking up now on the last phrase in verse 28 of Ezekiel 36, and thus, He is shaping us into the kind of people who love to do the will of God.

I will cause you to walk in My statutes. That doesn't mean kicking and screaming. That's not the way the Holy Spirit does.

That's the way the law does. Will the law land on you without doing this? Well, you may do it and become Nicodemus to the core. Classic Pharisee.

But, when the new birth happens, He causes us to walk in His statutes from the inside shaping. We start to think, well, not committing adultery is a beautiful thing. Not stealing is a beautiful thing.

Not killing is a beautiful thing. Not lying is a beautiful thing. Loving my neighbor and inconveniencing myself and dying is a beautiful thing.

Because He's that way and He's in me. He's taking shape. He's stretching Himself out and forming Himself within.

So, concluding exhortation. Since the way that you experience all of this is through faith, since the way that you experience all of this is through faith, I invite you now in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit to receive Him. Another word for faith according to John 1.12. To receive Him as the sin-forgiving transforming treasure of your life.

I'm going to say that again now. The actual closing exhortation will, I hope, be clear. Since the way all these wonderful, glorious, divinely initiated things are experienced by us is through faith, therefore, I invite you in the name of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit to receive Him as your sin-forgiving transforming treasure.

Let's pray. O Lord God, grant the gift of repentance and faith so that it grows in those of us who have been born again and so that it is awakened and experienced in those who would be born again. I pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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