

What Man Does in the New Birth

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of believing in Jesus for salvation, highlighting the role of faith in the new birth and the necessity of God's grace in enabling individuals to believe. It stresses that God is the decisive cause of saving faith and that the fruit of being born again is love, impacting every aspect of life. The message calls for a response of belief in Jesus, acknowledging that without God's intervention, individuals are unable to believe, and encourages believers to pour out their lives to relieve suffering, both now and for eternity.

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:22, Acts 16:31, Romans 10:17, Acts 15:9, John 3:5, Titus 3:5, Matthew 7:7, James 1:18, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Faith in Jesus", "God's Grace and Love"

Description

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Transcript

Let's pray. Publicly, I take refuge in you and lay hold on the promise, oh, how abundant is the goodness of God, which he has stored up for those who fear him and which he works for those who take refuge in him in the sight of the children of mankind. So publicly, I fly to your refuge.

Guard me from error. Guard me from pride. Guard me from lifelessness.

Grant that your Holy Spirit would be here to do verse 23. Not by perishable but imperishable seed, we are born again through the living and abiding word of God. So for every unregenerate non-born-again person at the North Campus and the South Campus and in this room, I ask that by the living and abiding word of God, as I am faithful to it, they would be born again.

And strengthen your people and show them the massive relevance of this event in their lives. Through Christ I pray, amen. With a good deal of benefit and joy, I am reading the autobiography of Clarence Thomas, the Supreme Court Justice.

It's entitled, My Grandfather's Son. He grew up in Savannah in the Roman Catholic Church. Went to Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts.

And while he was there, abandoned the Catholic Church, at least for a season. And I want to read you the paragraph that describes that abandonment. During my second week on campus, I went to Mass for the first and last time at Holy Cross.

I don't know why I bothered, probably habit or guilt, but whatever the reasons, I got up and walked out midway through the homily. It was all about church dogma, not the social problems with which I was obsessed and seemed to me hopelessly irrelevant. Now, as a preacher, I think a lot about relevance.

Why should anybody listen to what I say? Why should anybody care what I say? Why shouldn't you all just walk out? The word relevance is ambiguous. I'll give you two possible meanings. One meaning of the word relevance would be that a sermon is relevant if you feel that it is significant for your life.

The other meaning of relevance is a sermon is relevant when it is significant for your life, whether you feel it or not. Now, I happen to base all of my preparations on the second one in the hopes that if the first isn't true, I might help make it happen somehow. It's mainly God's work, but he uses people.

So you need to know that when I'm thinking about why anybody should listen to me, my question is not, how can I say what they will feel is relevant? It's not my goal. My goal is, how can I say what is relevant, what is significant, what really matters in their lives, and hope to God they might recognize it to be so? So in any given service, there may be a dozen or so young, angry, idealistic Clarence Thomases who might be present and full of rage. He called it the beast of rage in his heart.

Full of rage about racism, global warming, abortion, limited health care for children, homelessness, poverty, war in Iraq, white collar crime, human trafficking, the global AIDS crisis, rampant fatherlessness, greed behind the subprime mortgage crisis, the treatment of illegal aliens, the plight of Christians just coming out of prison. So they're here, and those things are seething inside of them, or any one of them. And they hear me announce, in this service, I'm going to talk about the human part in being born again.

And they might react like the young Clarence Thomas and simply say, that is the most irrelevant thing I can think of in relation to my issue, and so they leave. Now, I've caught you. Nobody's walked out yet.

So let me just tell you that if you were to choose for that reason, don't feel bad if you need to walk out, I'm not going to think you can't see you, it would be a double mistake to conclude that. The first part of the mistake would be that what Jesus means by the new birth is insignificant for those issues. It is, in fact, massively significant for those issues.

That would be the first mistake you'd make. The second mistake you'd make would be in thinking that those are the main issues. There is another issue Jesus is even more concerned about.

All of those issues deal with the relief of suffering for about 80 years of your life, and do nothing to relieve it for 80 trillion years of your life. I am a pastor and a preacher of the Word of God, and at the center of the Word of God is a message for all of your life, not just the tiniest front end. Jesus said, truly, truly, I say to you, unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you will never see the kingdom.

Not to see the kingdom of God is to be excluded from the kingdom of God. And to be excluded from the kingdom of God, according to Matthew 8, is to be on the outside where Jesus said there is outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth and an unquenchable fire and the worm does not die. That's the biggest issue.

Nothing is more important than the glory of Christ personally seen and savored in the kingdom with as many people as we can gather in His name. I'll say that again. Nothing is more important than the glory of Christ in the kingdom, seen and savored personally with as many people as we can gather with us, even at the cost of our lives.

That's the most important thing in the universe. The question in this tenth message on the new birth is, what is our part? What do we do in the act of the new birth? How do we participate in bringing it about? That's the question for this message. Now, I'll give you the answer that I believe is in the Bible and I'll state it in a couple of paragraphs and then we'll go back and put some biblical foundation underneath it.

But I think in this case, it will be helpful just to say it up front and then to go back and build it from the text of 1 Peter 1. Your part in the new birth is faith. Faith in the crucified and risen Son of God, Jesus Christ, Savior, Lord, treasure of your life. So, what do you do in the act of new birth? You believe in Jesus Christ.

That's what you do in the act of new birth. The way to participate in bringing the new birth about is by receiving Christ for who He really is, supremely valuable as the Savior and the Lord and the treasure of your life. When you do that, you are acting the new birth.

You are acting out the event of the new birth. The new birth is the birth of faith. The answer continues like this.

Your act of believing and God's act of begetting relate as an effect to a cause. God's begetting and your believing relate as cause and effect. You do the one, He does the other.

You do the other simultaneously. Now, I know in my own experience, it has proved in the past, before I gave it some thought, to be a stumbling block to think of a cause-effect relationship simultaneously. We usually think of cause and effect as temporally first and then second, and not simultaneous.

But I'm arguing that in the begetting that God does, simultaneous is its effect, believing. The closest analogy I've been able to come up with is fire. Strike a match or pick one of those little oven things.

As soon as there's fire, there's light. As soon as there's fire, there's heat. Before fire, no heat.

And there doesn't appear to be, maybe in some rare philosophical way, there's a sequence here, but as far as I can tell, you got fire, you got light. You got fire, you got heat. And yet, who would say light produces fire or heat produces fire? Everybody would say fire produces light, fire produces heat.

And that's the closest analogy I can think of to God's begetting. When it goes click, there's faith. Click, there's faith.

So to sum it up, what I see in the Bible is that our part in acting the new birth, bringing it about, performing it, doing our part in it, is faith. That's our conscious experience. We are receiving Christ, the Lord, the Savior, the treasure for who He really is.

We're receiving Him. We're banking on Him. We're believing in Him.

That's what we're doing. And the doing of that is the acting of the new birth. And God is begetting that.

And as He begets it, we do it. Let's go to 1 Peter 1, verses 22 to 23, and I will try to show you some in this message where I'm getting that and why it's important, and then we'll finish this part off next time. 1 Peter

1, 22, Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and abiding Word of God.

I hope in view of what I've said, ideas are just tumbling to your mind right now about those words. Born again through the living and abiding Word of God. Let's notice several things here.

First, notice that the aim of what is happening in verse 22, having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, the aim is love, brotherly love, love among believers and then spilling over to others. And then there's a commandment. Once the aim is stated, let's read it, Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, for a sincere love of the brethren, for a sincere brotherly love.

You see that word for there? That's what it's for. That's where it's going. Literally, having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth unto, unto something.

It's going somewhere. This is why I said the new birth is so massively relevant for every one of those issues I mentioned. It's going somewhere.

We'll see over the next four or five weeks, all the places where it's going, the fruit of the new birth. But here, I just want you to see that the purifying of the soul through obedience to the truth is not love. It is unto love.

It's really important. Everything I have to say is hanging on that. We usually think of a pure heart as a loving heart.

Well, certainly it would become one. But in this text, purified heart by obedience, this obedience is to the truth, which purifies the heart, which leads to love. So it's not yet love.

What is it? What does obedience to the truth mean? That's crucial. To answer that question, what does obedience to the truth mean? My answer is, it means faith in the gospel. What is the truth here? Well, I think in the context, verse 23, it would be the living and abiding Word of God, which is then in verse 25 at the end, defined as the gospel.

So obedience to the truth is obedience to the Word of God, the living, abiding Word of God. This is the gospel that was preached to you. So it is obedience to the truth, i.e., the Word of God, i.e., the gospel.

And then the question is, how do you obey the gospel? What's the summons of the gospel that you must obey? You want to risk it out loud? What? Repent or believe. Two sides of the same coin. Not yet love.

The gospel is not love people and you will be saved. That's not the gospel. The gospel is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, Acts 16, 31.

And when you are, you're going to love people. But if you switch it, you don't have gospel anymore. It is unto love.

It is unto love in verse 22. So you see where I'm going? I'm arguing that purifying the soul by obeying the truth means purifying the soul by believing the gospel, which is, trust me, I'm your Savior and Lord and treasure. Embrace me, trust me, and that will lead to love.

Now, does Peter think that way? Am I on his track here? Test this, that obeying the truth or the word or the gospel means believing. That's what I'm arguing. It means believing.

Not loving yet, believing. Do you remember the word in chapter 3 to wives who have unbelieving husbands? Very important passage for you women who are married to men who don't believe and to men who have women who don't believe. And how is that man described in verse 1 of chapter 3? I'll read it to you.

You can look at it if you want. It says, likewise, wives be subject to your own husbands so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be one, W-O-N, one, that means converted without a word. So I'm arguing now that this is a confirmation that I'm on the right track in chapter 1 verse 22 when I say obeying the truth, which is the word of God, which is the gospel, means believing.

And here, these unbelieving husbands are described as those who do not obey the word. So in Peter's mind, to obey the word as it's preached is to believe. And then other kinds of obedience will grow out of that, but here we just mean believe.

Now let me confirm it a second time with the way Paul talks. Listen to 2 Thessalonians 1.8. Paul says, God will inflict vengeance when Christ comes on those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. So even Paul uses the language of they're not saved because they haven't obeyed the gospel, which says believe and you will be saved.

And so to obey the gospel is to believe its message, its Savior. Now back to verse 22 of 1 Peter 1. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, that is by belief in the word of God, which is the gospel, which says trust Christ, having believed in Christ unto a sincere love of the brothers, that means what about the new birth? Let me mention the new birth. New birth comes in verse 23.

But have we not said anything about the new birth? Anybody with me yet about purification? John 3.5, Titus 3.5. Unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you won't enter the kingdom. We were born again through the washing of regeneration. I've argued in two messages that two things happen at least in new birth.

One is cleansing or purification and the other is renewal by the Holy Spirit. Those have been my two focuses of the new birth. And here we have Peter saying, you have purified your souls by your obedience or in your obedience to the truth, which leads me to say your role in the new birth is thankful.

That's where I'm getting. I hope you're with me. Gotta put the pieces together like this.

Our part, our way of participating in the event of the new birth is you believe. You believe, which means that the new birth is in or by obedience to the truth. In believing, we are acting out the new birth.

Now we're at verse 23. And here the language of new birth is explicit. So let's read all together.

Verse 22 and 23 together to see how they're connected. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, for a sincere brotherly love, that's where it's all going to go, love one another. So go ahead and live in this as your new birth is going there.

Live in this since or having been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and abiding Word of God. Now here it seems to me that the connection between our action, clearly our

action in verse 22, you obeyed the truth and in obeying the truth purified your soul. That's our action.

And it's the new birth. Now he says, having been born again, the command, love one another earnestly from the heart, is the point where all this is going. And our purification of our hearts through faith and God's regeneration by the Word are supporting that, pushing love out into action.

And the question is how these two relate to each other. God's activity in begetting and my activity in purifying my heart by faith or my activity in faith. That's how they relate.

And my first immediate observation is to say it looks like, since it comes second and is underneath in, it looks like causality, just looks like it. It's not proof. But when you say this happened, this having happened, it looks like this is underneath it, supporting it.

So I got three clues. That's the first one. Three clues that argue that God's begetting is the cause of my believing.

And they're instantaneous and simultaneous when they happen. So that was clue number one, just the sheer flow of the text and the way verse 22 appears to be supported by verse 23. And here's the second clue.

God makes the Word the instrument of the new birth in verse 23. God makes the Word, born again through the living and abiding Word of God. Let's read the whole thing.

You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and abiding Word of God. Now some take imperishable seed here to refer to the Holy Spirit. It might.

It might. I'm not sure. I don't think anything fundamental or essential changes.

I think, however, that since the word imperishable, defining the seed, is virtually synonymous with living and abiding, abiding, abiding, it never perishes, describing the Word, that seed and Word are probably synonymous. And he's saying it simply in two ways. You're not born again by anything perishable, seed, but imperishable seed that is through the living and abiding Word of God.

Now the point here is that God makes the Word the instrument of the new birth. Now think about that in how God relates to your activity. How does the Word relate to faith according to Romans 10, 17? Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ.

So if you ask biblically for Peter and Paul, okay, my role in this activity of the new birth is faith. And God says, I bring it about, I bring about the new birth through the Word, and the Word produces the faith. You've got God behind the Word, behind the faith, therefore God is the one who begets, and the begetting produces the faith.

I think that's the implication of saying you were born again through the living and abiding Word, which is my Word. I'm sending it, I'm delivering it, I'm doing this. That's my clue number two.

Here's clue number three. God's begetting is the cause of our believing, because in the Jerusalem Council, in Acts 15, when Peter is standing up and talking about why we should accept Gentiles into the church, he says something very closely related to what he says here. He says this.

This is Acts 15, verse 9, Peter talking. God made no distinction between us and them, Gentile and Jew, God made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Exactly the same thought as verse 22, with one massive difference.

He said God did it through faith. Verse 22 says we did it by believing, and Acts 15, 9 says God cleansed their hearts by faith, which puts God underneath supporting this whole massive transaction. Yes, we have faith.

Yes, our faith purifies our hearts. No, we don't originate that faith. It comes from the Word, and it comes from God.

So, my question now, having tried to persuade you that your role in the new birth, acting the new birth, bringing about the new birth, experiencing the new birth, is to believe in Jesus, receive Jesus, and to know that in the very act of believing, you are experiencing God's begetting. This is unconscious. This is very conscious, which is why the New Testament, whenever anybody asks, what must I do to be saved? Answers, believe.

Repent, believe. This is what's conscious. This is what you do.

This is what your will has in front of it as an option and can embrace. And then, when you are taught, you say, for doing for me what you did for Lydia, the Lord opened her heart to give heed to the gospel, and she believed, but it was that opening. It was that awakening.

It was that life-giving. It was that begetting that you give ultimately. Praise to you.

So, I close back at Clarence Thomas. So, if you stayed the service, Clarence, what does this mean for your burden? What does it mean for all of you and for me? I'll give you four things. Number one, it means you must believe on Jesus in order to be saved.

Nobody is saved and nobody is born again who's not a believer. Just like there's no light and there's no heat where there's no fire. So, just know that I am issuing on behalf of Jesus Christ, as I close, an invitation and an appeal to you to believe on Jesus.

You're here for a reason. You're there at the North Campus and the South Campus for a reason. You didn't come without the providence and mercy of God active in your life.

And you're listening to me say on behalf of the risen Christ, believe in Him, trust Him, receive Him as what He really is, the Savior, the Lord, the treasure of your life. That's number one. Number two, it means that you, left to yourself, will not believe.

Left to your deadness, you will not believe. Dead people don't choose to breathe. If they're going to breathe, it will be because Jesus Christ says, live and you will live.

That is, God says, through the Word, you are mine and I make you my own by new birth. Number three, God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, He is the decisive cause of your faith. You must believe.

You can't believe if left to yourself. God is the decisive cause of all saving faith. Which leads me to number four.

According to verse 22 of 1 Peter 1, the fruit of being born again is love. We're going to spend a lot of time on that in the weeks to come because 1 John is saturated with this truth. Those who are born again love each other.

That means that nothing in life is left untouched by the new birth. Racism, global warming, abortion, limited health care for children, homelessness, poverty, war in Iraq, white collar crime, human trafficking, global AIDS crisis, rampant fatherlessness, greed behind the subprime mortgage crisis, treatment of illegal aliens, the plight of Christians coming out of prison and on. Nothing is untouched by the new birth.

Having purified your souls, having participated in the new birth by believing in the truth, which is the gospel, which is trust me, I'm your savior, unto brotherly love. Love each other now earnestly from the heart. That's the way the New Testament is written.

The miracle of God, the participation in faith, the impulses of love enter the world. And I hope none of you are sitting at home twiddling your thumbs while Rome burns, saying, I'm going to heaven and that's all that matters. That's not all that matters.

There are other people who aren't going. And the Bible says, the savior whom you love says, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Therefore, I plead with you on behalf of Christ to believe and receive him, savior, lord, treasure of your life, who he really is, receive him.

And Christian, humble yourself under the gracious hand of God. And as an everlasting, invincible child of God, who knows that you will spend your eternity with him, on the new heavens and the new earth, in that absolute security, pour out your four score, if you get strength, to relieve suffering. Now, and especially forever.

They're kind of a seamless fabric. Pour out your life, Christian. Pour out your life to relieve suffering.

Now, just like you would want somebody to pour out their life to relieve your suffering, and especially forever. Father in heaven, I am so thankful that many years ago, owing to nothing in me or my parents, you sovereignly said, John Piper, live. And my little heart was awakened to my need and the sufficiency of the savior and believed.

And you've never let go of me. Thank you. For now, pray that sweetness, that security, that persevering grace for everybody in the sound of my voice.

Do this mighty saving work. I close where I began. We are born again through the living and abiding word of God.

And I believe God, I have preached it. And that you are at work right now. Making it like a two edged sword, pierce to the division, soul and spirit, bone and marrow, and reveal the secret things of the heart and incline people to the savior.

I ask that that would be a completed work in Jesus name, amen.

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