**SERMON SERIES**

**YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN**

**John 3:1-15**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we’re going to look at an element of church membership that is far too easy to overlook. We can focus so much on how church members are to function that we neglect to answer the question of *who* the church should be made of. Who is church membership for? Should church membership be open to everyone, or should it be restricted in some way?

The Bible’s answer is simple: church membership is for those who are *born again*. That’s it. This is the one thing that is necessary to become a member of a local church. There may be other issues that may make it unwise to become a member at a particular local church – like an egalitarian becoming a member at a complementarian church – but the only necessary condition for membership is that a person be born again.

These days, the term “born again” has taken on political tones, especially in the US, where it’s used to describe conservative evangelicals who typically vote Republican. But the Bible’s definition of “born again” is much different and much more important.

A few years ago, I was at our Sovereign Grace Pastors’ Conference when C.J. Mahaney preached a sermon on Psalm 126. I’ll never forget one of the main points of that sermon. He urged us to never lose our awe at our own conversion.

My first response to that was confusion. After all, I was born in a Christian home and grew up going to church all my life. I never “converted” from one religion to another. I have always been a self-professing Christian.

But this missed the fact that everyone who truly trusts in Christ had to be converted at some point in their lives. Whether we grew up in Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or secular homes, all of us had to be converted from a state of spiritual death to spiritual life. All of us needed to be made alive in Christ.

This is what the Bible calls being “born again”. It’s also called “regeneration”. There is nothing more important to building a healthy church than ensuring that its members are regenerate. Too many churches have fractured, divided, and dissolved because they had unregenerate memberships. They try to run the church without reference to the Bible, or they try to build a church that looks nothing like what we find in the New Testament, or they get into conflict with one another and they don’t know how to forgive and reconcile with one another because they’re still spiritually dead.

Church members must be born again. That’s one of the reasons why we have such an extensive membership process. Our primary goal is to discern whether our prospective members are genuinely converted before they become members.

This doesn’t mean that only those who are born again are welcome to our services and small groups. We’re actually in a strange season right now where more than half of the people with us on Sundays aren’t members. Everyone who is sincerely seeking Christ and wants to learn more about the Bible is welcome to join us.

But when it comes to membership – the body of believers who make up, serve in, and represent the church – they must be born again. John Calvin wrote:

“…no man can be truly united to the Church, so as to be reckoned among the children of God, until he has been previously renewed”. – John Calvin

Today we’re going to consider what it means to be born again by looking at John 3, where Jesus speaks about being born again with a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

The title of this sermon is **You Must Be Born Again.** We will have three points today:

1. The Necessity of New Birth
2. The Agent of New Birth
3. The Means of New Birth

(1) **THE NECESSITY OF NEW BIRTH**

Verse 1 tells us that Nicodemus was a “Pharisee” and “a ruler of the Jews”. This meant that Nicodemus was an exceedingly religious man. He was a member of an elite religious sect that devoted itself to studying God’s Word and obeying God’s commands. Many of them were hypocrites. Jesus called them out for acting in their own self interest, and they hated him for it. But some had a genuine desire to know God and serve him.

Nicodemus appears to have been one of them. Verse 2 says:

**2**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.”

Nicodemus probably came to Jesus under the cover of night because he didn’t want his fellow Pharisees to know that he had taken an interest in Jesus. But he also came with a genuine interest in hearing what Jesus had to say. He calls him “Rabbi”, a title for a religious teacher, and says that he knows that he comes from God because he performs signs that show that God is with him. He doesn’t go so far as to call him a prophet. He definitely doesn’t call him the Messiah or the Son of God. But he knows that Jesus has a divine mandate to do God’s work and to spread God’s message.

He seems to be on the right track. But Jesus has a shocking message for him in verse 3:

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

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that all his religious activity, all his spiritual interest in Jesus, all his efforts to know God and obey God mean nothing unless he is born again. He may see the miracles of God, but he won’t see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. In verse 5, Jesus calls this “entering” the kingdom of God”. To truly *see* the kingdom is to *enter* the kingdom.

But what is the kingdom of God? Some might say that it’s a synonym for heaven, and Jesus is saying that you won’t go to heaven unless you’re born again. That’s true in the sense that heaven is God’s Kingdom in its perfection. But when Jesus preached the gospel, he said “the Kingdom of God is at hand”. It’s not just in the future; it’s in the present.

When the King of Kings came into the world, he brought his Kingdom with him, and he demonstrated that by performing miracles. He cast out demons and healed the sick to show that the Kingdom of God had broken into the world and foreshadowed a time when the Kingdom would be here in its fullness. Jesus came to show us the Kingdom and to invite sinners like us to enter in.

God’s Kingdom is present wherever the King is worshipped and obeyed, so that as more and more people are born again and saved, the further his Kingdom spreads. That’s why Jesus calls the Kingdom of God a mustard seed. It’s here, but it’s still growing, and it will continue to grow until Christ returns.

But in order for us to enter the Kingdom, we must be born again. Jesus says this twice in verse 3 and verse 5, and in both cases, he says, “Truly, truly”. Whenever Jesus introduces a statement like this, he’s highlighting its immense importance. There can be no doubt about this. This is the truth of truths, that unless one is born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.

In a sermon directed to people who were religious but not regenerated, Charles Spurgeon said this:

“You go to your churches and your chapels, you attend the house of God, you take care that there is some form of religion observed in your family; your children are not left without hearing the name of Jesus! So far so good; God forbid that I should say a word against it! But remember, it is bad because you do not go further. All this is of no avail whatever for admitting you into the kingdom of heaven, unless you are born again.” – Charles Spurgeon

Being religious isn’t sufficient. Going to church on Sundays isn’t enough. Sending your kids to Christian schools, leading your family in devotions, living by the Ten Commandments – none of it is sufficient to grant you entrance into the Kingdom of God unless you are born again.

We need “life from another realm” (D.A. Carson). We need spiritual resurrection. We who are spiritually dead need to be brought to spiritual life in order to enter the Kingdom of God.

(2) **THE AGENT OF NEW BIRTH**

But who is responsible for this spiritual resurrection? It certainly doesn’t come from us. If a dead man can’t bring himself to life physically, he certainly can’t bring himself to life spiritually. We need someone else to act on us, someone outside ourselves. We need the Holy Spirit. This leads to our second point.

Nicodemus is having trouble with this concept of being born again. In verse 4, he intentionally uses the ridiculous image of a grown man re-entering his mother’s womb to show his skepticism. But Jesus stays with him and patiently explains how this comes about, beginning in verse 5:

**5**Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Some find a reference to baptism in this verse. When Jesus says that you must be “born of water”, they take him as saying that you must be baptized in order to enter the kingdom of God. While baptism is certainly commanded of those who trust in Christ, that’s not what Jesus is talking about here. All you need to do is read the rest of the chapter. If baptism is so important that you need it in order to enter God’s Kingdom, you would have expected Jesus to speak further about it later in the chapter, but he doesn’t mention it a single time.

The best interpretation is to see being born “of water and the Spirit” as one unit. To be “born of water” and to be “born of Spirit” aren’t two distinct experiences. Rather, they are two ways of describing the same thing. In John 7, Jesus uses water as a metaphor for the Spirit when he says, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” John tells us that he said this of the Spirit. The Spirit moves into our hearts and out of our hearts like living water, refreshing us, cleansing us, and flowing out of us to bless others.

We see the same parallel between water and Spirit in Ezekiel 36:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, 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 36:25-28

This is one of the most powerful descriptions of the New Covenant. As God puts his Spirit in us, he cleanses us like clean water washing away our guilt and our shame, and we are made pure. He gives us new hearts, turning our hearts of stone to hearts of flesh and bringing us to life. So when Jesus says that we must be “born of water and the Spirit”, he’s talking about the cleansing and regenerating work of the Spirit.

Jesus explains why this is necessary in verse 6:

**6**That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Jesus is saying that physical birth has no spiritual benefits. When a baby is born, he may take his first physical breath, but he doesn’t take his first spiritual breath until the Spirit works within.

This sounded incredibly strange to Nicodemus, and perhaps it does to some of us as well. But Jesus says don’t marvel at this, because there’s so much in the world that we don’t understand.

He uses the wind as an example in verse 8. People back then didn’t know where the wind came from or where it went after it touched them. We know now because of satellites and meteorology, but they didn’t back then. The wind was an unseen force moving in unseen ways into unseen places. Jesus says, “So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”. The Spirit moves in us like the wind moves around us. Unseen, and yet clearly there.

In his commentary on this passage, D.A. Carson writes:

“We hear (the wind’s) sound, watch the swaying grasses, see the clouds scudding by, hide in fear before the worst wind storms. So it is with the Spirit. We can neither control him nor understand him. But that does not mean we cannot witness his effects. Where the Spirit works, the effects are undeniable and unmistakable.” – D.A. Carson

This is an essential element of the doctrine of regeneration. People aren’t just born again. They are born again to a new way of living. Where the Spirit works, his effects are undeniable and unmistakable as people take on new desires, new affections, and new power to obey God’s commands.

To be born again is to be a new creation in Christ. That doesn’t just apply to a single moment in your life when you accepted Jesus or responded to an altar call. To be born again is to have a completely transformed life. You live in the new by dying to the old. You put off the old self and you put on the new. Your life is no longer characterized by sensuality, greed, division, envy, anger, jealousy, or pride. It’s characterized by purity, contentment, compassion, and love.

That’s when you know that the Spirit has blown upon a person and brought them to life.

(3) **THE MEANS OF NEW BIRTH**

But how does that happen? What is the mechanism that the Spirit uses to bring about new birth? This leads to our final point.

Nicodemus can only muster one final question before he falls silent. “How can these things be?” How is this possible? How could he have missed this central requirement for entry into God’s Kingdom? Up until then, he had assumed that he would be fine as long as he lived the right way, said the right things, and believed the right doctrines. But all this talk about being born again is making him very uncomfortable.

Jesus begins with a correction before he extends an invitation. He corrects Nicodemus in verse 10:

**10**Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?

Nicodemus should have known about the new birth. He was a Bible teacher, and should have been familiar with passages like Ezekiel 36, but he wasn’t. James 3:1 says that not many should become teachers, for those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. God holds teachers of his Word to a higher standard.

Jesus could say more about the new birth to Nicodemus, but he refrains, because he’s not ready for it. If he doesn’t believe earthly things, how will he believe heavenly things? Jesus has so much more to say about this, because as verse 13 says, he came from heaven. He carried heavenly wisdom with him into the world. But Nicodemus isn’t ready for it, and neither are we, until we are born again.

And so, Jesus tells Nicodemus, and he tells us, how we can be born again in verses 14-15:

**14**And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15**that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

That’s how we become born again. We look at the Son of Man, lifted up on the cross, and we believe in him. That’s how the Spirit works. The Spirit opens the eyes of our faith so that we see Jesus on the cross and believe. We believe that he died for our sins, that he took our place, that he suffered the wrath of God on our behalf, and that everyone who trusts in him as Saviour and Lord will be saved from the judgment of God.

That’s when we go from spiritual death to spiritual life. That’s when we are transferred from the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son. That’s how we inherit eternal life, an eternal life that begins *now*. Jesus said in John 17, “This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” You can have eternal life right now, because eternal life isn’t about how long you live. It’s about whether you live in a relationship with God. True life is knowing the deep, deep love of God in sending his Son to die on our behalf, and it will take an eternity to swim in the oceans of that love.

Jesus his lifting to Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in Numbers 21. As the people grumbled and complained about being in the wilderness, God sent fiery serpents that infected and killed many. But as they acknowledged their sin, the Lord instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, so that everyone who was bitten could look at it and live.

That wasn’t because the bronze serpent had any power in itself. In fact, King Hezekiah had to destroy it in 2 Kings 18 because the people were worshipping it and making offerings to it. They had forgotten that their ancestors weren’t saved by looking at the snake. They were saved because of their faith in God’s promise to heal them and to save them from his judgment.

So it is with the cross. We aren’t saved from God’s judgment just by looking at the cross, or understanding the cross, or nodding our assent to the cross. We are saved by believing in the One who hung on the cross. We are saved when we realize that we are infected with the poison of sin, that we are destined to die under God’s judgment, and that the only way we can be healed is if God has mercy on us.

**CONCLUSION**

So let me ask you the most important question you could ever answer: are you born again? Do people look at your life and say that the wind of the Spirit has blown over you and given you new life? Have you made a decisive break from your old way of living for yourself and embraced a new way of living for God? Or is there really no difference between how you’re living and how the rest of the world is living?

One way to tell whether you are actually born again or not is how you respond to God’s commands. Jesus said in John 14 that “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”. Do you keep Jesus’ commandments? Do you even know them? Far too many self-professing Christians have no idea what Jesus has commanded. Nor do they care. They think that as long as they were baptized, or as long as they responded to that altar call, or as long as they accepted Jesus into their hearts, or as long as they haven’t intentionally turned away from the faith that they grew up in, or as long as they’re generous with their money, then they’re fine.

But none of that is the new birth. None of that is regeneration. New life in the Spirit results in a new life that’s lived for the glory of God. New life results in happy obedience to God. We’re all going to go through seasons where obedience is hard, or obedience isn’t happy, because we’re still sinners. But if you’re truly born again, your life will be marked by increasing godliness as you live out your new birth.

If you can’t say that you’ve been born again with confidence, then hear Jesus calling you today to see him lifted up on the cross for sinners like you, so that you could be healed. He was covered in your shame, so that you could be covered by his righteousness. He died, so that you could die to sin. And he rose again, so that you could be born again.

If you believe in Christ, you won’t just receive a new way of living. You will receive a new nature, a spiritual nature birthed in you by the Spirit of God. Yes, the Christian life takes a lot of hard work. We need to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness. But none of it matters unless we are born again through faith in Christ as our Saviour and Lord. So look to him, trust in him, and come alive.

If you’re here today and you have experienced the new birth, then I encourage you to never lose the awe of your own conversion. You were lost, but now you’re found. You were condemned, but now you’re justified. You were dead, but now you’re alive, and it was all because of God’s grace.

You are who you are today because the Spirit moved powerfully within you, cleansing you from sin and replacing your heart of stone with a heart of flesh. That could have happened when you were young, or it could have happened when you were old. Whenever it happened, the fact that it did happen should give you reason to rejoice every day.

And so, I encourage you to make a regular habit of celebrating your own conversion. Remember your sins, so that you might rejoice in your Saviour. Tell others about what he has done for you, and what he has done in you. And may we commit ourselves to living as citizens of the Kingdom, the redeemed people of the Lord Jesus Christ, born again by the power of the Spirit.