

# You Must Be Born Again

APRIL 3, 2019 | [TIM KELLER](#)

This message from [John 3:1–21](#) titled *You Must Be Born Again* from Tim Keller was given at The Gospel Coalition 2019 National Conference in Indianapolis, Indiana. The three-day conference was titled *Conversations with Jesus* urged participants to be faithful in their efforts at evangelism and gospel proclamation.

*The following is a lightly edited transcript of this message. Please confirm quotations using the original audio or video above.*

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Let me read this famous chapter ([John 3](#)). I'm just going to read down to [John 3:16](#).

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." ([John 3:1-16](#), NIV)

Now I could preach to you for a while, or I could read you an epitaph, which is on a particular gravestone in St. Mary's Church, Everton, Bedfordshire, not too far west of Cambridge. The vicar there, the pastor there, John Berridge died.

And the famous Charles Simeon came and did his funeral in the church yard, and this is on his gravestone, which can still read today. I could just read you this, and then close in prayer. Listen...

Here lie the earthly remains of John Berridge, late vicar of Everton.

Reader, art thou born again?

No salvation without the new birth.

I was born in sin February 1716.

Remained ignorant of my fallen state until 1730.

Lived proudly on faith and works for salvation till 1754.

Was admitted to Everton vicarage (the pastor there) 1755.

Fled to Jesus alone for refuge 1756.

Fell asleep in Christ January 22, 1793.

Let us pray. Because there it is. Or... We've got some time, so let's go ahead.

The new birth:

- Who is it for?
- Where is it from?
- What does it do?
- How does it come?
- How can you tell?

So, first of all. Who is it for?

## (1) Who Is the New Birth For?

Now, it is typical today that if you say to most Americans, “I’m a born-again Christian” or “those are born-again Christians” or you use the term “born again,” they immediately have a *type* of person in mind. Some Americans might think, “OK, you’re the emotional type. I understand. You’re the kind of person that wants an emotional experience and you want to wave your hands and cry and close your eyes when you sing your hymns. OK, you’re a born-again type.”

Others would say, “Well, born-again types are people who have had very broken messed up lives. I have heard about this. They need to go to these very conservative churches with lots of moral structure because they’ve been drug addicts or they’ve been alcoholics. And so, they need moral structure.” For people who’ve had broken lives, you might need born-again kind of religion.

So there’s emotional types, there’s broken types, and another way Americans think is they say, “Oh yeah, born-again types, they’re knee jerk conservatives.”

And so, generally when people in America hear the term “born again” they think it is for a type of person, it is a kind of person.

This text indirectly and directly undermines that patronizing idea completely.

First of all, it indirectly does it just by giving us Nicodemus. Who is Nicodemus? Well, first of all, he was a member of the council, the ruling Sanhedrin. He would have been a very high-status figure, a wealthy figure—by no means an emotional person. You know, a Jewish male, a ruler, a very wealthy person. By no means an emotional type.

Secondly, he was not a broken type person. He was a Pharisee. He wouldn’t have needed more moral structure. Pharisees were the epitome of moral authority and structure.

But then, thirdly, when you hear the word Pharisee, you say, “Oh yeah, knee jerk conservative, Pharisee, right!” Except, listen to this guy...he comes to Jesus—Jesus, who has no pedigree, did not come up through the ranks, had not studied under any rabbis, has no credentials. We don’t know who this person is—yet he comes, and he respectfully calls him rabbi. And then he clearly wants to enter into a dialogue with him.

This is one of the most open-minded men you find in the gospels. Here is a man who even though he comes from upper echelons of the elite, he is very open to new ideas. He is open to *radical* new ideas. And he comes and he speaks so respectfully to Jesus. No, no, no, look. This guy is not an emotional type. This guy does not need a moral structure and this guy is *not* a knee jerk conservative.

In all these ways, he’s nothing like it at all. Let’s put it together. Being born again cannot mean you need more morality and religion in your life. In fact, the way Jesus is saying this to Nicodemus, the new birth is a challenge to morality and religion. He’s saying you’ve got all the morality and religion in the world, Nicodemus, and you need to be born again!

We're going to keep looking at this metaphor of being born again. Jesus doesn't say, "well you're an awfully, awfully moral guy. You are at least three quarters of the way to heaven, but you can't make it all the way. You need some kind of spiritual vitamin supplement. Now most people are back like only a quarter of the way to heaven." No, no, no. "You must be born again. Nothing you have done counts." See this is not a call to more moral and religious structure. This is a challenge to that.

Do you see what the good news is? No matter how good you are. No matter how pulled together you are. You must be born again. But it also would mean, no matter how messed up you are, no matter how broken you are, you *can* be born again. Because Jesus also directly just says, "I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" ([John 3:3](#)). No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again. So, who's the new birth for?

"Listeners, art thou born again? No salvation without the new birth."

So, that's who it's for. But where is it from?

## (2) Where is the New Birth From?

Now that is maybe an odd question to ask. And in some ways, it's only hinted at here, but the rest of the New Testament tells us. Where is it from?

In [John 3:3](#), Jesus says you must be born again to see the kingdom. In [John 3:5](#) he says you must be born again to enter the kingdom. What's remarkable about this, as some of you know, unlike the synoptic Gospels, unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John very seldom uses the term "Kingdom of God." Very rarely. In fact, this is virtually, almost, the only place where it even comes up in the Gospel. And therefore, that's significant.

What would Nicodemus have thought of when Jesus said you must be born again to see and to enter the kingdom of God? It would have been very striking to him because as a Pharisee he would have thought of the kingdom of God as something in the future. And that's right. He would have thought of the resurrection at the end of time. He would have thought about the new kingdom of God that the Messiah was going to bring in at the end of time when everything was going to be made right.

The Greeks, many of the Greeks, believed that history was not linear, going someplace, but that it was cyclical and repeated itself. Every so often there was a kind of conflagration in which the world was purged, it was regenerated, burned or something. Then, history would start all over, and of course it would just decline down to the place where it would be regenerated again.

And they had a technical term for it, *palingenesia*, the regeneration of the world, but in the Greek way of thinking was something that happened cyclically. And just made things a little better. You know, where the world was sort of reset. It's the way you always fix your computer. It's all messed up so you unplug it, you plug it in again, and it's reset. But it basically goes back to being what it was before.

Then Jesus Christ in [Matthew 19:28-29](#) says something remarkable. He says "at the renewal of all things," which is the word *palingenesia*, "when the son of man sits on his glorious throne, everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive 100 times as much and will inherit eternal life." At the *palingenesia*, when the son of man sits on his throne, when the kingdom of God comes. He uses a Greek word, which was a technical term, but he uses it in a completely different way.

What he is saying is the philosophers got it wrong. There is only one *palingenesia*, there is one regeneration of the world, and it won't be just a reset of history just to go on declining. It will be one regeneration and that will be the end of all death, end of suffering, end of sin, end of evil, end of all those things. All evil and suffering, every tear, will all be wiped away when the kingdom of God returns in fullness.

Then Paul, in a remarkable little aside, almost, in [Titus 3:5-6](#) Paul is talking about the new birth. He talks about the new birth and then he says, “he saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit which he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” But that first term—when he says through the washing of regeneration—is the word *palingenesia*.

See, what this text here in [John 3](#) is hinting at but what Paul says directly is this: Where is the new birth from? It’s from the future. The new birth is the power that God is going to use to regenerate the world. Brought into your present. It’s not complete, of course. It’s only partial. But didn’t you always like time travel stories? I love time travel stories. I love getting into some machine or something and going to the future. Well, this is kind of like that, only the reverse. It’s the future coming into you. It’s God’s future, present in your heart now. It’s that renewing, regenerating power by which God is going to heal everything and remove all evil and all sin and everything. But it comes into your heart now. Only partially, but actually. And that’s what it means to be born again.

Now that may sound pretty esoteric. Let me be as practical as I can possibly be. Don’t you ever underestimate the power of the new birth to change somebody. Never underestimate that power! Look here’s Peter. Peter was soft, squishy and impulsive, too much so. Here’s Paul almost the opposite: hard, over controlled, abrasive, harsh. But they were born again, and they were turned into world changing Christians. They were not made of any more promiscuous material than you. There is no fear, there is no guilt, there is no hurt, there is no flaw that the new birth can’t at least partially repair.

So where is the new birth from? It’s from the future. It’s the power of God to regenerate the entire world coming into your life and your heart now. That’s amazing! Don’t underestimate its power. Don’t settle for little change if you are born again.

[Number 3](#)... So, who’s it for? Where is it from? What does it do?

### **(3) What Does the New Birth Do?**

Now that’s another way of saying, “what is it and what does it do?” Now it’s fairly clear from the metaphor, that it is the implantation of new life. It is the divine life implanted in you.

Now one of the most controversial parts of this passage is where Jesus says “you must be born of water and of the Spirit” ([John 3:5](#)). And, as a lot of you know, there are certain churches that say, “Ah, that means if you want to be regenerated and you want to be saved two things have to happen: you have to have the Holy Spirit, and you have to be baptized.”

Now of course the problem is that the word water doesn’t say baptize, it says water. “Ah, well, it’s just a metaphor for baptism.” Well, it’s probably more likely that the water is a metaphor for the Spirit. It’s more likely that the background of Jesus’ statement is [Ezekiel 36](#), where Ezekiel talks about the Spirit of God as water in a desert. Because in a desert, in those arid places, water wasn’t just life-giving. In a sense, water was life itself, and so it’s a metaphor for the Spirit. What we are hearing here is that the new birth is having the Spirit implanted in you.

But Jesus could have used the metaphor of a seed being planted. Now elsewhere, like in [1 Peter 1:23](#), it talks about being born again of imperishable seed, so you *could* talk about the new birth as the implantation of divine supernatural life and use the metaphor of the seed. He doesn’t. He uses the metaphor of a baby being born. Therefore if we want to understand what the new birth does, let’s stick with that metaphor.

And I’m going to suggest too—actually if we had the time we could go into a lot of them—that what it means to be born again at least means new sensibility and new identity. That’s what the new birth does, it gives you a new sensibility and identity.

## (a) A New Sensibility

Now what do I mean by sensibility? Well, all living things, sense their environment. They sense something about what's in the environment. Even the simplest living things. And a baby being born immediately sees for the first time, hears, really, almost for the first time. At least when they are brought out into the world, they are brought into a world of amazing sensations. One of the things that all the great theologians of the soul over the years have observed, to cross from death to life, to be born again means that suddenly spiritual realities that you could not sense before—that were either invisible to you or maybe you'd say inaudible to you—suddenly you can sense them, because you are given a new sensibility.

There's one man who's written on this very well, and I'd actually suggest this book to everybody here. It's a book by Archibald Alexander called *Thoughts on Religious Experience*. It's really rather unique. It's uniquely helpful. He was first teacher at Princeton Theological Seminary in the very, very beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And he spends a fair amount of time asking this question, *what does the new birth do? Or, what does it give you, what does it do for you?* One of them of course is this, what he says is “everyone on whom this divine operation is passed”—and he's talking about the new birth—he says “experiences new views of divine truth.”

Now by the way, Jesus says “If you're born again you see the kingdom of God.” Why did he say that? You can't even see the kingdom of God. You can't sense it. It might have been an abstraction. You might have heard about the kingdom of God all your life, but now you see it.

And Archibald Alexander goes on and says,

The soul that sees, that gets spiritual sight, though it may have not discerned it before, it now discerns in the truths of God a beauty and an excellence of which it had no conception until now. Whatever may be the diversity and the clearness of the views of different persons, or in the particular truths brought before the mind, they all agree on this, that there is a new perception of truth, the beauty and excellence of truth; whether you ascribe it to the head or to the heart, I care not.

Now, I would like to say it's both. I think he means that too. In other words, the way you know you're born again, one of the things it gives you, is that both your mind is illuminated and your heart is moved. And spiritual truth that you might have actually heard before but didn't make sense to your mind or it certainly didn't touch your heart, now it

For example, let's start with the heart. I cannot tell you how after years and years of ministry when somebody who comes to church all their life starts to say “something has happened. I knew these biblical texts all my life but now they just seem almost like somebody turned the lights on.” Or “I've read this or I've heard this verse and now suddenly it's just hitting me. I don't know why I never saw this before.”

But more than that, what they usually mean is, “I always knew God loved me but I'm actually starting to sense that. It's starting to actually become real. It's starting to convict me. It's starting to feed me.”

Now here we are in the realm of St. Augustine. St. Augustine would say that the mark of a truly born-again, a truly regenerated Christian, is the loves of your heart are being reordered. It's one thing to say, “I believe that God loves me” and it's just in your mind, that's all. Meanwhile, the main thing that's driving you is to get this person's love, a man or this woman, or the main thing that's driving you is to have a successful career, to have everyone love you because you've got status and money.

And no matter what you try, you say “I'm a Christian, of course I'm a Christian. I go to church, and I believe God loves me.” But the love of fame and accolades, the love of romance and maybe sex, is much more real to you than God's love. God's love is in the abstract.

Or another way to put it is, have you ever tried to watch something on the screen and listen to something at the same time? Whatever is up there on the screen always wins. And what happens is, career or maybe something else, something in your life is on video, and until the new birth—even if you go to church—God’s love and his holiness just God is on audio. And you say, “Oh, of course, I’ve always believed that.” Then the lights come on and suddenly God goes on video.

And when God’s love in Christ becomes more real to your heart than the fame and status that you get in a career, even more real to your heart than your family’s love, your loves get reordered. It creates changes.

Unless I love my wife less than I love God, or better yet, love God more than I love my wife, I won’t love my wife right. I’ll crush her with my expectations. She has to affirm me at every point. She can’t get sick. She can’t have a day. She’s got to affirm me. And as a result, I’m just going to be upset. I’m going to be angry at her. We are going to get into conflict. Unless I love God more than I love Kathy, I’m never going to love Kathy well.

And see, the new birth starts to reorder the loves of your heart because these things that you might have read in the Bible, you’ve heard about all your life but were nothing but abstractions, become realities. But that’s just the heart

There’s also something that goes on in the mind. There’s an awful lot of truths in the Bible that just don’t make sense to the un-illuminated mind. They don’t make sense. Some years ago—I’ll never forget this, as you can tell because it happened many years ago—I was in a room with a number of ministers and we were actually evaluating candidates to be church planters in my denomination. So we were all in this room and men would come in and give their testimonies. We were trying to decide which ones we should approve to be church planters. We always asked for a testimony. And every testimony it seemed like, back then—this was a long time ago, I don’t think this would be true anymore—but almost everybody came in and said “I was raised in the church but I never heard the gospel in that church.” And then this or that happened, very often, “I became a Christian in college.” About the eighth guy in a row came in and started saying, “I went to church all my life but I never really heard the gospel in the church.”

After he left one of the older ministers said “you know, I think we’d better just keep something in mind.” Because we were talking about the fact, “isn’t that interesting, that they all went to these horrible churches where they didn’t preach the gospel.” And this older minister told his story.

He said he had grown up in the church, not only had he grown up in the church but he actually started to think about going into ministry, and actually had taken some Bible courses. And then he was, I think, put into the military, he might have been drafted.

But in the military a chaplain led him to Christ, showed him that you’re not saved by being a good person, going to church, being a nice guy. You’re not saved by those things. You’re saved by grace alone through faith alone through Christ alone. And all of his life he had always thought, “well, being a Christian means you ask Jesus into your life. But he always thought that meant you try harder than you’ve ever tried to be a good person. You try to live like Christ. Suddenly the penny dropped. It just dropped and everything changed.

And so, the chaplain was discipling him and one day this man—now this is the man telling the story, this older minister—said one day he was talking to the chaplain, and he said, “You know, I don’t know why nobody has ever shown me the gospel before.” And he said, “What I really don’t understand is why Martin Luther didn’t understand the gospel.”

The chaplain said, “Martin Luther didn’t understand the Gospel? What makes you say that?” He said, “Well, I too, of course, and I read parts of this book he wrote on Galatians, and there was no gospel in it.” So the chaplain said, “I know what? Now that you’ve been born again, why don’t you go back and look at the book.”

He said he went back to the book. He was the kind of person that would highlight and underline things. He said, "I would open the book, and I started going through it, and on every page," he said, "almost every page, underlined, highlighted, there was the gospel!"

And how did he conclude this little story. He said, "Right now there are young men and young women growing up in my church, under my preaching, and they're not hearing the Gospel. Because you have to be born again to even see the kingdom of God."

Now, by the way before we get to the next point, if you read Archibald Alexander's great book on spiritual experience *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, when he gets to the new birth he points out that there's a danger. That when we're trying to share our faith with people, and trying to see people come to faith, there's a danger that we might actually develop in our mind—especially when we've seen a couple of people get converted—we develop a little template, a sort of an informal outline of what happens when you're born again. And we tend to try to make anybody who's born again fit that template, fit that set. And he says, you've got to keep in mind that people come into this sensibility in very, very different ways.

In fact, I saw all three of my sons—I have three children—and I saw every one of them born, I saw them come out. And I want you to know they came out really different. One of them came out barely looking alive at all, like, "weak and up!" And one of them came out kicking and screaming. And Archibald Alexander says, keep that in mind. Keep in mind the fact that that sensibility sometimes is like *THIS!*, and sometimes it's more like a lamp that shines more and more unto the perfect day and it takes a lot longer. So keep that in mind.

## **(b) A New Identity**

But the other thing we are asking, and it's implied in what it means to be born again, is "what does the new birth bring?" I said, sensibility, but also identity. Now the reason I mention the word identity here is because Jesus does use the impersonal term of the new life being implanted like a seed. He says the new life comes into you like a baby being born. And babies are born into families.

If you're reading John 3, you've already read John 1. And in John 1 identity and family are very closely tied to the new birth. So of course, in John 1:12-13 it says very famously, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." Now notice, as soon as it starts talking about the new birth, it talks about the rights of the children of God. Because when you're born—we're using the image of a baby—you're born into a new family and into a name.

Now, what does that mean? I'm sure that when John wrote these words in John 1 where he says we're not born of natural descent or of human decision, he didn't have this in mind, but keep this in mind. What is your identity? Your identity has to be rooted in something. Your identity is a sense of self and a sense of worth.

If you're from a non-Western part of the world, probably your identity is basically rooted in your family. Because in that part of the world you are a good person, you can feel good about yourself, you can know that you're okay, as long as you are fulfilling your family's responsibility. It's pleasing your family. It's being a good son or daughter, a good husband or wife, a good mother or father. And as long as you are living up to your family's expectations, you can feel good about yourself. Now there's pressure there. Your family can control you. It can be pretty suffocating. It can be exploitative.

But if you're in the West, you don't have that kind of family-oriented identity. How do you feel good about yourself? Well, we live in an individualistic culture, where *you* decide who you want to be, and *you* determine who you want to be. It's *your* will that matters. And you decide "I want to do this or I want to do that," and then you go out and you do it. Of course, that's putting a lot of pressure on you too. Enormous pressure.



But don't you see? How interesting that to be born again, to be born of God, is *not* to be born by family descent—not of natural descent—or of human decision. I'm sure that it's only an accident perhaps that the two things that are mentioned there are Western and non-Western identities.

But don't you see what it means to receive rights as children of God? You're not on the spectrum. You're off the spectrum. Your identity is received not achieved. Your identity is rooted in God's love for you and the fact that God is now your Father, not just your boss, not just your king. He is that, but he's your Father. There's an unconditional love on his regard for you. And that is so different from any other kind of identity. You've got a new identity, an remarkable one. It's nothing like anything that you've ever had before.

## **“Your identity is received not achieved.”**

Just to get this across, one woman once told me that she had had five identities in her life. She said, “when I was a young girl, I grew up in a very conservative church. And I felt good about myself because I'm a good person. I'm very moral. I'm one of the good people.” But she said “it turned me into something of a self-righteous Pharisee, and it put a lot of pressure on me. And finally, I broke out and I left the church.”

Then she started dating. She started getting into romantic relationships, which very often were very heady. And she went on and she said, at first, she felt good about herself because she was so moral. “Now,” she said, “I feel pretty good about myself because somebody loves me.”

You know there's a 1940s song. It was originally written in the 40s and sung by Frank Sinatra. Then in the 50s and 60s. It was redone many times, “You're Nobody till Somebody Loves You.” The song says you could be a king and could have all the gold in the world...you're nobody until somebody loves you. And she said, that was the second phase in her life, she felt, “as long as I've got a guy who really thinks I'm great, as long as I've got a man on my arm or I'm on his arm, then I know I'm okay.”

But of course, that turned into something bad because she found herself sticking in relationships that sometimes were bad or even abusive too long because she felt like, I'm nobody unless somebody loves me.

And some of her girlfriends said, “You need to be liberated, dear. You cannot build your identity on morality, and you cannot build your identity on men. You need to get a career, and you need to be proud of the fact that you are an independent career woman.” And so she did. She got an education and she went into a career, and then she realized she said, “I got just as destroyed when my career had a bump as when I broke up with a guy. You know, my heart was still not really safe at this point. You know, now I felt good about myself because I was a successful career woman.

And somebody came along and said, “Oh you know, honey, this is what you really need: You're working too hard; you need to start to care for people. You need to start to help people.” And she got involved in all sorts of good deeds. She said she started to volunteer, and she got involved with working with women in prison and working with the poor, doing all this stuff. And then she said, “I was exhausted.”

Until finally she said, and these were her words to me: “First I thought I was somebody because I was moral. Then I thought I was somebody because I was beautiful. Then I thought I was somebody because I was successful. Then I thought I was somebody because I was helpful.” And then she heard the gospel message, and she realized, “I've been trying to save myself. These identities don't work.” And she gave herself to Christ. And she said “God loves me because of what Jesus has done, not what I've done.” And every other identity she had tried had been based on her own performance—and all the ups and downs and the whiplashes she was experiencing during all those efforts at a different identity—and finally, finally she could rest.

Becoming a Christian is not just self-renunciation, but it's not self-realization. It's not another way to get self-esteem. It's self-transformation. You lose yourself to find yourself. You don't lose yourself. You don't find yourself. You lose yourself in service to Christ. You get your identity in Christ. And then you realize you've become who you are, who you really are, who you were made to be.

What does it do? New sensibility, new identity.

OK, fourth... How does it come?

## **(4) How Does the New Birth Come?**

Now up to now, I've been talking about the new birth as if it was really pretty much the same thing as conversion. I need to know that Reformed theologians have always made a very warranted and important distinction between what we do, which is repentance and faith—see, we turn; we turn away from sin and turn toward God; that's what we repent and believe—and what God does, which is the new birth.

There is a certain sense in which, if somebody says to me, "*How* can I be born again?" Technically, the right biblical answer is "There is nothing you can do." John 3:8 talks about that at one point where it says, "the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going, and so it is with everyone born of the Spirit." That's not really under your control.

And also, these two things, what you do—repent and believe—and what God does—which is open your heart to new life, open your eyes, that's the new birth—they are inextricably linked. And if anything, Reformed theologians would say it's the new birth that causes the conversion. Because, (did you see?) Jesus says you have to be born again to enter the kingdom. In other words, for the Gospel of the Kingdom to make any sense to you at all, there has already got to be some work of God in your heart.

Having said that though, they're so inextricably linked that if somebody says to me, as they have over the years, "Can I have eternal life?" (which is what the new birth is. It's the life of God.) What the Bible tells you pretty clearly is that you repent and believe, and it tells you right here, you repent and believe.

Now the text actually, in the text in front of us, gives us some interesting ways of thinking about those two things: Repent and believe. When you hear repent and believe, you're probably thinking, "Repent means I'm sorry for my sins and believe means, yeah, I believe that Jesus died on the cross." Let's drill a little deeper here.

### **(a) New Birth Comes Through Repentance**

What does it mean to repent? Of course it means to be sorry for your sins. But in this text Jesus uses a fascinating illustration of what it means to repent and believe. And it's down here in John 3:14, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life." "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert." That's a fascinating reference, and of course we could actually preach an entire message just on that.

But what happened in the desert—you find it back in the book of Numbers 21:4-9—is that the children of God had sinned. Israel had sinned. And God sent a plague of snakes, venomous snakes, and they bit them and they were dying. And in a sense, the venom represented sin in their life. Basically, the venom represented in their bodies what was killing them in their soul. And what Moses was told to do was to take a bronze serpent—an image of the thing that was killing them—put it up on a pole (you know, "as Moses lifted up the serpent"), and all they had to do was look at it because some of them were so sick, and so immobilized, they couldn't possibly go over to it and rub it or touch it or any of that. All you have to do is look.

And this text says *that's* an image of what it means to repent and believe. By far, the most memorable exposition of this whole idea is Charles Spurgeon's conversion story. Do you know it?

When Charles Spurgeon, who became the great Baptist preacher in London in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when he was a teenager, and he was struggling to be a Christian. He was struggling to figure out Christianity. And one Sunday he wanted to go to church, but there was a massive snowstorm. And he could only get to a little primitive Methodist church in London around the corner. He wasn't a Methodist, but he went there. And when he got there, there was virtually no one there. And also, the minister couldn't get there...because of the snow.

And a layman got up and he began to preach. Spurgeon said fortunately he was such a poor preacher, he didn't do much other than read a text and then just exhort. But listen, the text was Isaiah 45:22, "Look to me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth!" And the man began to explain the text. He says, "you know you don't even have to lift a finger to look." Spurgeon remembers him saying, "you don't have to be worth a thousand pounds a year. You don't have to make a thousand pounds a year in order to look. You don't have to have anything true about you to look, don't have to be good or bad to look."

Then he said, "Don't look to yourselves! There's no hope there." And then finally he lifted up his voice, and he put words of Isaiah 45:22 in Jesus' mouth, and he said:

Look to me! I am sweating great drops of blood.

Look to me! I'm hanging on the cross.

Look to me! I've died. And I'm buried.

Look to me! I'm risen. And I'm ascended. And I'm going to the right hand of the Father.

Look to me!

And then he looked out (there were only 3 or 4 people there), he looked out and he saw Spurgeon and he said, "Young man, you look miserable. And you're going to be miserable. You are going to be miserable in life and death if you don't obey my text." And at that moment (this is what Spurgeon said), he suddenly realized. He said "I was ready to have somebody tell me to do fifty things in order to get salvation." He was looking for something to *do* in order to get salvation. I guess he probably thought of God as the Wizard of Oz. You know, "Go get me the broomstick of the wicked witch of the West," or something like that. He said "I was ready to be told, you have to do these fifty things."

And suddenly he realized, "I just have to look." And he realized he'd been looking to himself. And this is what he said, "Oh, I looked! And I looked! Until I could have almost looked my eyes away."

See, what is repentance? Yes, of course you are sorry for your sin. The repentance that brings eternal life is not just asking God's forgiveness for your sins. He'd already done that. He'd been doing that and doing that and doing that. He had to repent of trying to save himself. This is what it means.

This is the repentance that brings eternal life, to say, Father, "I not only repent for all the bad things I've done. I repent for all the bad reasons I did all my good things. All the good things I've done, I've been doing to control you, or to feel good about myself, or to get other people to look at me. I've done bad things, and even the good things I've done for bad reasons, and therefore I am spiritually bankrupt. I'm totally spiritually bankrupt. I admit my total absolute helplessness, moral bankruptcy, and need for sheer grace." That's the repentance. And then there's the faith.

## **(b) New Birth Comes Through Faith**

Faith. Well, I believe Jesus died for me. Well, you have to rest in him. Let's consider this again, this metaphor where Jesus Christ says, "You must be born again." And he says "you're like a newborn baby."

Just think, how much effort on the part of the baby does it take to be born? Does the baby have to do this? What the baby have to do? Nothing! The baby doesn't do anything. The baby contributes nothing to its birth. Okay? Do that mean, "Oh, the new birth, you're not born by your good works?" Right.

But you are born again by somebody's works. Because that baby is born, and somebody's doing a lot of work for that baby to be born. I told you, I watched all three of my sons born. And there was somebody in that room who was doing a lot of work. There was somebody in that room who was in a fair amount of pain.

I think one of the reasons we don't completely understand this metaphor and the implications of it... though Jesus spells it out in John 16. I think we don't understand the implications of this metaphor, because we live in a time of hospitals and anesthetics and epidurals. By the way, if you're a young single male and you don't know what an epidural is, ask a woman nearby. But let's go back to no hospitals and no anesthetics and no epidurals, and every baby born into the world is being born through the pain and suffering of somebody else: the mother. At the risk of her life and in many cases the cost of her life. Read the history books. You know how often people were born at the cost of a mother's life.

In John 16, Jesus is talking about going away, right? He said, I am going to go away. And then suddenly he says in John 16:21, "a woman giving birth to a child is pained because her hour has come, but when her baby is born, she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child has been born into the world." It's a remarkable statement.

First of all, if you are a student of the book of John, you know that that word "hour." I mean it's odd to say, when hour has come, the baby is born in spite of all of her anguish she has joy. It's odd to talk about a woman's hour coming. But in the book of John every time the word "hour" is brought up, it usually—it's brought up over and over again—means the hour of Jesus' death. Remember when he said to Mary in Cana, "Woman, my hour has not yet come"? It means it's not time for me to die. What is Jesus saying? He's identifying with a woman in labor. He's saying "I'm like a woman in labor. You'll be born again but not just through my pain and suffering, not just at the risk of life, at the cost of my life. And I'm going to have such joy to see your life coming from my death." That's beautiful.

To believe, to repent, the repentance that brings about eternal life. Repentance that's consonant with the new birth—repentance that doesn't just say "I'm sorry for my sins," but also "I'm sorry for all the things I thought were righteous but really were just filthy rags." And faith—the faith that brings eternal life, the faith that's consonant with the new birth—is to see the costly grace of Christ and to rest in it. To see that it's his works that have saved us. And the reward of his suffering he shall see and he'll be satisfied. Repent and believe, and you will be saved, all ye ends of the earth.

Here is one last question: How do you know it has happened?

## **(5) How Do You Know New Birth Happened?**

Well, there's a sense in which if you go back through everything else we've talked about here, there's a lot of ways of having some understanding of what the new birth is and what it looks like and what it brings. But I think it's fair to the end of the book, at least the end of this talk is going to go to the end of the book of John. Because Nicodemus shows up again.

And we have to ask ourselves, "What is the sign of the new birth? How can you tell somebody has been born again? Every theologian who understands anything about the Bible has always said: "Changed life." We're saved by faith alone, but not by faith which remains alone. We're saved not by our works. We're saved by faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. But if you really are saved, it always results in a changed life. Always.

Now when you get to the end of John 19, what do you see? You see Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea asking for the body of Jesus Christ and then personally dressing the body for burial. And you start to ask yourself, “Wait a minute. What’s going on here?” Now, this is no proof. I am not trying to say that this is proof that Nicodemus was born again, but there is something going on. Maybe let’s call this evidence, or maybe let’s say, “Here’s the kind of thing that has to happen in your life if you really can say, yes he/she/I, born again.”

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who were members of the ruling council, asked for the body of a man who had just been executed. Jesus was the leader of a movement. He has just been executed. Who wants to be seen to be a follower of him at this time? How dangerous would that be? Very boldly, in fact; one of the Gospels (Mark 15:43) has the word “boldly.” Very boldly they went and asked for the body. But then they dressed it for burial, you know, on a shroud, and women and slaves did that.

I heard somebody once preach on this and say, something is happening to these men. Because they are very bold because they are very tender, and in some ways this is the most masculine and most feminine thing they’ve ever done in their lives. They seem to have lost their class pride, their male pride. At the same time, they are filled with a courage that you would not have expected of them.

And you see, if you’re saved by your good works, then you’re bold as long as you feel like you are living up to your standards, but of course you’re not humble. You’re condescending toward everyone else. Or if you think you’re saved by works and you fail your standards, then you’ll be humble and you’re very down on yourself. Very humble but of course you’re not confident. If you’re saved by your works, you’re either bold but not humble, or you’re humble but not bold. But if you’re a sinner saved by grace, the gospel takes you into the dust and then lifts you to the skies. There’s a boldness and a humility that work together. And it can change you. It will change you culturally; you will not be the same. Your masculinity will not be the same. Your class-consciousness will not be the same. Your racial consciousness will not be the same. Your femininity will not be the same. Got that? It’s going to change. And that’s scary, right? Get ready. It’s also wonderful.

At the very end of C. S. Lewis’ radio talks, which were published as *Mere Christianity*, he talks about how scary it is to let God come into your life and change you like this. But he says, there’s really no alternative. And here is what he says—this is the very last words of those radio talks—he says,

The principle runs through all of life from top to bottom: give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day, and death of your whole body in the end. Submit with every fiber of your being and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in.

Let’s pray.

Thank you Father for the new birth. Thank you that you did not call us simply to live in a particular way and hope that perhaps at the end we might make the cut and go to heaven. Thank you for giving us new life, new sensibility and new identity now. Thank you for the power of your future in our life now for change. Thank you for the supernatural nature of our salvation. Thank you for the new birth. And I pray that everyone listening here will either have experienced it or will ask themselves the question, “What must I do?” Help us all to look to you and be saved. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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