

Revitalize: How the Holy Spirit Bring us Life “The Spirit Gives The New Birth”

John 3:1-8

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on April 24, 2016

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to John 3.
- It’s a very basic question. But the wide-ranging answers that people give shows that there is a lot of confusion. The question is, “What is a Christian?” That sounds simple enough but people’s answers are very diverse.
 - To some a Christian is defined by affiliation. To many people living in Middle Eastern countries, a Christian is anyone who lives in a western nation. Even in our own country many people will select “Christian” on a form, not because they believe all its teachings, but simply because they grew up going to a church.
 - To others, a Christian is defined by religious practices. I’ve met many who attend what are called “mainline churches” (such as the United Church of Canada). They deny that Jesus is God, deny that Jesus is the only way to God, and deny that he physically rose from the dead. Yet, they would still call themselves Christians because they go to church, and try to love others like Jesus did.
 - To still others, a Christian is someone who believes the Bible and holds conservative views on social issues like abortion and homosexuality.
 - What is a Christian?
- This morning Jesus is going to bring some clarity to this confusion. According to Jesus, no one is a Christian simply by affiliation or because they do certain things. This misses the point.
 - It’s like asking, “What is a cat?” Let’s say you answer, “A cat chases mice, runs from dogs, and thinks it owns the world.” You didn’t answer the question. That’s what a cat *does* but not what a cat *is*.
 - In the same way, a Christian may do certain things and have certain affiliations but, according to Jesus, that is not what makes a person a Christian.
- So what is a Christian? Today we will see that, according to Jesus, a Christian is someone who has been spiritually born by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ words, they have been “born again” of the Holy Spirit.
 - As we unpack this today I am calling you to listen intently because, according to Jesus, it is very possible to live a moral life, to be spiritual, and even to attend church your whole life and still be lost.
 - In Matthew 7 Jesus says that on judgement day many people will say they knew Jesus but Jesus will say, “I never knew you; depart from me.” Oh let the weight of those words be on your heart. Test yourself. Be sure that you truly are a Christian.
- So let’s look at the Holy Spirit’s role in granting us the new birth – the new birth that defines what a Christian truly is. I will develop this morning’s message in three parts.

- First, we will talk about the necessity of the new birth. Why do we need it? Second, the nature of the new birth. What is it? And then third, the evidence of the new birth. How do you know if you are truly born again?
 - Necessity, nature, evidence.

THE NECESSITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First then, the necessity of the new birth.
 - As we come to this first point we need to begin by saying that in our culture this concept of being born again is a strange one. I think that **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** the average person thinks of being “born again” as an emotional religious experience for broken people who need to get their lives back together again. You often hear this language of being born again from drug addicts, alcoholics, or prisoners who claim they got clean through becoming “born again Christians.” Johnny Cash for instance claimed to be born again and this helped him with his addictions.
 - But you don’t generally hear people who live good stable and moral lives speak about needing to be born again.
- For this reason, Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus is very striking. Look at verses 1-2. **READ 1-2** – *“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.”*
 - I want you to see right away that Nicodemus is the exact opposite type of person whom we today would think needs to be born again. This is not a broken and needy person – not a drug addict or alcoholic. He is a Pharisee, which means he is highly cultured, highly educated, and an upstanding member of the community. He is a member of the Sanhedrin – the cultural and religious elite of his day. Of all people this is hardly a man who needs to turn over a new leaf and reform his values and morality. Pharisees were as moral as they got. And notice he even has great respect for Jesus and comes to him because he wants to learn from him.
 - Nicodemus would fit well in Victoria. People here are cultured, educated, and decently moral. The average person believes that unless they do something horrible like murder they will go to heaven when they die. Victoria is also a very spiritual place where many people respect Jesus as a great teacher.
- But Jesus has no time for pleasantries. He does not even respond to Nicodemus’ compliment. Jesus cuts right to what he thinks Nicodemus needs to hear. Look at verse 3. **READ 3** – *Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (SHOW SLIDE 4)*
 - To this upstanding, educated, religious, and moral man Jesus says, *“All of your morality, volunteer hours, and religion count for nothing in bringing you to God. If you want to know God you have to be spiritually born. You need a spiritual birth.”*
 - Notice how definitive Jesus is on this point. He says, *“unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* That word

“unless” has no wiggle room. It is not a suggestion. It is not an optional thing that you can add to improve your life.

- Human life cannot exist *unless* there is water. Birds cannot fly unless there is *air*. And no one can enter God’s kingdom, no one can be a Christian, *unless* he or she is born again.
- Jesus drives home the necessity of the new birth. He says it three times. Look at verse 3 – “***unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.***” Look at verse 5 – “***unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.***” And finally in verse 7 notice that he says, “***You must be born again.***”
 - And notice that this is not just for Nicodemus. In verse 7 your Bible probably has a margin note that tells you this “***you***” is plural. To quote our American friends, “***Y’all, must be born again.***” Or if you are from way down South, “***All y’all must be born again.***”
- Nicodemus is confused. Look at verse 4. **READ 4** – ***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?”***
 - But Jesus is not talking about physical birth. Jesus is talking about spiritual birth. Jesus is saying then that just as you needed to be physically born to enter this life, so also you need to be spiritually born to enter God’s kingdom. The Bible teaches that because of our sin all human beings are dead in their sin. We must then be spiritually born.
 - But how can we do that? No one causes himself or herself to be born. **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** In saying this to a man like Nicodemus Jesus is teaching us that our most moral and religious efforts are incapable of bringing us spiritual life.
- It does not matter what your education level is or how morally upright you are. You must be born again. Moreover, this new birth is not just for certain types of people. Jesus says *everyone* must be born again.
 - This then is the necessity of the new birth. The obvious question then is, what does it mean to be born again? What is this new birth?

THE NEW BIRTH IS A SUPERNATURAL WORK OF THE SPIRIT

- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** Let us turn now to the nature of the new birth.
 - Jesus describes the new birth in three ways.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** First, the new birth is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, not the turning over of a new leaf.
 - We must get this straight. Becoming a Christian and entering the kingdom does not depend on you turning over a new leaf and reforming your life. We are dead in sin and there is no moral self-improvement can change our condition.
 - The BBC gave a thought for the day from some Hindu Mystic. His thought boiled down to this: spirituality is an inner spark in us all that if you stopped to meditate on, you would find because it is in

you. But Jesus is saying spiritual life is not within you and neither is it in anything you can bring to yourself.

- Look at verse 3. **READ 3** – *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.* Notice that you probably have a footnote next to *“born again”* which says *“or from above.”* The big idea here then is simply that you must be *“born from above.”* Jesus insists that this spiritual birth does not come from within you; it comes from above you. It is not something you do but is something that is done to you. What is this power from above that can accomplish what you cannot do for yourself?
 - Look at verse 6. **READ 6** – *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* It is the Holy Spirit of God who accomplishes this. Adam was dust until God breathed into him the *“the wind or spirit of life”* and *“the man became a living being.”* Lazarus was dead in the tomb until Jesus said, *“Lazarus, come out!”*
 - Listen, because of sin, every single person is spiritually dead. Just as no person can cause themselves to be physically born, no person can cause themselves to be spiritually born. So if you are a Christian here today and you love Jesus, the only reason is because the Holy Spirit breathed into you. If you love Jesus there is only one reason why: the Holy Spirit said, *“Come out.”* The new birth is not something we do. It is something that is done to us.
- Unless the Spirit makes us spiritually alive, the message of Jesus Christ makes no sense to us. William Wilberforce was, of course, the man who abolished slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Wilberforce had a good friend named William Pitt who became the Prime Minister of England. Wilberforce always wanted Pitt to hear a tremendous preached in London named Richard Cecil. Finally Pitt agreed to go.
 - Wilberforce was very excited. Now you know sometimes you take a friend to church and it just so happens that on that Sunday the preacher is speaking on giving to build the new addition. But not on this Sunday. Wilberforce felt that it was the clearest and best sermon on Christ that he had ever heard. He was thrilled that Pitt was hearing this sermon.
 - On the way out the door Pitt turned to Wilberforce and said, *“William, I haven’t the slightest idea what that man was talking about.”*
- So what is this new birth that Jesus says we must have in order to enter his kingdom? It is not just cleaning up our lives. Not just stopping swearing, being nicer to other people, and maybe going to church.
 - No, the new birth is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in making spiritually dead people spiritually alive.

THE NEW BIRTH IS A DECISIVE YET MYSTERIOUS ACT OF THE SPIRIT

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** Secondly, the new birth is a decisive yet mysterious act of the Holy Spirit.

- First, notice that it is mysterious. **READ 8** – *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.*
- Jesus is drawing an analogy between the effects of the wind and effects of the Spirit. His point is simple: people cannot control wind or understand it but we can detect its effects. It is the same with the Spirit. We cannot control him or understand how he works but there is no question that we can see the effects of his workings.
 - I think of a friend of ours who at one time had no interest in Jesus. Now today he loves Jesus, trusts him for salvation, worships him, and serves him. It is mysterious to me exactly how the Spirit granted the new birth to him but I can clearly see the effects of the Spirit’s work in his life.
- So the new birth is a mysterious act of the Holy Spirit but it is also a decisive act. It is a birth. It is a moment in time. It happens only once. Knowing this can greatly help the angst that some of you feel about your conversion. Many Christians struggle with comparing their conversion experience to others and feel that theirs is not that great because perhaps it does not have a great emotional moment.
 - But we need to say this: although the new birth is a definitive event it is often not a conscious moment.
- Some you had a conversion experience like the apostle Paul. It was a conscious moment, a blinding light experience, where your life was radically changed from one moment to the next. Like Paul there was probably great emotion involved. Christians like this can mark the exact date, place, and time they were born again.
 - But others are like C.S. Lewis. He had been learning about Christianity for a while. He could remember the day but there was no great experience involved in it. Lewis writes, *“I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion...it was more like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.”*¹
 - Or maybe, like me, you cannot remember the date or any experience. Just as I do not remember my physical birth I do not remember my spiritual birth. All I can tell you is that from my earliest memories I have always known and loved Christ.
- All that to say, do not compare your conversion with others. The work of the Spirit is mysterious like the wind. Whatever your experience, it is an act of grace whereby the Spirit miraculously granted you the new birth. It is a definite event but it may or may not be a conscious moment with emotions attached.
 - It does not matter when or how you were born again. What matters is that you are born again.

THE NEW BIRTH IS THE IMPARTATION OF NEW LIFE BY THE SPIRIT

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 237.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** The third thing to say about the nature of the new birth is that it is the impartation of new life by the Spirit.
 - This should be obvious from the image of being born again. Verse 5 says we are born of “water and the spirit.” Jesus is here saying that what he is speaking of is the fulfillment of Ez 36. ***“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; [water is a picture of purification] I will cleanse you from all impurities and from all idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws.”***
 - So water pictures purification and newness. The new birth affects the whole person. II Corinthians 5:17 says it well, ***“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”***
- This new birth is so radical that those who have experienced it can hardly imagine that they used to live and think the way they did.
 - There is a famous Christian named Augustine who lived in the 4th century. Before the Spirit gave him the new birth Augustine was a sex addict to say the least. One day after he was converted he traveled to a town where he met a woman he used to sleep with. She ran up and greeted him. He was warm and kind but seemed distant. As he walked away it occurred to her that Augustine may have mistook her for someone else. She called to him, ***“Augustine, it is I.”*** Augustine turned around and said, ***“Oh I know, but it is not I.”***
 - The new birth then is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, not the turning over of a new leaf. It is a decisive yet mysterious act of God’s Spirit and it is the impartation of new life. In short, it is the mysterious act of God whereby he grants new life to people.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE NEW BIRTH

- That brings us to the final part: **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** the evidence of the new birth. How can you know if you are born again?
 - Again, I point you to verse 8. **READ 8** – ***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.***
 - If I tell you there is a great wind in here you will say, ***“No, there’s not.”*** But what if I say, ***“The wind is invisible. How can you prove it is not windy in here?”*** You would answer by saying, ***“We may not be able to see the wind but there is clear evidence when it is blowing. If it was blowing in here people would be shivering, and papers would be flying in the air.”***
- In the same way we cannot see the Spirit give new birth but the Bible does provide all kinds evidences of the new birth. The book of 1 John gives a whole bunch. Let me mention four very quickly.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** First, those who are born again believe that Jesus is the only one who can save them from their sins.

- John 5:1 - ***“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.”*** Do you love Jesus? In the deepest part of your heart do you trust that Jesus alone is the one who can rescue you from your sin? If not, then you are not a Christian. If so, then rejoice for this is evidence that you are born again.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 12) Second, those who are born again hate sin.**
 - I John 3:9 - ***“No one who is born of God will continue to sin.”*** The evidence that you are truly born again, that you are a Christian, is that you admit you are a sinner and that you hate sin. The true Christian may often be deceived into sin but where you were once friends with sin you are now enemies. Even though a true Christian still sins, the true Christian hates sins, mourns over it, and flees from it.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Third, those who are born again strive to obey God.**
 - I John 2:29 – ***“Everyone who does what is right is born of him.”*** The new nature delights to obey God and yearns to be totally like Jesus. You may stumble, and may not be all that you want to be but you are not the person you were once were. If you have no desire to be like Jesus then you are not born again. But if you are striving to be like Jesus, then rejoice, for this is evidence that the Spirit has granted you the new birth.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) Fourth, those who are born again love all people, especially the church.**
 - I John 3:14 – ***“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers.”*** The new birth implants a love for the church in the Christian, a love for those fellow members of God’s family. Do you love the church? Are you committed to the people of God, pouring your life out for them?

CONCLUSION

- These evidences may be strong or weak in you but the question is simply this: does your life show evidence that the wind of the Spirit has blown through and breathed new life into you?
 - If you don’t see any of these evidences in your life then it may be that like Nicodemus, you are a moral person and maybe even a religious person. But you are not a Christian. You are not born again. This can be quite shocking to realize that although you thought you were fine, you are actually not.
 - What should you do? The good news is that you are not called to make yourself spiritual alive. That is the Spirit’s role. Your role is simply to cast yourself on Jesus asking him to save you and change your life.
- Perhaps you do see evidence of the new birth. Fill your heart with praise to God. And then share Christ with others trusting the Spirit will work in their lives.
 - ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”***