

You Must Be Born Again

In order to understand biblical Christianity, one must grasp the enormous problem that the Christian faith claims to solve—our alienation from God. One can see this in Genesis 3 when, after their sin, Adam and Eve cover themselves, hide from God, and are subsequently driven from the Garden. The Christian faith intends to bring us back into intimacy with God. There are, however, two main problems: our moral guilt and our moral corruption. We cannot solve these problems on our own. In John's third chapter, he addresses both of these problems and their only solution. One can see this in verses 7 and 14 with Jesus' use of the word "must." In verse 14 Jesus says, "So must the Son of Man be lifted up," indicating our need for the atoning death of Christ. In verse 7, he says, "you must be born again," indicating our need for moral cleansing and renewal. Bishop J.C. Ryle said of this chapter: "This is one of the most important chapters in the whole Bible...a man may be ignorant of many things in religion and yet be saved, but to be ignorant of the matters handled in this chapter is to be on the broad road that leads to destruction."

John 3:1-8

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." **3** Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." **4** Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" **5** Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter 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** Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' **8** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Let us make several observations from this text.

I. The new birth is utterly essential for eternal life (vv. 1-3).

We can see in verses 3, 5, and 7 that Jesus says clearly one must be born again. Particularly with Nicodemus, who was an upstanding, religious, and intelligent man, Jesus says that his need is not one for more education or for a new start, but rather for a new nature. There are many things we are commanded to do but without which we may still go to Heaven—baptism, church membership, Bible reading, communion—but without the new birth, Jesus teaches us that absolutely no one will enter the kingdom of Heaven.

II. The new birth is a radical transformation of our nature (vv. 4-7).

In verse 4 we can see that Nicodemus doesn't get it. He is assuming that religion is basically a matter of managing properly cause and effect in this visible world. He also assumes that Jesus is talking about turning over a new leaf or simply getting a new start on life. Neither of these assumptions is correct. Jesus is talking about a radical and complete transformation of our nature. In the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 10), the Westminster Divines say about regeneration (or "effectual calling" as they call it): "All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace."

Jesus says in answer to Nicodemus' confused question: "...unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Jesus here seems clearly to be referring to Ezekiel 36:25-28, where God shows us that He, by His Spirit, will grant us cleansing and renewal.

III. The new birth is a powerful and sovereign act of the Holy Spirit alone (v. 8).

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit in our regeneration is like the wind: it "blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." Just as we cannot control the wind, neither can we control the work of regeneration. John said in his prologue that we "were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." The reason Jesus uses the analogy of birth and wind is that we clearly have no control over the matter. God saves those who He will, by His own wisdom and grace. For this reason, all of us who are saved must glorify and thank Him, all of us who do not yet know Him must apply to Him alone for our salvation, and all of us who want to lead our neighbors to Christ must seek Him in prayer as our primary ministry of evangelism.

But Jesus uses the analogy of wind for another reason: wind is very powerful, as is the work of the Holy Spirit. We see this clearly in hurricanes and tornadoes, but Jesus teaches us that we see it especially in the work of the Spirit. Especially do we see it in the life of Nicodemus where in Chapter 3 he comes to Jesus hesitantly in the cloak of the evening, but in Chapter 7 (vv. 45-52) he is defending Jesus before his colleagues and in Chapter 19 (vv. 38-42) he is giving 75 pounds of spices for the burial of Jesus' body, recognizing Him as true royalty. We all have hopes that Nicodemus, the unconverted religious teacher, eventually became Nicodemus, the Spirit-filled disciple of Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. What problem does the Christian faith solve? How does our salvation solve that problem?
2. What religious assumptions did Nicodemus seem to have which kept him from understanding what Jesus was saying to him in verses 1-8?
3. Why is the new birth essential for eternal life with God?
4. Describe the nature of the new birth. What can we learn about the new birth from Ezekiel 36:25-28, II Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 2:4-6; and Titus 3:4-7?

5. Why does Jesus use the wind as an analogy to the Holy Spirit in His work of regeneration?

Going Deeper

1. Do you know you are born anew? How?
2. Ask the Father each day this week to give you His Spirit in full measure, cleansing, renewing, and empowering you to love, worship, and serve Him.