

# YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

John 3:1-21

C.S. Lewis set out to explain and defend 'mere' Christianity...

*“Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbors was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times...For I am not writing to expound something I could call ‘my religion,’ but to expound ‘mere’ Christianity, which is what it is and what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not.”*

Regeneration is one of the irreducible minimums of Christianity — the absolute basics and essentials that can't be reduced any further and still call it Christianity.

## THE NECESSITY OF REGENERATION

*1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.*

Nicodemus belonged to the religious-political group known as the Pharisees. For them, the way to God was through strict obedience and moral performance. They even created extra laws on top of the law to ensure the strictest level of obedience. They controlled the synagogues and were highly influential.

But not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, he was also held one of the seats on the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish council that governed Israel under the watchful eye of the Roman Government.

*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.”*

So, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night to avoid public scrutiny and to have a focused conversation without interruptions. He begins the conversation by letting Jesus know where he currently stands. Nicodemus isn't ready to call Jesus a prophet or the Messiah — But he knows that God is with him. Though Nicodemus hasn't asked a formal question — there's an implied question — Rabbi... we know you're a teacher from God — but...are you more?

*3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

Jesus responds by questioning Nicodemus's ability to rightly assess who he is and interpret the signs he's seen because he's not born again. And if you're not born again — you can't see the kingdom of God.

Kingdom of God Definition

*The kingdom is God's reign through God's people over God's place (Jeremy Treat)*

The Kingdom of God is his sovereign reign through God's people — the church — over God's place — his creation. God is King over his creation and He's working to restore what's been shattered by sin so that his people can be saved from death to live with him and enjoy him forever.

So — Jesus says — without born-again eyes you won't be able to accurately see the Kingdom and...without a born again heart, you won't be able to accurately assess than I am Jesus the King.

Right there. Jesus said it. You take away regeneration — and you can't participate and experience the Kingdom of God. It's one of the Irreducible Minimums of Christianity. If you take it out — you no longer have Christianity.

This would have shocked Nicodemus. The theology of his day affirmed that all Jews would be admitted into the Kingdom — unless you were guilty of abandoning the faith or some kind of heinous, extraordinary sin.

Here's what this means...

***First — No one is Exempt.***

Remember Nicodemus's resume? He's a distinguished teacher and a member of the Pharisees. He knows the law inside and out. He was probably really good at following it too. And as a member of the highest ruling council, he's highly successful with a good reputation.

This guy has his life together and if there's anybody who is first in line to be accepted into the Kingdom of God — It's Nicodemus. And Jesus says — your résumé, your curiosity, your belief that I'm a good teacher — none of that transforms you or makes you born again.

Jesus is saying — Nicodemus — you, even you, need to be born again — because everyone needs to be born again. If anyone deserved a pass or an exemption it's Nicodemus. But Jesus says — no one is exempt. Everyone needs to be born again.

***And second — There's No Other Way.***

Not only are there not exceptions, but there is no other way. Jesus doesn't give Nicodemus a buffet of options to choose. Jesus gives one way for a person to see and enter the kingdom of God — by being born again.

## **THE NATURE OF REGENERATION (1460)**

***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?"***

Nicodemus doesn't actually think entrance into the Kingdom requires two physical births. He understands that it's a spiritual metaphor — but what he doesn't understand is how it's possible for someone to just start their life over as if they've been reborn. And he doesn't understand how a Jew of his pedigree would need the kind of radical transformation that Jesus demands.

***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.***

Jesus doubles down and says — unless a person is born again they cannot enter the kingdom of God — but this time he adds further explanation of what it means to be born again.

So what does Jesus mean when he says — born of water and spirit?

First it's helpful to put verse 3 and 5 next to each other to see that born of water and spirit and born again are parallel and refer to the same thing.

Now — we might miss the Old Testament allusion — but Jesus is talking with a distinguished teacher of the Old Testament who should have heard those key words — water and spirit — and made the connection.

There's a passage in Ezekiel where the concepts of water and spirit come together in the context of radical transformation.

***Ezekiel 36:25-27***

***I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.***

God promises that we'll be cleansed with a water that washes away our impurities and idols and that God will give us a new spirit that transforms our hearts.

Most people think what they need is an improvement. But — Improvement is not regeneration. We don't need to get incrementally better. We need radical transformation. Jesus came not to make bad people good and good people great. Jesus came to make dead people alive.

That's what it means to be born again.

John Calvin wrote...

***By the term born again He means not the amendment of a part but the renewal of the whole nature. Hence it follows that there is nothing in us that is not defective.***

We don't need parts of our life transformed — we need a renewal of our whole nature — and that's what regeneration is. It's the birth of a new, redeemed, transformed nature.

Jesus goes on to say,

***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.'***

Jesus says — like generates like. Natural, human birth produces people with human natures. But only the Holy Spirit can give birth to a spiritual nature.

Listen, you can't generate your own spiritual birth — only the Holy Spirit can do that. People talk all the time about guiding and directing their own spiritual journey as if they could generate their spiritual renewal on their own.

That's not Christianity.

Jesus teaches that it's the Spirit of the Living God that generates spiritual awakening — spiritual renewal — spiritual transformation.

And then Jesus gives us an analogy...

***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."***

Jesus is making an analogy between the wind and the Spirit, or more precisely between the effects of the wind and the effects of the Spirit. Wind can't be controlled by human beings. Though our modern meteorology brings some understanding, it doesn't bring total comprehension and certainly not the ability to control it.

We can't make the wind blow, nor can we stop it. But we can detect its effects — we enjoy its breeze and when necessary, take shelter in a dangerous storm.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. We can't control the Spirit — We don't make him move — but when he does move, we can see and feel His effects. And just like the wind blows where it pleases, so the Spirit of God moves as He pleases to give spiritual life and rebirth as he sees fit.

***John 1:12-13***

***But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.***

***1 Peter 1:3***

***Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,***

John and Peter are saying — regeneration is not caused by natural birth, by racial ethnicity, nor by human exertion or performance. We become born again because of the gracious initiative of God.

It's by Grace Alone.

Just think about the whole analogy of birth itself. Birth is not something you can generate on your own. You didn't conceive you. You didn't birth you. You had nothing to do with your natural birth and you have nothing to do with your spiritual birth.

John Piper writes,

***We do not cause the new birth. God causes the new birth. Any spiritually good thing that we do is a result of the new birth, not a cause of the new birth. This means that the new birth is taken out of our hands. It is not in our control. And so it confronts us with our helplessness and our absolute dependence on Someone outside ourselves.***

Friends, this is the greatest news you could hear this morning and yet — we get so up in arms when we hear this because we want to be in control of everything.

But think about it. If it *were* up to you, would you be able to clean yourself up and give yourself a new heart? How unloving would it be for God to make our redemption our problem. We're the ones who got ourselves in this mess in the first place. How loving of God that he steps in and says — you made the mess, I'll clean it up. You walked away, but I'm coming for you. You hardened your heart, but I'm going to renew it.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes...

***“A statue has the shape of a man, but is not alive...A man who changed from having bios [biological life] to having zoe [spiritual life] would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real man. And that is precisely what Christianity is about. This world is a great sculptor's shop. We are the statues and there is a rumor going round the shop that some of us are someday going to come to life.”***

This is what regeneration is all about — the radical transformation where we go from being statues to real persons, from death to life, from being physically alive to truly living because of the gracious work of God.

## THE MEANS OF REGENERATION:

*9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*

Nicodemus wants to know how does this happen?

Jesus responds with a rebuke. As one of Israel's distinguished teachers it's his job to read and understand the Bible so that he can teach others — Of all people — He should've understood that the New Covenant Promise anticipated a radical transformation at the soul and heart level.

And the reason you don't understand is because you aren't listening with a receptive heart. Comprehension of heavenly realities is tied to a receptive heart. An unreceptive heart will not understand what Jesus is teaching.

And Jesus has only really started to cover the basics. Jesus says — If you stumble over the basic, then what's the use of going on to explain the more complicated realities of the Kingdom.

And then Jesus adds this gem — By the way — Do you know why I'm able to speak with clarity and authority about these things? No one has ascended into heaven and come back down to tell you what it's like — But I have. Heaven was my original home — and now I'm here to tell you all about it.

*14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

Jesus makes an allusion to Numbers 21. The people of Israel have just been delivered out of slavery. And they're grumbling and complaining against the Lord. They're ungrateful and scorn his deliverance and provision of food in the wilderness. So God sends a plague of poisonous snakes in judgment.

Then, Moses intercedes for his people and God provides a way of salvation.

*Numbers 21:8-9...*

*And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

Moses makes a pole with bronze serpent at the top. And anyone who was bitten by the snake and poisoned — would look at the serpent and live. The bronze serpent was God's means of salvation for those who were poisoned by the snake. Likewise Jesus is God's means of salvation for those who are poisoned by sin.

Jesus says — just like the bronze serpent was lifted up in the wilderness — So will I be lifted up and whoever looks to me for salvation — whoever believes in me will have eternal life.

That phrase "lifted up" was the colloquial way to refer to someone who had been crucified.

Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to us — just like the Israelites were instructed to look to the bronze serpent for new life — we are to look to Jesus for new life. New birth is experienced and eternal life begins through the saving cross-work of Christ when you received and believe by faith.

Then Jesus goes on to explain even more...

***John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.***

That little word — For — F.O.R. — at the beginning of verse 16 — indicates the reason that God the Father gave his Son. So what’s the reason that God gave His Son to make eternal life available to us?

LOVE.

God so loved the world. God doesn’t love us because we’re so lovely — God loves us simply because he is Love. Love exists because God exists. God’s love for us is not conditioned on who we are or on our performance — It’s conditioned — it’s based — on who He is. Despite its wickedness, rebellion, and filth — God loves the world. He hasn’t given up on it — even though it has given up on God.

But not only does God love the world in theory — He also proves that love in practice.

The giving of the Son is the objective evidence that God the Father loves the world — not just a particular race or people group — but the whole world without distinction and without exception.

Out of the immense and extravagant love of God — the Father gives — not some cheap consolation prize — but the infinite and costly gift of His Son.

He goes on...

***17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.***

The world is perishing — and God the Father sent the Son on a rescue mission to bring everlasting and ever-increasing life to those who would believe in Him. The Father sent the Son on a rescue mission to those who were already condemned and perishing. Jesus didn’t bring condemnation — because it was already there.

That’s the whole point of a rescue mission — to save those who are already in peril. You don’t send a rescuer to people who are safe and sound. You send a rescue mission to those in need. John says our need is that we’re condemned already. God’s love for the world results in the mission of the Son to bring salvation. Whoever believes in him experiences the new birth of regeneration, receives eternal life and is saved. Those who reject and do not receive the Son perish and are doomed to destruction.

Those are the two options. There is no middle ground. No third option. No third way.

And then he ends...

***19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”***

John says — The light of the world has come into the world — and instead of receiving the light — people choose to remain in the dark because they love the darkness and fear being exposed.

But those who love the truth...those who love the light — come to the light to have their deeds exposed, their sins forgiven and to walk with God.

These verses don't detail how to live out the Christian life — walking out of darkness into the light. What it does tell us is that the way you know that you've received and believed in Jesus — the distinguishing mark — is that your life will be characterized by walking away from the darkness and coming into the light.

See belief in Jesus is not a one time event where you make a decision and then go on about your life — like getting a chicken pox vaccine. Jesus is not a sin-vaccine where you get a shot from him and then go on about your business.

It's a call to look to Jesus for your very life — to walk in the light — and live your life in humble gratitude to the one who left Heaven to be lifted up on a Roman Cross to die in your place so that you could experience ever increasing and everlasting life.