

New Life by New Birth

Sent: Ambassadors for Christ on Mission for God Sermon 1

John 3:1-18 | October 8, 2023

A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

See page 10 for small group discussion questions

We began this fall with our sermon series, *Pillars*. We considered these four pillars of a biblical church:

Worship: we *glorify* Christ.

Community: we *gather* in Christ's name.

Discipleship: we *grow* like Christ.

Mission: we *go* into the world for Christ.

In the next few weeks, we'll consider in more depth this fourth pillar, *mission*.

What does it mean to go into the world for Christ?

Two weeks ago, we saw that our mission is modeled after Jesus' mission. Twice Jesus says of his followers in John's Gospel: "As the Father sent me into the world, just so, I am sending you" (see John 17:18; 20:21).

Jesus' mission includes bringing three profound new realities into this world: giving individuals new life, creating a new people, and inaugurating a new kingdom.

This week and next, we'll consider the reality at the very center of all this, or at the depths: *new life*. Becoming God's people and entering His kingdom, all depends on Him granting us new life.

Turning to John 3

What is this new life that Jesus came to give? How does he give it? How do we receive it? And how does it shape our own mission? We take these questions with us to John 3, where a religious leader comes to Jesus under the cloak of darkness. This man, Nicodemus, ends up in a conversation about new life and the kingdom of God, and Jesus tells him, emphatically, that "no one can enter the

kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3). New life, requires new birth. As you turn in your Bibles to John 3, let me read for us the opening interaction—for it sets the real issues before us:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (3:1-4).

Nicodemus is a well-educated religious leader, “a teacher of Israel,” Jesus says (3:10). While he opens with praise—“we know you are a teacher come from God” (3:2)—he’s really come with questions. He wants to know if Jesus is *more* than a teacher, perhaps the great prophet? And if Jesus has “come from God,” then Nicodemus wants to know what he has to say about God’s approaching kingdom—who enters it, when will it arrive?

Questions about God’s kingdom were common in that day. Jewish people anticipated God’s radical intervention into history, reestablishing their fortunes and granting the chosen people eternal life.¹ And Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter in his address to Nicodemus:

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (3:3).

Again in verse 7, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” (3:7).

Jesus claims that no one enters the kingdom of God nor inherits eternal life unless they are *born again*. Whatever else Jesus’ mission involves, and whatever else our mission involves, it must, therefore, have much to do with this new life that comes through this new birth.

So, let’s imagine ourselves in Nicodemus’ place, and consider these three questions that might surface as we take this teaching in: (1) Why is the new birth necessary? (2) What happens in the new birth? (3) What is the evidence of the new birth in someone’s life?

I. Why Is the New Birth Necessary?

Jesus presents the new birth as a *necessity*: “**unless** one is born” again (vv3, 5); you “**must** be born again” (v7). There is not another doorway into God’s kingdom. But why? Why is the new birth necessary?

Prescriptions reveal diagnoses

Nicodemus and his contemporaries thought much about the requirements for entering God’s kingdom. Chief of these were scrupulous keeping of commandments and faithful observance of religious practice.² To the problem of being outside the kingdom, Nicodemus would expect Jesus to prescribe the remedy of moral performance and religious devotion. Instead, Jesus prescribes something far more radical.

Imagine you go to the doctor because you’ve been experiencing shortness of breath. You expect he’ll tell you that you need to get in better shape, or perhaps you have asthma. Instead, at the close of his tests he says you must have a heart transplant. Your problems are far worse than an extra few pounds or asthma.

This is what Jesus is doing to Nicodemus and to us. He’s offering a prescription that assumes a far deeper problem. We expect entrance into his kingdom to involve being good and religious people—kind, justice-seeking, morally upright, and church-attending. But instead, Jesus says we need a heart transplant—we need to be *born again*! There is something wrong with us that only a total transformation can fix.

Spiritually dead

The new birth is necessary because we are spiritually dead: spiritually dead, morally twisted, and legally guilty before God. And none of this we can fix on our own.

Most people have no idea what’s really wrong with them. We all tend to mistake the real problems as a lack of religious effort on our part. Or we blame things outside of us—social systems, political structures, and families we come from.

Dostoevsky takes on this line of thinking in his brilliant novel, *Crime and Punishment*, where debaters surmise that the real cause of sin and crime is social environment:

Crime is a protest against the abnormality of the social set up—that alone and nothing more.... A social system, coming out of some mathematical head, will at once organize the whole of mankind and instantly make it righteous and sinless.³

Of course, social environments impact us. But don't we realize that it's *people* who make the social environments in the first place? Jesus does not say to Nicodemus, "no one enters the kingdom of God unless you socially build it." Nor does he say, "no one enters the kingdom until humanity evolves to moral perfection." No. He says, "no one enters the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Someone from another church emailed me once frustrated by the Anglican Catechism (a catechism is a structured way of teaching the faith). She didn't like that it opened with such a negative view of human beings. In Part 1 it asks, "*What is the human condition?*" It answers,

The universal human condition is that, though made for fellowship with our Creator, humanity has been cut off from God by self-centered rebellion against him, leading to lawless living, guilt, shame, death and the fear of judgment. This is the state of sin.

"*How does sin affect you?*" it goes on. "Apart from Christ, I am hopeless, guilty, lost, helpless, and walking in the way of death."⁴

Four hundred years prior, the Heidelberg Catechism rings the same: *How many things must I know to live?* it asks. Answer: "The magnitude of my sin and wretchedness, and how I am relieved from all my sin."⁵

We often find it hard to believe that our condition is this bad. And this is because we base our self-diagnoses on our *feelings*. But we know our feelings are not always in line with the state of our physical health—how much more so when it comes to our spiritual health? Jeremiah is correct, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

Like a good physician, in John 3 the God of Love lovingly tells us what's really wrong with us, and speaks of the cure: new birth: "Do not marvel that I say to you, 'You *must* be born again" (John 3:7).

Let's now ask what it is, what happens in the new birth?

II. What Happens in the New Birth?

Nicodemus cannot understand how the new birth happens:

How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? (3:4)

Jesus' answer states not only that it *can* happen, but offers insights into how it comes about:

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:5-8).

Notice three things about how the new birth happens:

1. God causes it

First, it is God, not man, who causes it. This is what lies behind Jesus' words, "unless one is born of water and the spirit" (v5). Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit, and water to cleansing from sin. And all this looks back to a prophesy of Ezekiel worth quoting at length because of all the light it shines upon the new birth:

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, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse 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 (Ezekiel 36:24-27).

This is God speaking. He declares one day he will give his people a heart transplant and put his spirit within them. And notice that it is God who's doing the acting: "I will take;" "I will sprinkle clean water on you;" "I will cleanse you;" "I will give you a new heart;" "a new spirit I will put within you;" "I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh."

God causes the new birth. Just as a human being cannot cause their own natural birth, so too, a fallen sinner cannot cause their spiritual new birth.⁶ We will return to this point as we close, for God's action in the new birth is crucial for our confidence in mission.

2. It is spiritual in its nature

Second, the new birth is spiritual in nature, though it affects all of us. Jesus explains in verse 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:6).

When someone is born again, they do not wake up with a new physical body. Nor do they immediately lose all fleshly aspects of life, such as sinful. Rather, the new birth is a new *spiritual life*. It does impact all of life, and it promises and points to a time when one will be raised from the dead with a new body.⁷

This new spiritual life is likened to a new heart: you are no longer spiritually dead, but now capable of loving God, and sensing His beauty. In this new spiritual state, you are also forgiven, and cleansed of your sins—so legally, you are no longer guilty. Your state has changed from an enemy of God's to his son, his daughter. You are now Jesus' friend. We will say more about what it's like to *experience* this new spiritual state below.

3. It is mysterious, though we can detect its effects

Third, the new birth is mysterious in its ways, but we can detect its effects. Jesus uses an analogy in verses 7-8 to help Nicodemus understand how the New Birth Happens, which I think will be helpful for us:

Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:5-8).

It is hard for us when we cannot fully control things, nor understand them. Jesus says it will be like this with the new birth. Just like you cannot see the wind, nor control the wind, nor understand from whence and where it comes, so too, you cannot understand how it is, or when it happens, exactly, that God causes the new birth.

And in Jesus’ teaching about the new birth, there is the age-old conundrum about free will and God’s sovereignty. If we are truly spiritually dead, then of course we need God to act upon us in order to have life. But, as we’ll see in a moment, a key part of this new life is our *belief*, or *receiving*. But our belief cannot come first, for how could a spiritually dead person believe? There is a mystery here—like with the wind—between God’s sovereign power and our hearts believing in him. But the deep principle is unmistakable: without God acting, without his grace, we are without hope.

Drawing us to our third point is Jesus’ subtle comment about the wind: though we don’t understand it, we can “hear its sound” (v8). So too, even if we cannot ultimately control nor understand the ways the new birth happens, we can see and sense its effects (its sounds). So finally, we turn to the question: What are some signs (evidence, experiences) that the New birth has happened to you?

III. What is Evidence of the New Birth?

What are some signs that you are born again? What are some experiences you may be having that indicate the new birth is happening or has happened, to you? Here are three.

1. Repentance

In his first recorded sermon, Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent (μετανοέω) and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Repentance means feeling sorrowful about your sin, not just because it hurt others and you, but because it’s an offense to God. The word translated “repent” literally means “to turn and go the other way.” A sign of the new birth is if you are truly desiring, and trying, to follow God instead of the ways of the world. There is no new birth if there is no repentance.

2. Belief

Second, a sign of the new birth is belief, or faith, in Jesus. Jesus uses the term “believe” five times between vv. 15-18, here are a few examples:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever **believes** in him should not perish but have eternal life.... Whoever **believes** in him is not condemned, but whoever does **not believe** is condemned already (3:16, 18).

Belief is both a mental and heart reality. It means believing in your mind that Jesus is God, that he died for your sins, and that he is your Lord. It also means collapsing into his arms, putting your heart in his hands. If there is no belief that Jesus is God, no admission that sins need to be forgiven, and no giving of the heart to Jesus, there is no new birth.

I should add an important qualifier at this point: Those who are born again can and do experience seasons of failing into sin, and or seasons of doubt and coldness of heart—these do not mean you are not born again. However, if there have never been and never are signs of repentance (real turning away from sin) and trust (real giving of the heart to Jesus), then that is not a good sign.

3. Affections

Finally, I would add affections. Not those of the flesh, but a subtle, but real, desire and joy in God. This means that you have not come to Jesus simply for the miracles or signs; you have not come to Jesus simply so that he will answer prayers for stuff you want. Rather, you love him for himself. That is a sign of the new birth.

Let me conclude with two implications about Jesus’ teaching on the New Birth for our own mission, both of which point to the sermon next week.

Implication one: In our mission, evangelism takes a *logical* priority.

God’s work in the world is expansive. And as we’ll see later when we consider the *New Kingdom*, one day God will remake the whole creation, perfecting and reordering our world. Christians therefore should and do care about so many things around us. The Christian mission, in its full outworking, will

involve all types of good works that impact people's temporal lives: caring for the poor, seeking justice, running for political office or lobbying for good policies, and raising healthy families.

But in light of Jesus' words in John 3, we must recognize that no one will ever enter this kingdom apart from being born again. And if being born again centers around repentance and faith in Jesus, then this has massive implications for missions. Evangelism—using words to make the real Jesus non-ignorable to others—may not be the only thing Christians do, but it is the most important thing we can do.

As John Stott has said, and in reference to the Lausanne Covenant, “in the Church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary.”⁸

This does not mean that evangelism is always the *first* thing we do in mission. If we meet a person who's terribly physically ill, or ready to die of hunger, we obviously address those temporal needs first. What it means, however, is that evangelism has a *logical* priority: according to the logic of our problems, and of eternity, there is nothing more important than whether or not someone is born again.

Implication two: If God is the one who is at work in the new birth, then we should have indestructible confidence in the mission. With God “all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26), including the conversion of the most unlikely of persons.

How do we, as Christians, partake in Jesus' mission to bring new life by bringing about the new birth? This will be the topic we take up next week.

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading John 3:1-18. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Why do you think Jesus tells Nicodemus that it is necessary to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5)?
 2. What is the new birth? How would you explain it to someone?
 3. What do you think should take priority in *Christian* missions?
 4. Next week we consider the topic of evangelism. How does that topic make you feel? Why?
 5. Where might you practice evangelism? How about in the home with your children? How about with your adult children? How about at school or with friends? Think about *places* or *relationship* where God might want you to be about the mission of new birth.
-

Endnotes

1. Remember the similar exchange Jesus has with a rich young ruler, who's after this same question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Lk 18:18).
2. Remember when the rich young ruler engages Jesus about the same topic: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The young man goes on to speak of all the commandments he's kept, "since his youth" (Lk 18:18-21).
3. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (Vintage Books, New York, NY: 1993). 256.
4. *To Be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 23.
5. *The Heidelberg Catechism: A New Translation for the 21st Century*, trans by Lee Barrett (Pilgrim Press, 2007), 31.
6. This is stressed in the opening of John's Gospel: "But to all who did receive [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (Jn 1:12-13).
7. As Paul explains in Romans 8: "You ... are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.... although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom 8:9, 11).
8. John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, expanded edition (IVP, 2015), 58.