

**PRINCIPLES OF THE NEW BIRTH**  
(John 3:3-8)

*4 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?*

*5 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.*

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

*7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.*

*8 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.*

We are in the first week of Jesus' public ministry and already He is causing ripples of excitement in Jerusalem. When he came to Cana of Galilee he turned water into wine and by doing so he demonstrated his deity. When He came into the temple in Jerusalem, the first thing He did was to overturn the money changers' tables. And He told them to take their tables outside the temple. And by doing so he asserted authority over his temple. And during this Passover week, Jesus performed many miracles.

*Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did.*

John 2:23

And even Nicodemus and the other members of the Sanhedrin must have witnessed some of these miracles. Look what Nicodemus said to Jesus.

*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.*

John 3:2

Now Nicodemus recognized the supernatural power behind the miracles of Jesus. There are hucksters and phonies and tricksters in any age. But it seems that Nicodemus recognized something irrefutable about the miracles of Jesus.

*No man can do these miracles that thou doest.*

“Magicians can pull rabbits out of hats, but these miracles which thou doest come from God.”

Jesus caused the lame to walk. He caused people who had been blind from birth to see. He fed the multitudes. And not a magician in town could do that. So there was a certain quality to the miracles of Jesus. They were more than mere tricks or slights of hand. His miracles were miracles indeed.

Now Nicodemus came out at night to find Jesus. And it appears that he came to inquire about the kingdom of God. (John 3:3) And he was probably inquiring as to what Jesus might have to do with this kingdom. Perhaps he suspected that Jesus was a great prophet or even the Messiah come to rid the land of the Romans.

But before Nicodemus could get his question out of his mouth, Jesus, who knew the thoughts of his heart, stated a great principle of the kingdom.

*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

Now when Jesus made this statement, he shot down a basic premise which Nicodemus and the Jews mistakenly harbored. They thought that they were entitled to the kingdom by virtue of the first birth. But Jesus said not so.

*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

And since it is impossible to enter into a mother's womb and be born the second time, it is obvious that seeing the kingdom requires a spiritual birth.

And Jesus seems to say that even if it were possible to have a second physical birth, that would do you no good because it would still be a fleshly birth and a fleshly birth yields a fleshly nature which would still be unqualified for the kingdom.

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

So Jesus tells Nicodemus not only that there is an absolute requirement of a second birth, but also this second birth must be a spiritual birth.

Furthermore, no one can see the kingdom of God without a spiritual birth.

*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

So, Nicodemus came to ask about the kingdom. And Jesus told him that he was unqualified for the kingdom. Sorry Nicodemus, you are not in a condition to see it. Furthermore, you can't *enter* it.

*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

John 3:5

This evening we are going to evaluate this concept called the new birth. Jesus said,

*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

John 3:3

This is the key that unlocks the door to the kingdom of God. It is a birth. And let's see what we can learn in this passage about this birth that unlocks the kingdom.

- I. The new birth is the exclusive key to the kingdom.

*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

There is no substitute for the new birth. Nothing else will qualify you for the kingdom of God. The word "except" literally means "if not." If a man is not born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Now in the physical realm, in order to have life, you must be born. Your life came into existence by a birth. And so, in the physical sense you might say, "Except a man be born, he cannot see the world."

And, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

And so, keep in mind that it is by a birth that a man enters the kingdom of God.

II. The new birth is not by any work or act of man.

If entering the kingdom is by a birth, then it is not by anything a man does. A birth is something that happens to you. It is not something that you do.

**Example: Now you were present at your physical birth, but you had very little to do with it. Your mother labored. And perhaps the doctor labored. But you didn't labor. You were conceived by someone else's will and you were born by someone else's labor. And we all come into the world in this way.**

And if anyone enters into the kingdom of God, he enters by a birth. Your spiritual life is conceived in the mind and purpose of God and you come into spiritual life by a birth.

Now the passage that we are here studying is the most famous passage on the new birth. But there are many other passages of Scripture which refer to this birth.

*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

John 1:12, 13

Here we have people who received him and they believed on his name. But there is an underlying cause of the receiving and the believing. They were born . . . of God.

**Example: A baby breathes in air and he sucks in the mother's milk. But he only does this if he is born.**

Likewise, all spiritual activity like receiving Christ and believing in Him necessarily follows a spiritual birth.

The same idea is found in James.

*Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth . . .*

James 1:18

And in I Peter.

*Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.*

I Peter 1:23

And in I John.

*If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every on which doeth righteousness is born of him.*

I John 2:29

In the above verse - Which comes first, the doing of righteousness or the birth? And the answer is always that the birth comes first and then deeds of righteousness.

*Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.*

I John 3:9

Although this is a troubling verse for Christians who know that they yet sin, the same question can be asked. Which comes first, the ceasing from sin or the birth? And the answer is that the birth comes first and then the ceasing from sin.

So how does one enter the kingdom of God? Does he enter by church attendance? Does he enter by baptism? Does he enter by works? Does he enter by repentance? Does he enter by faith? Not according to Jesus. He enters by a birth.

Now church attendance and water baptism and works and repentance and faith are all very closely associated with the new birth. But which comes first? And the answer is that the birth comes first.

Remember, this is a fundamental difference between the Arminian and the Calvinist. The Arminian says you repent and believe and then you are born.

The Calvinist says you are born and then you repent and believe.

The Arminian says that in your natural condition you come to God and then in response to your coming, He creates a new heart in you. The Calvinist says that God creates a new heart in you and then you come.

The Arminian says you see and then you are born again. But Jesus told Nicodemus,

*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

John 3:3

III. The new birth finds its source in God.

We said that the key to salvation is the new birth. And guess who holds the key. It is our sovereign God.

The new birth cannot be attributed to anything except the sovereign will of God. Perhaps this is why God uses the figure of a birth to describe this act of regeneration. A baby has no causal effect on his own birth at all, does, he? And neither does a sinner have any causal effect on his own spiritual birth.

In Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus, he makes it clear that the moving and causing force of the new birth is the Spirit of God.

*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*

John 3:5

*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.*

John 3:8

The new birth is motivated by the sovereign grace of God. It is predestinated by the sovereign will of God. And it is brought to pass by the sovereign power of God. And all of this while the sinner was dead in trespasses and sins.

*And you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins.*

Ephesians 2:1

While we were dead, God was yet alive. And he conceived us by his will before the foundation of the world. And in the course of time he made us alive and we were born spiritually.

This is why the Scriptures say we were born “of God.” (John 1:13)

Jesus told Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again.” This word “again” is *anōthen* in the Greek. In the Greek language, this word *anōthen* can mean “again.” And it also can mean, “from above.”

Now Nicodemus certainly interpreted the words of Jesus to mean, “You must be born again.” And because of that I think our translators have properly translated the word *anōthen* as “again.”

But perhaps this is one of those places where there is sort of a double entendre. Certainly, the new

birth is aptly described as being a birth from above. God, who resides in heaven, reaches down from above and performs an act within the soul of a man, and the man is made alive. So the new birth finds its source in God alone.

IV. The new birth is variously described in the Scriptures.

Now I would have you note that this concept of the new birth is described in various ways in the Scriptures. It is called a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15); a quickening (Ephesians 2:1); a regeneration (Titus 3:5).

And even in our text, it is referred to in slightly different ways, but referring to the same act of regeneration.

*Except a man be born again . . .*

John 3:3

*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit*

. . .

John 3:5

Notice in verse three that regeneration is described as being “born again.” But in verse five, it is described as being born “of water and of the Spirit.”

These are obviously parallel verses intending to convey the same truth.

*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

John 3:3

*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter in the kingdom of God.*

John 3:5

Seeing the kingdom of God is roughly equated with entering the kingdom of God. And being born again is roughly equated with being born of water and the Spirit.

Now verse five has given rise to several different interpretations. What did Jesus mean when he equated being born again with being born of water and the Spirit?

### Possible Interpretations of Being Born of Water and the Spirit

A. It refers to two births – physical and spiritual.

This is plausible because verse six clearly contrasts the physical birth and the spiritual birth.

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

John 3:6

And so, some say that being born of water refers to the first birth, or physical birth. To support this view, they say that water is a reference to the amniotic fluid that breaks from the womb shortly before childbirth.

But the only trouble with this interpretation is that the Scriptures and even ancient writings do not talk about childbirth as being “from water.” So we

don't have any precedent to suggest that Jesus used it in this sense here. In fact, he could have easily used the word flesh instead of water if he intended to contrast physical birth with spiritual birth. So unless you are willing to accept that water refers to amniotic fluid, then you have to look for another interpretation.

#### B. Water refers to Christian baptism.

Those who claim that baptism regenerates love to suggest that *water* here means water baptism. And so, they say, "Except a man be born of water baptism and of the Spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

To support their view they say that the use of the word *water* would immediately bring to mind water baptism. After all, baptism is in the surrounding context, with John baptizing in Chapter one and Jesus' disciples baptizing in John 4:1.

The Roman Catholic Church asserts that baptism is the magical removal of original sin. And so, if you are baptized, the slate is wiped clean and if you die immediately after you are baptized you are safe. Of course, in their view, baptism only washes away original sin and sins to date. Future sins must be atoned for in other ways.

The Church of Christ asserts that men are regenerated in the waters of baptism. In other words, the heart is changed when the body is dunked.

Obviously, we reject both of those views.

If water baptism was so crucial for entering the kingdom, it is remarkable that in the balance of the

discussion with Nicodemus, there is no mention of water or baptism again. The entire focus is on the work of the Spirit (v.8), the work of the Son (vs. 14, 15) and the work of the Father (vs. 16, 17). The whole subject of water gets one mention in verse five and then it is dropped from the discussion.

Of course, from the entire scope of Scripture, we understand salvation to be a work of God on the heart of man, don't we? Salvation is an inward work of God not an outward act of man. We humbly reject any doctrine that says that a mere ritual saves us. As important as baptism is as an act of obedience to Christ, we know that it is not a saving act. It is an act that pictures our participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. And so, we must reject the interpretation which says that water means water baptism.

There are other interpretations. However, let me tell you the interpretation that I prefer.

- C. Water refers to the cleansing which is associated with the regeneration of the Spirit.

When Jesus spoke the word "water" to Nicodemus, it is very doubtful that Nicodemus conjured up the image of baptism. Baptism was virtually an unknown concept until John the Baptist came baptizing a few months before Jesus appeared on the scene. Certainly, Christian baptism was not yet instituted. Baptism was not an ordinance in the Old Testament. It wasn't a Jewish requirement under the Law. And in this passage, when Nicodemus questioned Jesus about all of this, Jesus scolded him for not knowing these things.

*Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?*

John 3:10

This indicates that the use of the word water would have conjured up some image in the mind of Nicodemus from the Old Testament Scriptures. This is what he should have known. He should have known the Scriptures. And if he had known the Scriptures he should have had some idea as to the use of this figure of water.

It seems to me that in the Old Testament, especially in the Jewish age under the Law, water conjured up the image of washing and purification. Water was an essential part of the ceremonies that were performed in the temple. The priests had to wash constantly and continually. When people came into the temple from outside, they had to wash away the ceremonial defilements.

You remember the wedding feast that we just studied in John chapter two. There were six waterpots. But this water was not for drinking. It was for purifying. (John 2:6) The Jews could not function religiously without water. They had to have it available at every meal and at every function. There had to be water wherever there was any possibility of defilement.

And so, when Jesus mentioned the word water, the thing that was most likely to come to mind was religious purification and cleansing, not baptism.

There is a very interesting reference in the New Testament that may shed some light on the use of the word “water” in this context.

*But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.*

Titus 3:5

Here in this verse you see almost the same combination of thought that you see in John 3:5. Jesus told Nicodemus that you must be born of water and the Spirit. And here in Titus, Paul says that regeneration is a washing (which conjures up the idea of water) and a renewing by the Holy Ghost.

The use of water to represent spiritual cleansing is frequent throughout Scripture. (Psalm 51:7-10; Isaiah 44:3; Jeremiah 4:14) Let me just refer you to a passage in Ezekiel.

*Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.*

Ezekiel 36:25

You notice here that water is associated with a spiritual cleansing. They would be clean from their idols. And also notice who pours the water on them. God said, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you.” So, the sprinkling of clean water here in Ezekiel is an act of God that would result in a spiritual cleansing.

There is another passage in the New Testament that sheds even more light on the use of the term water. In fact, this passage has Jesus using the term water and it is in the book of John in the near context of John three.

*He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive.*

John 7:38, 39

So when Jesus said water in John 7 he spoke of the Spirit. This is a huge clue as to his use of the same figure in John 3:5. Since Jesus used the word water as a figure to represent the Holy Spirit in John 7 it is almost certain that he used it in the same way in John 3.

Let me also show you something about the Greek construction of the sentence found in John 3:5. It says,

*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*

John 3:5

If you look closely at the text in your Bibles you will notice that the word *of* preceding the word Spirit is italicized. This means that it is not present in the Greek text. So, the original text says,

*Except a man be born of water and Spirit . . .*

The word *of* (ek in the Greek) applies to both water and Spirit as though they are the same entity.

There are not two sources of this new birth, but one source, described in two ways.

Let me also point out something about the word translated *and* in our text. It says,

*. . . water and Spirit.*

*And* is the word *kai* in the Greek. And this word sometimes can join two separate entities. For example, a house *and* a car.

However, the word can also mean *even* or *indeed*. For example, "That woman is a whirlwind, indeed, my wife." Or, He is a sweetheart, indeed, our deacon.

And when Jesus said, "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit," it seems to me that he was first describing the source of the new birth (water) and then naming Him. (Spirit)

- V. The new birth is not comprehensible to the mind of man.

*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.*

John 3:8

The new birth is an absolute miracle of God. It is beyond explanation. It is very much the same as Jesus turning water into wine. There is no rational explanation, it is a miracle. When Jesus fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fishes there was no

making sense of it. It was miraculous and unexplainable.

And the new birth is not perceptible to the senses. Whatever God does to the sinner, he does quietly and in secret. The sinner doesn't hear thunder or see visions or necessarily feel some physical sensation of the Holy Spirit. The sinner may become emotional and may have feelings of brokenness or deep sorrow over sin or may feel great joy over sins forgiven, but these are just the natural reactions to the working of the Spirit.

The working of the Spirit in regeneration is a mysterious work. That is why Jesus compares it to the wind. We will never be able to analyze it or explain it. It is a mighty work of God that exceeds the bounds of human understanding.

The working of the Spirit in regeneration is sovereign. Jesus said,

*The wind blows where it listeth (where it wants).*

That is, the Holy Spirit regenerates whosoever He wills. He blows here and He blows there. But it is evident that He does not blow everywhere because like the wind He blows where He listeth.

What does all of this mean to us? It means that we must always view salvation as a change of heart wrought in us by a powerful God. I feel sorry for those who view salvation as some outward adherence to rules and regulations. Salvation is an utter change on the inside. This is why it is so necessary for us often

to reflect inward. We must be constantly evaluating the condition of our hearts. So many people are deceived by thinking that rote adherence to religious practices is enough to secure salvation. Not only is it not enough, it doesn't even contribute to salvation. Jesus said,

*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*