

*The Answer for All Desperate Times*

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**John 3. 1-15**

The past three months have been unlike any I've experienced. The pandemic brought extraordinary challenges. Life and death challenges, but also, '*God, help me remember 2<sup>nd</sup> grade math so I can teach my kid*' challenges. And we've all been trying to navigate this new normal as best we can. But just when we thought our world couldn't get any more unsettled, a tragedy took place in Minneapolis, George Floyd was murdered, and our world has erupted. We've gone from lockdown to curfew in a few short weeks, and I don't think any of us will ever be the same.

The image that's come to me in recent days, is of a world convulsing in labor pains. I'm reminded of when Jesus spoke of wars and rumors of wars and pestilences and famines and He said, '*These are but the beginning of the birth pains.*' Similarly, the apostle Paul says in Romans 8, '*Creation itself has been groaning in the pains of childbirth.*'

As Christians we believe that a new day is coming—a new creation of perfect joy—but the process God has ordained to get there involves great suffering. Like childbirth.

I've been present at three births. Not including my own. And let me tell you, nothing could have prepared me for the intensity of that experience. And it seems that we are going through something similar as a culture.

So how do we face this kind of upheaval? If our world is groaning in childbirth, what can we do to help? What medicine will take the edge off? What midwives can coach us through? You know, people are looking for answers. The protests are forcing the question – what's wrong with our world where these tragedies keep happening? And the church *has* to rise to the occasion, because we have the answer the world is looking for.

Jesus, in our gospel passage, cuts to the core of what our world needs. And essentially, He says, '*You need to be born again.*' We need a radical new beginning. *This* is the answer. Now I have to acknowledge, that in today's world the phrase 'born again' has a lot of cultural freight. It often means some kind of obnoxious fundamentalist. And there may be some truth to this. I remember when I was working as a chaplain, I would occasionally walk into the patient's room to bring comfort, only to have them interrogate me and ask, 'Have you been born again?'

And yet this is the image Jesus used. And so we need to get past the stereotypes to what Jesus meant. And so today we're going to look at Jesus' teaching on the new birth, and we're going to see three things:

1. The *need* for the New birth – why it's essential.
2. The *nature* of the New birth – how it happens.
3. What's *necessary* for the New birth – what's required.

So the need, the nature, and what's necessary for the new birth.

First, the need. In verse 3 Jesus says to Nicodemus, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

Without being born again, we cannot see God. This would have been incredibly insulting to Nicodemus. Because Nicodemus was a Pharisee. And not only a Pharisee but a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Later we read that he was also extremely wealthy. In today's world it would be like the president of Princeton Seminary also being a Supreme Court Justice, being fabulously wealthy, and having the personal piety of Ghandi. We just don't have these people around anymore.

And yet, Jesus confronts Nicodemus and says, 'Unless you're born again, you're not going to see God.' What a slap in the face. If anyone was qualified to enter the kingdom of God, it was Nicodemus. Nobody could surpass his Bible knowledge, or His piety. So what in the world is Jesus getting at?

The key is verse 6, '*That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.*' What Jesus saying is that there's a divide between human beings and God. We are flesh, He is Spirit. And part of what it means to be human is that we're sinful. 'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.' We recognize this truth.

But Jesus is hinting at an even deeper truth. Our problem is not just that we sometimes do bad things and sin. Our problem is that *even the good things we do are sinful*. Our problem is not just that we sometimes do bad things and sin. Our problem is that even the good things we do are sinful.

Johnathan Edwards, in a famous essay 'On the Nature of True Virtue' points out that many of our 'good actions' are not really virtuous. When we care for our children, when we care for our spouse, when we care for the poor. Edwards points out that these seemingly 'good' actions are actually ways we seek to benefit ourselves. We have children to meet our desires, we marry to meet our desires, we care for the poor because it makes us feel good. It's all about *us*. Even the best things we do are self-referential and self-serving.

Tim Keller points out that most people, most of the time, are motivated by two things. Fear and Pride. This is obvious when people are making a mess of

their lives. They're afraid and insecure, and so they turn to money, sex, and power, to feel better about themselves.

But the *scary* thing is that religious people are also motivated by fear and pride. Why do I go to church? So I'll feel good about myself, that I'm a good person. Why do I serve the poor? So I can think of myself as a compassionate person. Why do I work hard? So I won't be like those lazy people. Why do I pray? So God will do things for me and help me accomplish my goals. Because He's a really good personal assistant.

Ultimately, *why do I work so hard to be good?* So I won't feel bad about myself. So I'll feel like my life has meaning and significance. Because deep down I'm terrified that I'm actually weak, bad, unsuccessful, stupid, irresponsible, ugly, unpopular, whatever. And I do everything I can to quench that fear.

In the first Rocky movie, the hero is asked, 'Why do you want to go through this training?' And how does Rocky respond? 'I want to go the distance, so that I'll know I'm not a bum.'

How many of us do good things to convince ourselves we're not a bum? And we're motivated by fear and pride? Martin Luther speaks of the human condition as *incurvitas in se*. We are curved in upon ourselves. Luther writes, 'We are so deeply curved in on ourselves that we not only bend the best gifts of God towards ourselves...but we also fail to realize that we so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seek all things, even God, for our own sake.' It's all about us.

Think of the parable of the prodigal son. The fear and the pride is obvious in the younger son as he squanders his inheritance. And yet, the older son who does all the right things, is also dominated by fear and pride. And both are separated from the Father.

And this is why the human predicament is so frightening. How can we escape the overwhelming gravitational pull of our selfish hearts?

So the people protesting in the streets. How much of that is motivated by fear and pride? AND the people fighting against the protests. How much of that is motivated by fear and pride? And so whoever wins, their victory is going to be a triumph of fear and pride. It's scary.

So what's the answer, what's the solution? Jesus tells us. You must be born again. You must be born from above. You must be born of the Spirit. You must experience a radical transformation that frees you from fear and pride. So first, the need for a new birth in Jesus. WAIT.

Point two. The *nature* of the new birth. How is this possible, how does this happen? Jesus tells us. Verse 5, 'You must be born of water and the spirit.' Jesus is here referencing a famous prophesy. In Ezekiel 36 God says, 'I will

*sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and idols. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.* And then after this is the great vision of the dry bones, where the dead come alive by the breath of God.

*This* is how we are born again. Through the water and the Spirit. Through the forgiveness of sins and the infilling of the Spirit. What Jesus is saying is that new birth is a miraculous, supernatural event. And this will actually change our hearts so that we do things not out of fear and pride, but out of gratitude and love.

And as always, it begins with repentance. Repent and believe the Good News. In any kind of healing, in any kind of reconciliation, the sin must be acknowledged.

And so as we face our cultural crisis, where do we begin as Christians? First repentance. For all of the ways we contribute to the mess. For our fear and pride that leads us to judge others, to be disdainful and contemptuous of others, to feel that we are somehow superior to them because 'We believe the right things.' The Pharisees knew all the right things and were going to hell because they thought they were better than others.

A few years ago I had a major conflict with someone (from another state :). They said some very disparaging things about my character. Afterwards I was filled with tremendous anger. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how hard I prayed, I couldn't shake it. So eventually I went to another priest and I confessed my sin, my anger. Even though I was sure that the other person was 99% in the wrong, I knew that my anger was contributing.

And so I went to confession. And as I kneeled at the altar rail something remarkable happened. I physically felt something like a metal shackle around my neck. But as the priest pronounced absolution, I physically felt that sensation around my neck fall away. It was very mysterious.

And afterwards, the anger was gone and in its place was compassion. I was able to feel compassion towards the person who had hurt me. For the brokenness and blindness that made them lash out in the first place. And for me it was like a new beginning, a new lease on life.

And so to review: we see the *need* for new birth. Because we are curved in upon ourselves. We see the *nature* of new birth – we are born again through the forgiveness of sins and the infilling of the Spirit. Finally, what is *necessary* for the new birth, what is required?

Jesus answers this in a very mysterious way. In verse 14 He invites Nicodemus to contemplate an unusual story. In Numbers 21 the Israelites are in

the wilderness, whining and grumbling against God. And so God sends poisonous snakes to bite them and punish them for their selfishness. Fortunately, the people repent of their sin and God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent to hang on a pole, and whoever is bitten by a snake can look at that pole and be healed. They can be saved from their selfishness.

A very unusual story. And it's the key to the new birth. For Jesus tells Nicodemus, *'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'*

Yes my friends, *this* is how we can be born again. This is what's required. Not by trying harder. Not by being better, but by looking to the savior. Because we are a snakebitten people. We've allowed the poison of the deceiver to enter our hearts, and now that venom of fear and pride courses through our veins. And we are utterly helpless to help ourselves. To uncurve ourselves. Babies don't give birth to themselves, they are born through the agony of another. And there is only one who can save us and we see Him hanging on a tree.

Yes, *this* is the antidote to our selfishness and to the birth pains of this age. On the cross we see a naked bloody body, writhing in agony, crying out in a loud voice. Kind of like a woman in childbirth.

And there we see what true love looks like. Something completely different from pride and fear. On the cross we see the heights and depths and breadth of sacrificial love.

Yes, my friends, whether you know it or not, you are God's treasured possession. You are the pearl of great price, and Jesus is the prince who surrendered his kingdom so that He could have that pearl. And when you confess your sins and are clothed in His righteousness, Jesus delights in you like a bridegroom seeing his bride walking down the aisle. When sees you, His heart swells with joy and He exults in song.

My friends, if we know this, deep in our hearts, it will cast out all pride and fear. For if I am loved like that, who cares what anyone else thinks? If the king approves of me, who cares what the peasants say? If the bridegroom thinks I'm beautiful, who cares what the gawkers think.

And it's when this truth has sunk deep in my soul and melted my heart, I'm then free to live and to love without fear and pride. I can serve others without thinking of myself, out of sheer gratitude and joy. And I can love God for His own sake—not preoccupied with what I get out of the deal—but in awe and wonder at the glory of His love.

My friends, *This* is the new birth. This is the hope of the world. Let's pray.