

John's Gospel - How Can This Be?

by John Vissers

To be born again means to experience spiritual rebirth, to be cleansed of sin and given new life through the power of the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

Duration: 36:27

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 3:1-3, John 3:5, John 3:21, Ephesians 5:26, 1 Peter 1:23

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by expressing gratitude for the promises of God's word and prays for guidance and understanding. The focus of the sermon is on the fifth verse of John chapter 3, where Jesus states that one must be born of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God. The speaker emphasizes the concept of regeneration and the transformative power it brings to a person's life. The sermon also highlights the importance of recognizing that salvation is not dependent on human efforts, but on God's sovereign grace.

Transcript

We return tonight to our study of John's Gospel, and we're continuing in the third chapter tonight, and I invite you to turn to the third chapter. I'm going to read verses 1 to 9 only, not the 15 verses listed in the bulletin, but verses 1 to 9 as we return to this third chapter of the Gospel of John this evening. Here, God's word to us.

Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him. In reply, Jesus declared, I tell you the truth.

Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. How can a man be born when he is old, Nicodemus asked? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered, I tell you the truth.

Unless a man is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.

How can this be, Nicodemus asked? Amen. May God bless to us this reading from his word tonight. Let's pray together, shall we, as we come to God's word.

Gracious God, our Father, we thank you tonight for this new year. We thank you for the promises of your word, which guide us and sustain us in the midst of life. And we thank you tonight for this passage, and we pray, oh God, that you would speak to us by your spirit, through your written inspired word.

Teach us of things eternal, and help us to respond in faith and in obedience to your word this night. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

The text that I want to focus in on tonight is really the fifth verse of this third chapter of John's Gospel, where Jesus says, I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Over a month ago now, we were in John chapter 3, and it's been over a month since I last preached on the Gospel of John, since we've taken a break with a number of special evening services over the Christmas season. But a number of weeks ago, when we looked at this third chapter of John and were introduced to it, we saw that it records for us a conversation that Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus.

And I've given you some handouts tonight to take home with you, actually more than I usually do. The one handout gives you an outline of the 21 verses, the first 21 verses of John chapter 3, and gives something of an outline and some of the things contained in the third chapter, at least the first 21 verses of John chapter 3. And on the back of that, you'll then see a statement or some teaching on the doctrine of regeneration, which is at the heart of this passage this evening. But in our first message a number of weeks ago, we focused in on Nicodemus in the opening three verses.

And at that time, we saw that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, that he came to Jesus, that he was a Pharisee, that he was someone who was well taught in the law of God, that he was well schooled in the Old Testament and the things of God taught there, and that he was someone who worked hard, who would have worked hard at trying to keep the law of God. We're also told that Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council, that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, which meant that he was a man of prestige and a man of power. He was someone who was in the loop, as it were, in Jerusalem, someone who knew what was going on.

We're also told in the first three verses that Jesus received Nicodemus or Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. And we were reminded that the idea of night, the theme of night, is very important in John's Gospel because it symbolizes evil. And Nicodemus comes at night because it represents his spiritual state.

He is groping, as it were, in the dark. And then we were also reminded that Nicodemus was a seeker, that he realized that there was something special about Jesus for no one could do the miraculous signs that he did, that Jesus did, unless God were at work in him, unless, in fact, something significant were going on. And so Jesus sees all of this, and Jesus knows all of this, and he responds by telling Nicodemus that unless he is born again, unless Nicodemus is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And what Jesus is telling Nicodemus is that he has to start over, that he has to begin again, that all of his learning and all of his religiosity, all of his attempts to keep the law, all of his prestige, all of his power,

everything that he brings to this conversation with Jesus is not enough to save him, but rather, in fact, he must be reborn. And then the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus takes another turn. In fact, at this point, it's already taken a turn that Nicodemus did not expect.

And Nicodemus doesn't fully understand what Jesus is saying, but Nicodemus is no fool, and so he begins asking questions. Verse 4, Jesus, how can a man be born when he is old? I mean, come on, this doesn't make sense. What you're saying is not logical.

Surely you cannot enter a second time into your mother's womb to be born. Everyone knows, Jesus, that you're born once and you die once. And then in verses 5 to 8, Jesus responds, but Nicodemus still doesn't seem to get it, and in verse 9 he says, how can this be? And what we want to focus on tonight is verses 4, or rather, verses 5 to 8, really, and particularly verse 5, where Jesus really lays out very clearly for Nicodemus what it means to be born again.

And what we have here really is the biblical doctrine of regeneration, biblical teaching on what it means to be reborn, on spiritual rebirth. Now we need to be reminded as we think into this passage and as we think into what Jesus is saying here that this phrase, born again, really has two different dimensions to it. On the one hand, it means to begin again, to start over, as we've already seen.

It also means to be born from above, that this is a spiritual reality, that this is something which God does. And both of these dimensions we need to keep in mind as we look carefully now at what Jesus says in verses 5 through 8, because what Jesus is talking about here is a spiritual reality, and what Jesus is talking about is something that God does, the work of regeneration, imparting new life to the sinner. And so Nicodemus' question is really a question that I think all of us would want to ask.

How is this possible? How can this be? What does this really mean for my life? If what you're saying, Jesus, is true, how can this be? And what does it mean for my life? And so let's look at verses 5 to 8, and focus particularly on verse 5. The first thing I want us to notice is that Jesus says that to be born again is to be born of water. In answer to his question, Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless he is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Now the question, of course, that immediately comes to our minds is this question, what does Jesus mean here? What does it mean to be born of water? What does this phrase mean? What is Jesus telling Nicodemus? It's interesting, in the history of the Church, there have been a number of different interpretations as to what Jesus might have meant here.

And let me just run through some of them very briefly and very quickly in an effort to try to help us understand what it is that Jesus is telling Nicodemus. One of these interpretations takes the word water as referring to physical birth. That is, it's based on the fact that the birth of a child is accompanied by the release of the embryonic fluid from the womb of the mother.

And if this is what Jesus meant, then what Jesus is saying is that in order to be saved, everyone has to be born twice. You're born once physically, you're born into this world by your mother, and then you have to be born spiritually or spiritually reborn. Those who take this interpretation look at verse 6 and see something of a parallel there and suggest, in fact, that that explains what this means.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but spirit gives birth to spirit. And so there's some support for this interpretation. It would appear in the text itself.

But while this may be true, I want to suggest to you that it's not at all clear, and it doesn't seem to me that this is what Jesus is saying. There are a number of problems with this interpretation. One of the problems is that the word water is never used in this way anywhere else in the Bible.

And for another, the language that's used to describe physical birth in the ancient world never uses this phrase born of water. It seems, in a sense, to be reading a kind of modern understanding back into the Bible. But more importantly, it would seem, if this is what Jesus was saying, that the statement would be redundant, that Jesus would really be simply repeating himself.

Why would Jesus, in fact, state the obvious that you have to be born into this world and then you have to be born again? It doesn't really make sense for Jesus to be repeating himself or to be making such a redundant statement. So that's one possible interpretation, but it's not the interpretation that many of the commentators follow. Well, what's another possibility? Another possibility is that Jesus is referring here to baptism, specifically water baptism.

He might be referring to Christian baptism. He might be referring to the baptism of John the Baptist, which we've already seen and talked about earlier in the Gospel of John. But the problem with this view is that it makes regeneration, it makes what Jesus is describing here conditional upon an external religious right.

That is, if Jesus is saying you have to be baptized by water in order to receive this, he seems to be putting a condition on it, an external religious right. And the Bible clearly teaches that no one is saved, no one is born again, simply by observing an external religious right. In fact, this is the very thing that Jesus seems to be telling Nicodemus the Pharisee is not what he needs to do.

It's not the external observance, but something has to happen within his life. The third possible interpretation takes water as referring to the Holy Spirit. And there's a lot of support for this in the Bible.

Water is often used as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, especially in the Gospel of John. If you looked over a few chapters to John 7, for example, verses 37 to 39, you would find a reference to water and the Holy Spirit there. And so some would take this to refer to the Holy Spirit.

But the problem again here with this interpretation is that it appears to be repetitious. Jesus seems to be saying that unless a person is born of the Spirit, yes, even the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. I find myself this to be a very attractive and a possible interpretation because it does seem to me that Jesus might make a play on words to emphasize a point.

But I'm not totally convinced that this is the correct reading of the fifth verse. And then a fourth interpretation is to say that water refers to the Word of God. There's a lot of teaching in the Bible that suggests that the way we come to faith is through teaching of the Word of God and by the power of the Spirit of God.

And if this is the correct interpretation, then what Jesus is saying is that we are born again by the Word of God and by the Spirit of God. And so you've got these four possible interpretations. Well, which one should we choose? If we're going to choose any of them, which one seems to make the most sense? I want to suggest to you that the clue really is to be found in the idea of water itself.

And if you think about water, water is a cleansing agent and water is a life-giving agent. Water washes away dirt, it makes things clean, and it gives new life to that which is dry and dusty and perhaps even dead. And I want to suggest to you that what Jesus is saying is that this water is that which cleanses us

and imparts new life to us.

And it's interesting that this is precisely how the Word of God is described in the scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments. And so the fourth interpretation seems to me to be a real possibility. Think, for example, of Ephesians 5, verse 26, where Paul says Christ gave himself for the church that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word.

And Psalm 119 reminds us that our way is cleansed by taking heed of the Word of God. And if you look at 1 Peter 1, 23, Peter writes, you have been born anew, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and abiding Word of God. Now what is Jesus saying here? What Jesus is saying is you must be born again.

How are you born again? You are born again by being cleansed. You are born again by being given life, giving life, renewing reality. How does this come about? It comes about through the Word of God planted in your life, cleansing you, imparting new life to you.

If you take this idea of cleansing, of course, you can also extend it to refer to the Holy Spirit, and you can also begin to see how baptism reflects that reality, but it's centered and rooted in the reality of the Word of God. And so how does this work in our lives? Jesus is saying that being born again is to experience the cleansing work of God in our lives, the removal of our sin and receiving the new life-giving reality that comes by the Word of God and through the Spirit of God. That's a reality that all of us, if we're honest with ourselves, long to experience, this cleansing, this renewing activity through the power of the Word of God in our lives.

We all live with the burden, with the reality of sin, with the reality of evil which infects and inhabits our lives. One thinks of Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, who tries to get rid of the spot from her hands, the stain of murder, but she cannot. And in a very real sense, that's how we all live our lives.

And what Jesus is saying is there's no way to get out from under this except through the cleansing, empowering reality of the Word of God transforming your life, making you a new person in Jesus Christ, giving you a fresh start, giving to you new life, being born of water, being born again. Secondly, Jesus says to be born again is to be born of the Spirit. Now this is not quite so difficult to understand as the idea of being born of the water.

Jesus says that we must be born of the Spirit, and in verses 6 to 8 he spells this out a little more. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. And then in a wonderful play on words, he says, the wind blows wherever it pleases.

You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going, so it is with everyone born of the Spirit. Now Jesus is saying two things here that we need to be clear about if we're to understand the reality of regeneration. The first thing that Jesus is saying is that this is a spiritual reality.

This is a spiritual reality wrought by the Spirit of God in your life. So flesh gives birth to flesh, that's obvious. That's what happens in natural birth, but we're talking now about a spiritual reality.

To be born again is to be born from above. It is to experience something which God does in your life. It is something which happens by the work of the Spirit of God.

So there's a contrast here between flesh, the physical, and between Spirit. What God works in the soul of a man or a woman. And so what Jesus is describing here is this inner spiritual transformation.

This being made new. A heart of stone being taken out. A heart of flesh being taken out.

A heart of the Spirit being implanted within us. A heart of sin removed, and a heart after God's Spirit being put within us. It's described as new life, as renewal, as a resurrection from the dead.

It is a spiritual reality. But the other thing we need to understand is that this is a work of God's sovereign grace. This is something which God does.

And as you know, the Greek word for Spirit is the same word for breath or for wind. And the Holy Spirit is described in the Bible as the breath of God, as the wind of God. And if you understand that, you begin to see what Jesus is really saying here, and the play that he makes on words.

The wind blows where it pleases. You don't control the wind. You don't know where it starts and where it stops.

And Jesus says that's how it is with the Spirit of God. You don't control the Spirit of God. You don't know where the Spirit of God starts and where the Spirit of God stops.

Regeneration is a sovereign work of God's Spirit in your heart and in your life. This is something that God does. Nicodemus, this is something that God does in your life.

This is not something that you do. Those who experience this reality experience something of the touch of the sovereign grace of God in our lives. And this is the point, and you would well expect this from a Reformed and Presbyterian pastor and preacher and theologian, but this is the point that I want to underscore this evening.

Because there's a lot of talk and a lot of language which is used in the evangelical community to describe the experience of being born again as if this is something that we do. As if somehow we do something which can make us born again so that we can be good enough somehow to be accepted by God and enter into the kingdom of God. That this is something that we decide.

That it's somehow shaped by our wills. Determined by our choice alone. But the teaching of Scripture is very clear.

And John 3 puts the sharpest edge on the doctrine of regeneration at this point. That it is an act of God. That God acts in His sovereign grace.

Why? Because we are dead. In our sins and in our trespasses. We're not simply sick and trying to find our way limping along.

But we are dead in our sins and in our trespasses without God and without hope in the world. And the only hope we have is that God, by His grace, reaches down and touches us by His Spirit to regenerate us and to make us new. Our sin makes us unable to do what God requires.

And without the sovereign work of the Spirit, we are without new life. And how do we respond to that reality? How do we respond to the sovereign work of grace in our lives? Simply by faith. Simply by obedience.

Faith in trusting. Repenting of our sin and trusting in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. And then in obedience.

Committing ourselves to walk in His way. That's not what saves us. What saves us is the reality of the work of the Spirit in our lives.

Making us new people by God's grace based on what Christ has done for us. Only Christ can save us. We can't save ourselves.

And that's the hard message of the Gospel, but it's the hopeful message of the Gospel. Because why would you want to believe in a Gospel that depends on you? Why would you want to trust in a salvation that depends on you? Because in the end, such a Gospel, such a salvation will not come through, will not save you. But God, by His sovereign grace alone, can save.

There's a lot, there are a great many people who have testified to the reality of this sovereign work of grace in their lives and in their hearts throughout the history of the Church. One thinks of Augustine, whose heart was restless until it was touched by the Spirit of God. God speaking through the Book of Romans as it was read.

One thinks of Luther, who desperately wanted to be accepted by God and realized in the end there was nothing he could do except simply trust in the sovereign grace of God. Wesley, whose heart was strangely warmed by the truth of the Gospel at work in his life. They experienced, my friends, something that is real.

Not religious emotion. Not fervor that they somehow built up themselves and got carried away with. They experienced a real, palpable experience of the Spirit of God at work in their lives.

And it's such an experience, such a reality of regeneration, that we need to understand and receive an experience by God's grace in our hearts and lives by faith. And then finally, notice that Jesus says that to be born again is to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus says that spiritual rebirth is the means by which we enter the Kingdom of God.

Now as a devout and as an Orthodox and as a well-taught Jew and Pharisee, Nicodemus expected the arrival of the Kingdom. He would have been anticipating the arrival of the Kingdom. He would have been looking for the arrival of the Messiah.

He would have been expecting the Kingdom of God to come at the end of history. And furthermore, as someone who was committed to Pharisaical teaching, to all that he had committed his life to as a Pharisee, he would have presumed, he would have been assured that he had a place in that Kingdom. Why? Based on his race and on his circumcision.

And Jesus is turning the world of Nicodemus upside down and inside out by saying that entrance into the Kingdom of God comes by being born again. And what Jesus says here is really already anticipated in the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 36, verses 25 to 27, where the prophet says that at the new order of the Messianic age, the Kingdom of God will be like this. God says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean.

And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees. And what Jesus is really saying to Nicodemus, what Jesus is really announcing in his presence is that that Kingdom is now in your midst. That day has now arrived when God will pour out his Spirit, when there will be cleansing taking place.

How do you enter into the Kingdom of God? You enter in through being born again. How are you born again? Through the reality, through the ministry of Jesus. The Kingdom has been inaugurated in Jesus.

And what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is you don't get into this Kingdom on the basis of your racial heritage, on the basis of your religious experience, on the basis of your ritual observance, on the basis of your rational learning. You get into this Kingdom because the Spirit of God cleanses you, empowers you, renews you, and that's made possible through my ministry, through the ministry of Jesus. You get into it because of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, whose Kingdom it is.

And as we'll see next week, Jesus goes on in response to Nicodemus' question in verse 9 to talk about his own ministry and how his ministry is at the center of this Kingdom and is the basis of the reality of regeneration. I would encourage you to reflect on the reality of what it means to be born again, not as a religious cliché, not as something which is kind of acceptable within evangelical circles, but as something which is a reality taught by Jesus himself, the reality of this regeneration about which our Lord speaks. Because when you begin to grasp and when you begin to understand the depths of the reality described here by our Lord Jesus Christ, you begin to enter in in a more profound way to the reality of the salvation which has been wrought for you by our Savior and by our Lord.

The word phrase, born again, probably was made most famous in the 1970s by Charles Coulson. Charles Coulson, who wrote his biography under the title Born Again. When Chuck Coulson accepted Christ as Savior in 1973, everyone, especially the reporters, greeted his conversion with skepticism.

Coulson had been the Watergate hatchet man, as you will remember. He'd been the most notorious of all the Watergate conspirators. Time magazine described him in this way at the time of all the Watergate cast, few had a reputation for being tougher, wilier, nastier, and more tenaciously loyal to Richard Nixon than one-time presidential advisor Charles W. Coulson.

And on June 21st, 1974, Coulson was in fact sentenced to prison and served a time in prison for the crimes that he had committed and for his part in the Watergate fiasco. But you know what Charles Coulson does today? Charles Coulson now, what is this, 25 years later, 26 years later, is in prison ministry. Still in prison, not in prison for his crimes, but in prison bringing the gospel to men and to women who have been incarcerated.

Because you see, what happened to Charles Coulson back in 1973 was not just a religious experience that sort of helped him along in a difficult period. It was not just a cliché, it was a reality. God touched his life in a powerful and in a profound way that meant he would never be the same again.

And over these past 25, 26 years, he has given testimony to that fact, to that reality. That's the reality of regeneration. Have you experienced that kind of rebirth in your life? That kind of radical transformation? That kind of beginning again that wakes you from your sinful slumber? That turns your life upside down and inside out? That brings you out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of life? That gives you new life, new hope, that makes you forever a child of God? How can this be? It's possible by the spirit of God, as the spirit works through the word of God in your heart and in your life as you respond to the gospel of Jesus.

Let us pray. Lord, we thank you tonight for this conversation that you had with Nicodemus so many years ago. And how through this conversation, which found its way into the gospel, into the New Testament, into your written, inspired word, we have a record of that conversation which now instructs us in what it means

to know the reality of your gospel.

Lord, many of us would like to start over. We'd like to think that somehow there could be a work, a reality in our lives that would allow us to get a fresh start. And we thank you for this promise that by your spirit, through your word, such a fresh start is possible.

And so tonight we simply bow in your presence and invite you, God, invite you by your spirit to come and to work in our hearts and in our lives. And for those who may be here, Lord, who don't know you, who've never experienced this reality, touch by your grace their hearts and lives tonight in a very deep and profound way, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/26/SID26632.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-vissers/johns-gospel-how-can-this-be/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net