

# BORN OF THE SPIRIT

by Ray C. Stedman

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Everyone today is familiar with the term "born again." It has become so popular that it is used for all kinds of situations that have nothing to do with the way the New Testament uses it. If a football team has a bad season and the next year comes to life again and does much better, the sports writers say it has been born again. I heard a man say last week that his marriage, which had been threatened but was now recovered, had been "born again." I read in the paper that the Equal Rights Amendment, which is again being pushed hard by the women's movement, has now been "born again." If all this happened in line with the New Testament view of that term it would be very encouraging. How nice to know that football teams, women's movements and marriages are born again! But obviously that is not the way they use the term; rather they are referring to a kind of renewal.

In Chapter 3 of John's gospel we see this phrase used for the first time in connection with a famous night visit to Jesus.

**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 anew [born again] he cannot see the kingdom of God." {John 3:1-3 RSV}**

John calls attention here to two things about Nicodemus: who he was, and what he said.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of seventy men who ran the religious affairs of the nation and who had religious authority over any Jew anywhere in the world. That council was almost entirely made up of Pharisees.

It is very important to understand who the Pharisees were. If ever there was a group, which could be called religious fanatics, it was the Pharisees. They were a select group -- never more than 6,000 of them -- who had each one taken a solemn vow before three witnesses that he would devote every moment of his entire life to obeying the Ten Commandments, as a way of pleasing God. The Pharisees took this very seriously. As you know, the Ten Commandments speak about worshipping the true God and not having idols in your heart, honoring your father and mother, refraining from lying, adultery, and various other sins. The commandments are given in rather general terms. In order to be specific it was felt necessary to define those terms and to spell out how they applied to certain situations, so there had grown up in Israel a group of people called the scribes, who were members of the Pharisees. These men spent their lives studying the Ten Commandments and applying them to situations of life so that the Pharisees could carry out these commands and thus obey God.

The scribes took their work very seriously. In fact, to demonstrate how seriously they took it, they had compiled a very thick book, which the Jews still have today, called the Mishnah, made up of sections devoted to applying the Ten Commandments to life. In the Mishnah, the section on obeying the rule of not working on the Sabbath occupies twenty-four chapters. Besides that they have another book, the Talmud, which is made up of commentaries on the Mishnah. In the Talmud 156 pages are devoted to the Sabbath as it applied to life! We can see how serious the Pharisees were about keeping the Law.

We had for a while here at Peninsula Bible Church a Scribe School. We called the young men and women who were studying here, "scribes." We have dropped that name. We call them interns now, largely because when I took some of those young men with me on trips and they were introduced as *scribes*, everybody immediately assumed that I was a Pharisee!

In their interpretation of the commandment forbidding work on the Sabbath the scribes decreed that any form

of labor which a man engaged in to make his living was forbidden. For example, a farmer could tether his animals with a rope during the week, but he could not tie a knot on the Sabbath. If a sailor tied knots in the course of his labors through the week that was fine, but he could not tie a knot on the Sabbath. Knot-tying was regarded as work -- with, of course, certain exceptions. If it was absolutely necessary to life, one could tie a knot on the Sabbath. Knots that could be tied with one hand were permitted, but not one that required two hands. A woman could tie a knot in her girdle or in a scarf that she tied around her neck. That was essential to women, therefore it was permitted.

So people began to look for loopholes in order to get around these laws. If a man needed to draw a bucket of water out of a deep well, he was not permitted to tie a rope onto the bucket because that would be violating the Sabbath; but if he tied the rope to a woman's girdle and then tied the girdle to the bucket, he could draw up water! These meticulous, narrow, rigid interpretations constituted the whole life of the Pharisees. The Law said that mortar could not be made on the Sabbath for that would be work. The scribes said that if one spat on the ground on the Sabbath it would be making mortar, therefore spitting was forbidden. But if one spat on a rock there was no dirt involved, so one could spit on a rock on the Sabbath day but not on the ground. One had to take a good aim at the target!

The scribes limited the distance one could journey from one's home on the Sabbath day to a thousand yards. But people found ingenious ways to get around that. They tied a rope at the end of the street they lived on and that made the whole street their home, therefore they could journey a thousand yards beyond that. If people traveled around their city during the six days before the Sabbath, planting caches of food here and there so that they would have something to eat wherever they went, then they could call the whole city their home. Thus one could journey a thousand yards outside the city, but no further. By these ingenious applications the Pharisees conducted their punctilious attempts to observe the Law and thus please God. That is the kind of man Nicodemus was.

It is amazing that he would come to Jesus at all, because the Pharisees regarded themselves as superior to other men in spiritual status before God due to their total dedication to obeying the law of God. But not only did this Pharisee and ruler of the Jews come to Jesus, he asked certain questions of him. John tells us that he began his word with a courteous introduction, "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." The key word there is "teacher." This is a rather amazing statement. Notice the word *we*: "we know that you are a teacher." Nicodemus is probably speaking for the rest of the Sanhedrin -- or at least for a majority of the members -- and he is admitting that the Pharisees, who were rabid opposers to the freedom and liberty that Jesus represented, knew in their hearts that he really was a man from God, a teacher. Nicodemus regarded Jesus as a successful teacher, because God put his seal of approval on him by doing miracles through him. Nicodemus had no miracles to his record; nor could any of the other members of the Sanhedrin work miracles. Therefore Nicodemus came with a great deal of respect for Jesus, regarding him as a superior teacher, able to instruct in the meaning of the Law.

That concept of teaching indicates that the basic philosophy of this man (as it was with all the rulers of the Jews) was that all humanity needed in order to do right and to please God was good teaching -- an instructed mind and a committed will. If one had those and really worked at it, one could please God. I hope you recognize that this is a widespread, popular view of religion today. There are probably people here this morning who believe that what God expects of them is to do their best to obey the Ten Commandments, to live life as best they can, to try hard to do what the Law says, and if they do that they will please God and be accepted by him.

Notice how Jesus cuts right across that with a sharp and penetrating sentence that must have gone like a sword thrust right into Nicodemus' heart. He said to him, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Observe what Jesus is saying in this startling word to Nicodemus. He introduces his words with this little phrase, "truly, truly." I have come to understand that that term is a sign our Lord gives that what he is about to say is extremely important and should not be missed. It is a revelation of a fundamental reality about life; a basic, elementary fact that we need desperately to understand if we are going to live realistically in this world. In 19th century, billboards and newspaper advertisements, a hand with the index finger pointing was frequently used to highlight the important words. When I see these words, "truly, truly," I always see it in that light: a finger pointing at the important words that follow.

These then are the words which Jesus highlighted: "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." A new birth is absolutely essential to enter the kingdom. John uses a very interesting word here that is translated "anew," or "again." It is the Greek word, *anōthen*, which has three meanings: It means again to do it a second time; it also means to begin radically, completely, a new beginning; and it also means from above, and it is used in that sense in other places in Scripture. It signifies God must do this. The Christian understanding of this word includes all three of those meanings. It is speaking of something radical, a new beginning. It is a second birth, but it comes from above. It is God that does it, not man; and it results in a new creation, a new beginning.

This idea appears many times in the New Testament. Paul speaks of "babes in Christ," {1 Cor 3:1}. Peter says, "as newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow," {1 Pet 2:2}. Again Peter says we are "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible," {1 Pet 1:23 KJV}. And he speaks of being "born to a living hope," {cf, 1 Pet 1:3}. Paul speaks not only of being new creatures in Christ but of a new creation; of passing from death unto life, of a new, radical start. Jesus makes clear that this is the only way to enter the kingdom of God. If you do not come this way you cannot enter. There is no way you can even see the kingdom of God without this.

To be in "the kingdom of God," of course, is to belong to God; it is to be a part of his rule, his reign, his domain. Paul speaks of being transferred from "the kingdom of darkness, ruled by the god of this world, into the kingdom of the Son of his love," {cf, Col 1:13}. Thus, Jesus was referring to a transfer of citizenship, a radical departure from what we once were.

Jesus sensed in Nicodemus a deep hunger, an emptiness. Here was a man who was doing his level best to obey what he thought God wanted, yet he had an empty and unsatisfied heart that led him to seek out Jesus by night, at the risk of the displeasure of his peers, to talk with him about the kingdom of God. Sensing this our Lord immediately puts him on the right track, saying to him, in effect, "You are wasting your time if you think you can enter the kingdom of God the way you are. You cannot do it. You must be born again." John Wesley's favorite text, which he preached all through England, Wales and Scotland, was this, "You must be born again." Someone said to him once, "Why do you preach so often on 'you must be born again'?" Wesley's answer was, "Because -- you must be born again." That is what Jesus is saying.

But Nicodemus misunderstood. He took the word *anōthen* in its first sense, of "a second time." With an obviously puzzled look on his face he said to Jesus, "How can this be? How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" This is a frequent reaction of many in the Gospel of John. Jesus is forever using symbols when he talks to individuals and they take him literally. In the first chapter, he said to the Jews, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again," {John 2:19 RSV}. They thought he was talking about the building, but John tells us Jesus meant the temple of his body, of which the building was but a picture. When he says to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," Nicodemus immediately thinks of gynecology: "How am I going to get back into my mother's womb and start life all over when I am already old and grey? How can I do that?" {cf, John 3:4 RSV}. Taken in that sense, how absurd it must have seemed to him! What he is really asking is for Jesus to explain what he means.

Many people think like that yet today. Perhaps you do. Have you ever said, or heard someone say, "Oh, if I could just do it over again! If I knew then what I know now, and could go back and live it all over again, I think I could get it right!" But this is absolutely wrong; you would never get it right. The problem with humanity is not that we do not know enough, it is because of what we are. That is what makes us do the things that are wrong.

Mark Twain once said, "It is not what I don't know about the Bible that troubles me, it is what I do know!" He was not doing what he knew. This is the real problem. Most people know what is right but they do not do what is right. The reason they do not do what is right is because there is something wrong about who they are. That is true of us all.

Here our Lord is laying the foundation for that most unpalatable doctrine of Scripture that teaches we all belong to a lost race. That is the problem. It is who we are that is wrong, not so much what we do or do not do.

Once again Jesus prefaces his reply with the words 'truly, truly':

**"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 anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit." {John 3:5-8 RSV}**

Jesus is here answering Nicodemus' question, "How can a man be born when he is old?" "By water and by the Spirit," is Jesus' reply.

Many have been disturbed by the word "water" here. They do not know what it means. Some have thought it to be a reference to the bag of waters that breaks just before a baby is born; that it therefore refers to the physical life -- you must be born physically in order to be born spiritually. That, of course, is tautology; it is obvious. But when Jesus answers the question, "How can a man be born when he is old?" he is not making a reference to physical birth.

It is clear from the context that Jesus is talking about baptism. John's baptism was the sensation of the nation at this time. Everyone was talking about it. The Pharisees had sent a delegation to John to ask him why he was baptizing. The meaning of John's baptism was the central theological question of the day in which our Lord speaks. What Jesus means, then, is what baptism signifies. It is not the water that changes anybody. Many people superstitiously think that if they baptize their babies that will assure the children entrance into the kingdom of heaven; or if they themselves were to be baptized as adults that would guarantee them admittance into heaven. That is rank superstition. Water does not change anybody that way. It may make you a little cleaner, you might even smell better, but it does not make you any different in God's eyes. What the baptism stands for is what is important. Do not, like the many in John's gospel, miss the real meaning because of the symbol! The symbol behind baptism is repentance, an honest admission of need.

I have been preaching and teaching the Scriptures for almost fifty years, and I want to tell you that the one thing that keeps most people from being born again is that they do not want to admit their need. They do not want to admit that there is something basically wrong with them; they still cling to the idea that there is some good thing about them that God ought to accept, and if they do more good than bad he ought to let them into glory. I do not think anything has been more destructive in the whole realm of theology than that idea. No, repentance is necessary, an awareness that despite your best efforts you are not fulfilling God's law. You are not able to do so. You desperately need a Savior. That is what baptism acknowledges.

When a man, or a woman, boy or girl, admits he or she needs help and comes to Jesus, then the Spirit does something. God does what no man can do: he imparts his own life to that individual. After all, what is a birth but an impartation, or transferral, of life? When a man and woman have a child, what have they done? In a most remarkable way they have transferred their lives to that child; they have imparted life.

As Jesus continues, he indicates there is a clear and radical difference between the old and the new birth. He says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." What do you get from your first, fleshly, birth? More flesh! You get a body, a living body. Then what do you get from a new birth, a spiritual birth? You get a living spirit; your spirit is made alive. Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians, "You has he quickened [made alive] who were dead in trespasses and sins," {cf, Eph 2:1 KJV}. Only God can make one alive in the spirit. It is quite obvious that it does not make any difference how hard you try; if you do not have God's life you cannot live in a way that pleases him. There is no way to do that. If you are trying, with an unchanged, fallen nature, to please God, you can reduce it to the most ridiculous applications and tedious spelling out of what this means, but you still will not be able to do it. You will only miss the point. That is what Jesus is telling Nicodemus.

Finally, Jesus indicates in a most remarkable way that the new birth will result in a totally new lifestyle; he will never be the same. He illustrates this with another symbol: the wind. While he and Nicodemus were talking

they could probably hear the wind blowing through the streets of Jerusalem. Jesus said, "The wind blows where it wills." It is sovereign; no man directs it.

Isn't it remarkable that this is still true today? The weather forecasters tell us each day where the jet stream is, but they cannot say where it is going to be tomorrow. It goes where it wants; nobody has been able to control it. We cannot even figure out what makes it move. Television weather reports filmed by satellite from 22,000 miles up in the sky show where the jet stream is, but no one knows how it got there. It is under a sovereign direction and is not subject to man. That is the way the life of someone who is born again will be. There is a different drumbeat in his life, a different Lord directing his affairs, and that will make him behave differently. No man knows where he comes from or where he will be sent. You will not be able to predict the purposes of God in an individual life; God will direct that life. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

I heard once of a Christian in England who was asked to sign a church guest register. He noticed that a number of guests had entered their degrees after their names. He wanted to put some letters after his name, but had never been to a university. So he wrote, "John Smith, BA and MA." Asked what the letters stood for, he said, "John Smith, Born Again, and Marvelously Altered!"

Jesus is saying, "Do not marvel at that; that is to be expected." When God's life becomes your life, you can expect many changes. It may take awhile; there is growth involved. You are like a new baby at first, but watch: you cannot be the same person; you cannot go on the way you were. If you do, you have never been born again. When you get in touch with the life of God, things are going to be different.

Once again Nicodemus is puzzled. "How can this be?" he asks {John 3:9 RSV}. For the third time Jesus answers with a "truly, truly":

**Jesus answered him. "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" {John 3:10-12 RSV}**

It is Jesus' turn to be astonished now. He has spoken to a man who is the teacher of Israel, a man who has given his life to studying the Old Testament. Jesus also knew that book. He knew that Isaiah had spoken about a new life from God; that Jeremiah had predicted a new creation that would be given; that Ezekiel had said that God would take out the old heart of stone and give a new heart of flesh. All through the Old Testament there are statements about a new birth, a new beginning, a new creation, a new life that would come as a gift of God to those who would humbly, without pride, receive it as something they desperately needed. So Jesus says to Nicodemus, "How can this be? How can you, a teacher of Israel, not know about these things?"

It was our Lord's understanding that the Scriptures (as he put it on another occasion) "are they which testify of me," {John 5:39 KJV}. Nicodemus should have known that. Jesus is here giving the two witnesses which he always relies on to confirm that he speaks truth. There is a verse that says, "In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established," {Matt 18:16 KJV}.

That is a very important principle. Do not ever take truth on the basis of a single witness. That can be entirely subjective, colored by a person's experience. But require two witnesses.

Here the two are: first, the Scriptures witness to what Jesus is saying; and second, he himself does: "I say to you, we speak of what we know. Truly, truly (this is a fundamental fact) I am bearing witness as an eyewitness. "We speak of what we know and bear witness of what we have seen, and you do not believe our testimony." That was a gentle rebuke of Nicodemus that he ought to have known better; that when two witnesses say the same thing he ought to receive that testimony. Jesus rebukes him further: "If I told you of earthly things (I have talked about wind, and birth, and water) and you do not understand what I mean, how can I reveal to you deep and marvelous truths, the heavenly things (the things which are under the invisible control of God)? How can I do that?" Here is a confirmation that Nicodemus' problem is not what he does, but what he is.

Jesus then gives the outcome of all this in history:

**"No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man."  
{John 3:13 RSV}**

That is the incarnation. The way this would work out in historical manifestation is the appearing of God himself as a man on earth. That had already occurred. The one who came down from heaven, Jesus, witnessed to the truth of God.

Then the second historic manifestation:

**"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up," {John 3:14 RSV}**

That is a reference to the cross. When the people of Israel were being bitten by hundreds of poisonous snakes which suddenly appeared in the camp in the wilderness, and were dying by the scores, Moses was told to take a pole and put on it a brass serpent. That serpent would itself do nothing whatsoever for the people -- it was merely a symbol -- but they were told if they would look at it (and thus make a personal application of its meaning to their own lives), they would find themselves healed from the serpents bite. Jesus says, "That is a picture of me. I will be made sin (that is what a serpent always stands for, sin), lifted up to die. When that happens, if you will look at me and believe that I am dying for you, in your place, God will forgive your sins and you will receive the life of God."

**"that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." {John 3:15 RSV}**

That leads us to the greatest verse in Scripture:

**For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. {John 3:16 RSV}**

That is how to be born again.

Let us remind ourselves of those words in the first chapter of John: "To all who received him [to all who did business with Jesus by faith, who asked him to enter their lives and save them, deliver them, lead them out, change their nature], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God: who were born [born again] not of blood [not something you inherited from your ancestors] nor of the will of the flesh [not by your own desire and determination] nor of the will of man [nobody else can do this for you, no bishop, no priest, no pope, no one], but of God." Born of God. Unless you have that new life you cannot see the kingdom of God. That is the word of Jesus.

But that new life is available to anyone. Anyone can be born again if he will acknowledge his need of Jesus and receive him. That new change occurs by the power of God himself. Nicodemus needed to know that; everyone needs to know that. This is the greatest act of any life. This is where eternal life begins.

I am sure there are some here this morning who have never been born again. You have been wanting to do right, you are longing for God. A young man came up to me after the first service and said, "I have been wanting God all my life. This morning you told me how to find him." There are people wanting God, hungry for him, wanting to be right, wanting to be freed, sensing the emptiness and the futility of their own efforts. This is the way to receive him. This is the way to be born again.

**For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. {cf, John 3:16 KJV}**

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