

# The New Birth as Set Forth in John 3:2-21

by R.A. Torrey

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*The New Birth is a radical transformation of our inmost nature, a birth from above, where we receive a new nature, new thoughts, new ideas, new ambitions, new desires, new feelings, and a new will, through faith in Jesus Christ.*

**Scripture:** Numbers 21:5-9, John 3:3-16, Acts 10:4, 1 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Corinthians 5:17, James 1:18, 1 Peter 1:23

**Topics:** "Spiritual Transformation", "New Birth"

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## Description

R.A. Torrey emphasizes the critical doctrine of the New Birth as outlined in John 3:2-21, asserting its universal necessity for all individuals, regardless of their moral or religious standing. He explains that the New Birth is not merely a reform of behavior but a radical transformation of one's nature, requiring a divine act of God through the Holy Spirit. Torrey highlights that no amount of morality, religion, or good works can substitute for this spiritual rebirth, which is essential for entering the Kingdom of God. He concludes by detailing the method of the New Birth, which involves the Holy Spirit's power and faith in Jesus Christ as the means of regeneration.

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## Transcript

THE subject of our study this morning is The New Birth. One of the most fundamental and vital doctrines in Christianity is the doctrine of the New Birth. If men are wrong here they are likely to be wrong everywhere, and if they are right and clear in regard to this doctrine, they are pretty sure to be right and clear on every doctrine. We shall study the doctrine of the New Birth as it is set forth in the third chapter of John, the 1st to 21st verses. In this chapter our Lord tells us first of the Necessity of the New Birth; second, the Nature of the New Birth, and third, the Method of the New Birth.

### 1. THE NECESSITY OF THE NEW BIRTH.

1. The first thing that our Lord Jesus teaches us in the third chapter of John in regard to the necessity of the new birth is that that necessity is UNIVERSAL. In the third verse He says, "Verily, verily I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Literally translated, these words would read, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except anyone be born again (or, from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God." Not one single man or woman or child will be able to see the kingdom of God except they be born from above. In verse 7 our Lord says, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again (or from above)." The emphasis is upon the "thee" and "Ye." Nicodemus would not have been at all amazed or surprised if the Lord Jesus had taught that a Gentile needed to be born again, what surprised

him was that the Lord should have said it to him, and that he and other men of his class must be born again. Our Lord's words when taken in their connection, set forth in the most forcible manner possible that there is not one single man on earth who can see the kingdom of God except he have a personal experience of the New Birth. If any man could get to heaven without being born again Nicodemus was the man. He seemed to have pretty much everything that would entitle one to an entrance into the kingdom of God. He was a man of most scrupulous morality, he was a man of lofty aspirations, he was a man who longed to know the truth and was willing to make sacrifices in order to know it, he was a man who was endeavouring to live up to the truth as far as he did know it, he was a generous man, giving a tithe of all that he got as a starting point in his giving, and added to that generous free will offerings; he was an intensely religious man, a man who studied his Bible, and a man who prayed, he was a man who carefully observed the ceremonials of the Jewish religion (which was a Divinely revealed religion, Jno. 4: 22), he was an active worker, he was a teacher of the truth as far as he knew it, indeed he was "the teacher of Israel." What more could a man need in order to fit him to see and enter the kingdom of God? And yet the Lord Jesus said to him, "You need to be born again." If Nicodemus could not see nor enter the kingdom without the experience of the New Birth, certainly none of us can. The necessity of the New Birth is absolutely universal, there are no exceptions. The teaching is very common to-day that while certain classes of men and women, those that have gone into sin and whose characters have become corrupted, may need to be born again, people who are well born the first time, of pious parents, and who have a naturally amiable disposition, and who have been reared morally and religiously from early childhood, do not need to be born again. The Lord Jesus Christ says that they do. Not one man, woman or child shall see or enter the kingdom of God without being born again.

2. The seventh verse teaches us that the necessity of the New Birth is not only universal, but that it is also **IMPERATIVE**. Our Lord Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," not merely you may be, but "you must be." The New Birth is not merely a matter of privilege, it is a matter of solemn and imperative necessity, and I say to every one of you here to-day, who has not already been born again, "You must be born again."

3. The third thing that Jesus taught regarding the necessity of the New Birth is that it is also **ABSOLUTE**. Nothing else will take the place of the New Birth.

(1) Reform will not take the place of the New Birth. Many of the preachers of our day are preaching reform, they are telling men, and telling men very forcefully, that they must give up this sin and that sin in their lives. Well, reform is well enough in its way, but mere reform will not save, no matter how thoroughgoing the reform may be. Men need some thing deeper and more radical than reform, they must be "born again." The central teaching of one great preacher in this land was "Quit your meanness," and he led thousands of people in this country to quit their meanness in many forms, but quitting one's meanness is not enough, however desirable it may be, as far as it goes. What men need to be told is, "You must be born again." There must be not mere reformation but regeneration.

(2) Morality is not enough. Morality is an attractive thing, but it is an external thing. Nicodemus had morality, but he needed something more, something deeper, something that underlies a true and abiding morality. Our Lord said (Matt. 5:20), "I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven. " The Pharisees were moral, scrupulously moral, but their morality was superficial, it was not a morality of the heart. The only man who will enter into the kingdom of heaven is the man whose morality is of that deep kind, affecting the will and the affections and the whole inner life, that results from the New Birth.

(3) Baptism will not take the place of the New Birth. In the fifth verse we are told, "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Even if we take the water in this passage to refer to the water of baptism (which it does not) still we find our Lord saying that it is not enough to be born of water, but that we must be born, "of water and the Spirit." The birth from above, the birth by the power of the Holy Ghost, is necessary, even though one has been baptized by water in any form of baptism. In the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles we read of Simon Magus who was baptized, and whatever the proper form of baptism may be, he was certainly baptized by the proper form for the work was done by a Divinely appointed man, and yet further on in the record we hear Peter saying unto this same properly baptized Simon Magus, "Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right before God .... For I see that thou art in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." The baptism of Simon Magus was not enough, it was not the new birth, and he needed to be born again.

(4) Religion will not take the place of the New Birth. Religion is all right in its way, if it is true religion, but religion will not save. No amount of observation of the externalities of true religion, Bible reading, prayer, churchgoing, observation of the ordinances, will save. No man can see or enter the kingdom of heaven, no matter how religious, except he be born again. Nicodemus was religious, extremely religious, but he was unsaved until he was born again.

(5) Generosity in giving will not take the place of the New Birth. How many there are to-day who are really depending for their hope of heaven upon their generous giving, and how many there are who think of others who are generous givers that these men cannot be lost because they give so much for the poor and for God's work, but even though one should give all his goods to feed the poor, and have not that love which comes from being born again it would profit him nothing (1 Cor. 13:3). The Pharisees were generous givers, they were careful to tithe absolutely everything they received, down to the mint and anise in their gardens, but they were unsaved and needed to be born again.

(6) Conviction of sin will not take the place of the New Birth. Many think that they are saved because by the power of the Holy Spirit they have been brought under deep conviction of sin, but after they have spent days or weeks in agony over their sins they find that conviction is not conversion, much less is it the New Birth, and though one should sob and wail over his sins for years or his whole life, he could not by that means enter the kingdom of heaven. No amount of sobbing and wailing and doing penance will take the place of the New Birth.

(7) Culture will not take the place of the New Birth, even though it be "ethical culture" or religious culture. Everywhere through Christendom the churches are substituting culture, ethical culture," or religious culture, or intellectual culture, for the New Birth, but culture will not do "you must be born again." Nicodemus was one of the most cultured men among his people, he was "the teacher of Israel," but he was lost, and the most cultured people of America to-day, the most cultured men and women of Los Angeles are lost men and women, unless they have been born again.

(8) Prayer will not take the place of the New Birth. A man may spend hours a day in prayer and yet be a lost man. Cornelius was a man of prayer and a generous giver, so notable was he for prayer and almsgiving that his prayers and alms went up for a remembrance before God (Acts 10 : 4), but he needed to be saved by being born again through faith in Jesus Christ, and the angel said to him to send to Joppa for a man called Peter who would speak unto him words whereby he should "be saved" (Acts 11: 13, 14). Evidently he was not saved as yet. The necessity of the New Birth is absolute, there is nothing else that will take its place.

4. Why is the New Birth absolutely necessary? Verse 6 tells us why the new birth is absolutely necessary, why nothing else will take its place. The reason is because "that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." In other words, all that we can get by our human parentage, no matter how godly or pious or moral or cultured our parentage may be, is that which is natural and not that which is spiritual, and the kingdom of God is spiritual and in order to enter that kingdom we must be born of the Spirit. Human nature is rotten to the core.

## II. THE NATURE OF THE NEW BIRTH.

In this chapter we have a very clear explanation of just what the nature of the New Birth is.

1. First of all it is a **RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF OUR INMOST NATURE**. This comes out in the very wording of what our Lord said, "Ye must be born again (or, anew, or, from above)." It is not a mere outward change, but a birth, a new birth. Elsewhere we are told it is a new creation. Paul says in 2 Cor. 5 : 17, "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation (or, there is a new creation) : the old things are passed away; behold they are become new." Evidently the New Birth is a radical transformation in the deepest depths of our being, the impartation of a new nature, a new intellectual nature, a new emotional nature, a new volitional nature. That is to say, new thoughts, new ideas, new ambitions, new desires, new feelings, new emotions, a new will. It is an impartation of God's own nature to us. As the Apostle Peter puts it in 2 Pet. 1 : 4, "By these (that is by the Word of God, by God's exceeding great and precious promises) " we "become partakers of the Divine nature. " We are born into this world with a corrupt nature in every part of our mental and moral being. Our minds are blind to the truth of God. As Paul puts it, "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14) ; our feelings are corrupt, we love the things that God hates and hate the things that God loves; our will is perverse, our wills are set upon pleasing ourselves instead of upon pleasing God. In the New Birth we get a new mind, a mind that is open to the truth of God, that thinks the thoughts of God after Him; we get new affections, we now love the things that God loves and hate the things that God hates; we get a new will, a will that is in harmony with the will of God, a will that is set upon pleasing God and not set upon pleasing self.

2. The New Birth is also a **BIRTH FROM ABOVE**. We learn this from verses 3 and 7. Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." And again, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born from above." In our Authorized Version we find the words "born again," and in the Revised Version, "born anew," but a more exact translation is "born from above." The New Birth is a birth from above, it is a heavenly birth, it is a birth from God, a direct work of God in the individual heart.

## III. THE METHOD OF THE NEW BIRTH, OR HOW MEN ARE BORN AGAIN.

We come now to the directly practical questions, how are men born again, and what must we do in order to be born again. This question is answered plainly in the chapter we are studying.

1. First of all we are born again by the Holy Spirit's power. We read in verses 5 to 8, "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." The New Birth is the Holy Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit is a living person today who operates directly upon the spirits of men, quickening them, and by His transforming power working directly in our spirits we are regenerated. The Holy Spirit imparts a new nature to us.

2. The new birth, while wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit, is wrought through the instrumentality of the Word of God. This comes out in the fifth verse, "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." There is reason to believe that the water here means the water of the Word, but we will not go into that at this time. Whether that is taught here or not, it certainly is taught elsewhere in the Bible. For example, we read in 1 Pet. 1 : 23, "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the Word of God, which liveth and bideth. And we read in Jas. 1 : 18, "By His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures." The Spirit of God is the one who works the New Birth, the Word of God is the instrument through which He does it. We preach the Word of God to men, God quickens it by the power of His Holy Spirit as we preach it, it takes root in the human heart, and the result is the new nature. If we wish to see others born again we should give them the Word of God in the power of the Holy Ghost, and the result will be that they will be born again. If we have not been born again ourselves we should read and ponder the Word of God, and while we do so look to the Holy Spirit to quicken it in our hearts, and the new birth will be the result.

3. The new birth is wrought by the Holy Spirit through His Word in us when we look to or believe on Jesus Christ. This comes out in verses 1-4 and 15. Nicodemus had asked the Lord how these things could be, and how one could be born when he is old, that is, how one could be born again. Verses 14 and 15 contain the Lord's answer to the question. He said, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. The Lord was referring to an incident in the Wilderness when the murmuring Israelites were bitten by fiery serpents and were dying from the bite, and Moses cried to God for deliverance and God commanded Moses to make a serpent of brass (in appearance like to the fiery serpent that had bitten them) and to put it on a pole and that it would come to pass that everyone that was bitten when he looked at the serpent on the pole would live (Num. 21:5-9). We all have been bitten by the serpent of sin. His bite is death, eternal death. But the Lord Jesus Christ has been made in the likeness of sinful flesh and "lifted up" on the cross of Calvary where He made a perfect atonement for sin, and as soon as we look at Him on the cross and put our trust in Him as our sin-bearer, that moment we are born again. The same thought is found in the 16th verse, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have eternal life. All anyone has to do to be born again is, to look and live, to look at Jesus Christ, putting his confidence in Him, to look at Christ crucified and put faith in Him as our atoning Saviour, and the moment we do thus put our faith in Him, that moment the Spirit of God, through His Word, which presents Him to us as our atoning Saviour, imparts to us God's own nature and we are born again. The same thought is presented very clearly and very simply in the first chapter and the 12th and 13th verses, "As many as received Him (i. e., the Lord Jesus), to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name : which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." All anyone has to do then to be born again is to receive Jesus Christ, to receive Him as that which He offers Himself to be to us : as our atoning Saviour, who bore all our sins in His own body on the cross; as our risen Saviour and Deliverer from the power of sin; as our Teacher sent from God, who spoke the very words of God; as our Lord and Master, who has a right to, and to whom we surrender, the absolute control of our lives ; and as our Divine Lord. If there is anyone here this morning who has never been born again, all you have to do to be born again is to thus receive Jesus this moment, and the moment you do so receive Him you will be born from above, born of God.

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