

The New Birth

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Scripture Reading: Philippians 4

Text: John 3:1–15

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up

to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. 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.

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.

So begins John Milton's epic poem, "Paradise Lost." In these opening words, he captures what this message is all about: man's sin, man's corruption, man's need for the new birth, man's restoration in Christ.

And so, our theme is "The New Birth": 1) Its dire necessity, 2) its divine origin, and 3) its glorious possibility.

Its Dire Necessity

Why do you and I need the new birth? There are several reasons we need the new birth.

Man's Creation

Implicit in what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus about the need for the new birth is man's creation. In the very beginning, man's nature was created in righteousness and holiness. The very fact Jesus is teaching Nicodemus about the necessity of the new birth or regeneration implies that there was something before from which man had fallen. Therefore, man's original creation is important to consider. We need to consider what was before the fall. Man was created in God's image (LD 3, QA6). Man was created in righteousness, in moral rectitude. He was created in holiness. He was set apart by God from all creation to live for God's glory and commune with God. This is what is implied in Jesus's words as He speaks to

Nicodemus about being a teacher in Israel in verse 10, “Art thou a master/teacher in Israel and knowest not these things?” Nicodemus would have knowledge of man’s original creation in Paradise. He would know that this was God’s original creation.

Many people in our day do not know or willfully suppress this truth—that man was created in God’s image, that man could rightly know God, love Him, and live with Him. This was the original purpose for which God created man, not for the purpose of sin. We need to go back to the very beginning, to God’s purposes for mankind, to understand the effects of the fall and the dire necessity for the new birth. We need to be re-created in order to reflect God’s original purpose in creating us in the first place.

Man’s Corruption

But the dire necessity of the new birth is also seen in man’s corruption. Jesus reveals man’s corruption as He speaks with Nicodemus. He addresses it in verse 3, referencing humanity’s blindness to the realities of the kingdom of God. He says, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” That is, without the new birth, you remain blind to the glorious realities of God’s redemptive work in restoring humanity to its original purpose. And then in verse 5, Jesus speaks of humanity’s deadness: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Jesus is saying, “Unless you are made alive by the power of the Spirit of God, you remain dead and impotent to enter the kingdom of God.” Jesus further addresses the human condition of sin when he says to Nicodemus in verse 12, “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?” In other words, Jesus is referencing the effects of the fall on the mind, the

heart, and the will in their inability to believe the spiritual things of God. This is what Paul writes about as well in 1 Corinthians 2:11, “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.”

The new birth is thus a dire necessity to reverse the blindness sin has brought upon our minds and hearts and wills, a dire necessity to bring dead sinners into the life of God that is in Christ Jesus. Without the new birth, we remain in blindness and death. Without the regenerating work of the Spirit, our understanding remains darkened, alienated from God. The catechism speaks of it this way in QA 7: “Our nature is become so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.” If our first birth renders us this way, the new birth is a dire necessity to reverse the effects of what is called original sin. This original sin renders us corrupt and unable to do any good and makes us bent toward wickedness apart from Christ.

Man's Contribution

As Jesus teaches Nicodemus, He points out that man is unable to contribute to his own new birth. Now, we need to understand where Nicodemus is coming from. He is a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were known for their legalism. They were experts in the law. They tithed of the herbs in their gardens. They laid rules and laws for the Sabbath that defied the very spirit and reason for which God made the Sabbath. They argued that the keeping of these rules and laws in addition to God's law could earn salvation. But Jesus is speaking here to Nicodemus. He speaks in stark terms: “Except a man be born again.... Except a man be born of water and the Spirit.... Ye must be born again.” This is exclusive language arguing for the fact that no human being can contribute to his own awakening or spiritual rebirth. Man's contribution is shot through with

sin and is rejected by God. Even Nicodemus's confession of who Jesus was did not pass muster with Jesus. Nicodemus rightly saw something unique about Jesus. He says in verse 2, "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." I suppose Nicodemus was closer to the kingdom of heaven than most other Pharisees in his recognition of Jesus as a teacher come from God with divine origins. But he still did not see Jesus as God, as the Son of Man, a designation Jesus gives to Himself concerning His divinity in verse 13. It is in response to Nicodemus's question that Jesus says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nothing that Nicodemus could contribute in terms of religious training could get him closer to the kingdom of God.

Indeed, Jesus says to Nicodemus in verse 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." All that the flesh produces is more flesh. A baby born into the world already possesses this original sin. The corrupt flesh only produces more corrupt flesh. Corrupt desires only bring forth corrupt actions. Humanity contributes only sin to this equation. Paul affirms this principle in Galatians 6:8, "For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption."

The new birth is a dire necessity for humanity. It is a dire necessity for those who are still dead, blind, and unbelieving. As we learn from the history of Nicodemus, religious training and knowledge does not a spiritual person make. *Except a man be born again.* You are confronted with your dire need for rebirth because of the corruption and sin that render you totally depraved and unable to earn or produce new life. It is laid down as certainty by Jesus when He says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Its Divine Origin

Where does this dire necessity of the new birth leave you? Indeed, where should it bring you?

The Source

This dire necessity should bring you to the source of this new birth, as in verse 3. It does not arise from humanity in the first place. No, we read there Jesus's words, "Except a man be born again." That word *again* can also be translated "from above." We read it again in Jesus's words in verse 7, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again." Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born from above. The new birth is an out-of-this-world birth. It is not like the conception and birth of children that happens in the natural sphere, in the womb, or on the earth. The new birth proceeds from God Himself, from above. Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus's teaching here. He was puzzled and thought Jesus was referring to being born again the second time in the womb. That would seem impossible. So, Jesus points out that this birth is from above. It is a second birth, as it were, but it comes entirely from above.

That's where we are directed. Our eyes are being taken off ourselves as any possible source of spiritual life. There is nothing there. We are conceived and born in sin, the Scriptures affirm in Psalm 51. We are dead in sins, in trespasses, Paul writes in Ephesians 2:5. We need this birth from above should there be any hope. And so that is where the gospel directs us amid our dire need of this new birth. It points us to the source. It comes entirely outside of us. It comes from above. That should be an encouragement for sinners. Because it comes from above, because it is divine in origin, it will not fail in its purposes. The impossibility of our human condition gives way to the glorious possibility of birth from above. Where are you looking for life? Still

in yourself? You will never find it there. You are directed to God alone.

The Spirit

More specifically, you are directed to the Holy Spirit as the author of spiritual life in the hearts and minds of sinners. He comes from above and quickens and renews sinners. Verse 5 points out the power of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, or the new birth: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” In verse 6, Jesus points out that the Spirit is the author of this new birth, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The Holy Spirit produces spiritual life in those who are dead. The Holy Spirit is like the wind, coming sovereignly and powerfully. Children, you can’t see the wind, can you? You can’t see where it starts. You can’t see where it goes. All you can go by with the wind is the sound it makes and the effects it leaves behind. That is true of the Holy Spirit as well, as He does His enlivening work in the hearts of dead sinners. He makes them alive by His power. He makes them alive in His sovereign power. He blows where He wills. He blows upon dead bones and not only brings the bones together but breathes new life into these corpses, as the imagery from Ezekiel 36–37 shows us.

And what exactly does the Holy Spirit do in regeneration? Head III/IV of the Canons of Dort, Articles 11–13, is especially helpful so that we might understand what the Holy Spirit does as He comes with His power to effect the new birth. Listen to Article 11: “But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them and powerfully illuminates their mind by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God.” The Holy Spirit illumines the mind for a right understanding and discerning the things of the Spirit of God. The emphasis

is on the mind of man. "But by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed, and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions." He opens, softens, quickens, actuates (makes active), and strengthens the heart and will to show the effects of spiritual life.

And Article 12 says:

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation; a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation, that after God has performed His part, it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or continue unconverted. But it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the author of this work declares. It is not inferior to creation which called all things out of nothing, or the resurrection that brings life out of death. so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe.

When the Holy Spirit works through the Word, there are no stillborn children, but His work is always effective. It does not leave man neutral but brings him into the life that is in Christ. "Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence, becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent, by virtue

of that grace received.” This points out the link between regeneration, faith, and repentance. Regeneration comes first, is invisible, and actuates the will so that man who is regenerated is now said to do the actual believing.

Article 13 summarizes this last truth: “The manner of this operation cannot be fully comprehended by believers in this life. Notwithstanding which, they rest satisfied with knowing and experiencing that by this grace of God they are enabled to believe with the heart, and love their Savior.” We cannot understand it fully, but we can trust the Holy Spirit in His work of regeneration and can look at the fruits of this regeneration or the birthmarks of grace—namely, faith and love toward Christ. This is where Jesus also brings Nicodemus in his consideration of the new birth—faith and love toward Christ for His saving work on the cross.

Its Glorious Possibility

Indeed, that is where the Holy Spirit brings sinners in awakening them. What is the first sight of a newborn Christian? Is it not a sight of Christ brought home by the Holy Spirit? His senses dulled to Christ before but now alive to Christ and his need of Christ. Listen to how Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in verse 14: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.”

A Historical Lesson

Jesus takes Nicodemus back in history. “You know the history, Nicodemus.” There were the Israelites in the wilderness. They were snake-bit and full of venom. Fiery serpents with their fiery venom infected the children of Israel. That fiery venom is a picture of sin and how it shoots through the entirety of man’s nature. But there was hope for those who were infected with this deadly poison

back in the wilderness. What was that hope? It was tied to the brass serpent on a pole. They were instructed to look. Some were just bitten and still strong. All they had to do was look and be spared. Some were so weak that all they could do was take a glimpse of the serpent. And what do we read of those who saw the serpent and looked? In Numbers 21:9, "And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." He lived. It doesn't say how they looked. It doesn't say how long they looked. It simply says, "When he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." There is life for a look to the serpent in the wilderness.

But then Jesus moves from that lesson of history to the present possibility of salvation for Nicodemus.

A Present Possibility

Here he is, this Pharisee, coming to Jesus by night. He makes a confession of Jesus as a teacher sent from God. He misunderstands what Jesus is teaching about the new birth, and yet, the necessity of it is impressed on his heart. Jesus takes him back in history and then applies that historical lesson in verses 14-15 and beyond, "Even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Do you want this life from the Spirit? This new birth? It comes from God. And when you have it from God, there is a look to Christ, and this eternal life is yours. It's as easy as that. Don't complicate it further. God's work is regeneration. Your responsibility is to look. And it is in the looking that it is confirmed that you are indeed born again. A dead man can't look and won't look. But through the Word, the Spirit comes and bids you look, and even as He bids you look to Christ, He blows upon dead men and women and children and makes them alive in Christ, and they have eternal life. They look. They have the life. Amen.