

## **YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN**

**John 3:1-15**

**By Andy Manning**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. I was born into a very religious family. My parents were devout Christians. I attended church several times week from birth. As a result, I believed in Jesus because He was all I knew. My parents, my brothers, my grandparents, they all believed in Jesus. So, I did, too. I was baptized around the age of seven or eight years old, because everyone else my family had been baptized, and that's what Christians were supposed to do. But I wasn't saved. I hadn't experienced true salvation. As I grew up and got into middle school, the state of my heart began to show in my actions. I started lying, and stealing, and smoking, and cursing, and failing in school, and fighting. I was headed down the wrong path. And then I went to a Christian summer camp the week after fifth grade. I don't remember what the sermon was about. I don't remember the song that was being sung. But at the end of the service, I was balling my eyes out. I was sobbing uncontrollably. I realized my sin. I realized that I hadn't been living for Christ. I realized that I wasn't a real Christian. That night I got saved, and everything changed. You see, I was born into a religious family, but that night I was born again. It's one thing to be religious, but it's another thing to be born again. That's what has to happen if you want to be saved; if you want to know God; if you want eternal life; if you want to be a true Christian.
2. Today, we're going to study what it truly means to be born again. We're going to meet a man named Nicodemus who was born in a very religious Jewish family, but Jesus told him he needed to be born again.
3. The big theological word for the new birth is regeneration. Regeneration is part of salvation. It is one of the blessings of salvation. For example, when God saves you, the following happens to you:
  - i. Justification – the forgiveness of sins
  - ii. Adoption – become a child of God
  - iii. Redemption – freedom from sin and Satan
  - iv. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit permanently indwells you
  - v. Sanctification – the Holy Spirit begins the lifelong process of growing you more and more like Christ
  - vi. Regeneration – When God saves us, He gives us a new heart with the power and desire to please Him.
4. The Greek word for "regeneration" is palingenesia (Titus 3:5), and it literally means new birth, or a radical new beginning. The idea is that when a person is truly saved, they are radically changed into a new person. That's what happened to me when I was a kid, and what has happened to countless people who have met Jesus throughout history.
5. **Thomas Watson** "Regeneration, which is nothing else but the transforming of the heart and casting it into a new mold."

### **II. TEXT AND EXPLANATION: John 3:1-15**

1. *1 There was a man from the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to him at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him."*

i. We know several things about Nicodemus:

1. His name means "victor over the people." That's appropriate because he was a "ruler of the Jews." He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council, similar to the United States Senate or Supreme Court. It was made up of 71 men, and led by the high priest. The Sanhedrin executed both civil and religious law for the Jews. It was under the ultimate authority of the Romans, and the Romans didn't allow them to carry out capital punishment. That had to be approved by the Roman governor, as in the case of Jesus. Nicodemus was a very powerful man.
2. He was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a very strict Jewish group who had their origin during the intertestamental period. They devoted themselves wholeheartedly to following the law of Moses, as well as all of the man-made rules and traditions added to the Torah. The Jews believed that the Torah was God's word; it was perfect. To live a good life one had to live by it. But the Torah mostly contained general principles, the application of which had to be figured out. So, Jewish rabbis began to develop rules and guidelines to help you apply the Torah to every aspect and every situation in life. For example, the Torah said that you couldn't do any work on the Sabbath, but it did not define what constituted work, so the rabbis worked that out. All of these rules were eventually compiled and put into a book called the Mishnah. Later, another book was written which was a commentary on the Mishnah, called the Talmud. The Pharisees were a group of about 6,000 men who took an oath to keep the Torah and the Mishnah to the "T." Their name literally means separate ones. They were highly respected and influential among the common Jewish people. As it turns out, the Pharisees happened to be Jesus' greatest enemies for their hypocrisy, and for their focus on external rules and neglect of heart.
3. He came to Jesus at night. The text doesn't say why. It could be that he didn't want his colleagues to see that he was spending time with Jesus. Or it could be that he wanted to have plenty of time to talk, since Jesus was surrounded by people during the day.
4. He was a rabbi. In verse 10 Jesus called him "a teacher of Israel." The Greek can also be translated "the teacher of Israel," which makes some believe that Nicodemus was a very prominent, famous, master-teacher.
5. He later becomes a Christian. At this point in his life, Nicodemus is just a seeker, but eventually he becomes a Christ-follower. In John 7,

the Sanhedrin was meeting and was criticizing Jesus, but Nicodemus spoke up and defended Jesus. Then, when Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross and gave Him a proper burial (Jn 19:38-39). Nicodemus brought about seventy-five pounds worth of myrrh and aloes.

- ii. Nicodemus was already convinced that Jesus was not an enemy. He could see from Jesus' miracles that God was with Him. But He wanted to know more.
2. *3 Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*
  - i. The Pharisees were looking forward to the kingdom of God, when the Messiah would come and establish his new kingdom. But Jesus told him the only way Nicodemus would ever see the kingdom of God is to be born again.
3. *4 "How can anyone be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked him. "Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?"*
  - i. Nicodemus was puzzled. How can someone be born again? Can they go back in their mother's womb and come back out?
4. *5 Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. 8 The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*
5. *9 "How can these things be?" asked Nicodemus.*
6. *10 "Are you a teacher of Israel and don't know these things?" Jesus replied. 11 "Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven —the Son of Man.*
7. *14 "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*

### III. TEN FACTS ABOUT THE NEW BIRTH

#### 1. The new birth is required to see the kingdom of God.

- i. Jesus says this twice:
  1. **John 3:3** Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."
  2. **John 3:5** Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
- ii. What is the kingdom of God? It was a major theme of Christ's teaching. It is not a visible kingdom with borders, or a political kingdom. It is an invisible kingdom made up all true Christians who have made Christ the king of their lives. So, seeing the kingdom of God refers to salvation. To see and enter the kingdom of God refers to seeing and entering salvation. It refers to becoming one of God's people.

- iii. This would have been shocking for Nicodemus to hear because as a Jew – a Jew of Jews – he assumed he was already in the kingdom of God. He thought he was born in the kingdom of God. But Jesus told him he had to be born again to enter the kingdom of God.
- iv. If you want to be saved, if you want to go to heaven, if you want to be one of God’s people, then you must be born again. It doesn’t matter how much you know about the Bible. It doesn’t matter how good you are. It doesn’t matter how often you attend church, or who your family is. To be saved and enter the kingdom of God, you must be born again.

**2. The new birth is the cleansing of past sins.**

- i. In verse four Nicodemus asked Jesus, “How can someone be born again? You can’t enter your mother’s womb a second time.” Jesus then gave him more insight into the new birth.
- ii. **John 3:5** Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”
- iii. To be born again is to be born of water and Spirit. What does that mean? Let’s start with the word water. Water has to do with the cleansing of your sins; forgiveness.
- iv. Think about what Jesus is saying. You cannot enter the kingdom of God and be one of God’s people unless you are cleansed of your sins. And this cleansing occurs when you are born again.
- v. **Titus 3:5** “he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

**3. The new birth is the power to live for God.**

- i. **John 3:5** Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”
- ii. The new birth is the cleansing of your past sins, but it is also the power to live for God. That’s what He means by being born of water and the Spirit. The Spirit represents the power of God. When you are born again, you are cleansed of the past, and empowered to live in submission to Christ in the future.
- iii. **John 3:6** “Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.”
  - 1. The point here is that by yourself you are limited to what you can do against sin. You cannot overcome the power of sin in your life. You will be defeated and conquered by sin. But if you are born of the Spirit, then you will have the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome sin.
  - 2. **Philippians 2:13** “For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose.”

**4. The new birth is a command.**

- i. **John 3:7** “Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again.”

- ii. Notice the command: You MUST be born again. This is not a suggestion. This is not advice. This is not counsel. This is an imperative. You must be born again.
- iii. “You” is plural. At this point Jesus isn’t just commanding Nicodemus to be born again. He is commanding everyone to be born again. That includes you and me. Everyone must be born again.
- iv. This means that there is something you must do to be born again. When God gives us a command, that means there is an action that He wants us to take. That’s true of being born again. There is something we must do to be born again. We’ll get to that in minute.
- v. Of all the commands in the Bible, this is the most important. This is the most crucial. This has the biggest consequences. Obey this command, and you enter the kingdom of God. You get eternal life. You get heaven. You get to have a relationship with God. Disobey this command, and you lose everything, even your very soul.

**5. The new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit.**

- i. **John 3:8** “The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”
- ii. We’ll get into what this verse means in just a minute, but first I want to point out that to be born again is to be born of the Spirit. Jesus said it in verse six, and then here in verse 8. That means that the new birth is a work of the Holy Spirit.
- iii. Each person of the Trinity has a role in our salvation. The Father loved us and sent the Son to save us. The Son came to earth, took on human flesh, died for our sins. The Holy Spirit regenerates us or gives us the new birth.
- iv. To be born again there is something you must do, and there is something the Holy Spirit must do. It is a command – be born again – but it is also something that the Holy Spirit does in you.
- v. Titus 3:5

**6. The new birth is visible in its results.**

- i. **John 3:8** “The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”
- ii. Nicodemus is trying to figure out the new birth. In verse 3 he asked, “How can anyone be born when he is old?” Here Jesus explains. The new birth is like the wind. You cannot understand the wind. It blows where it pleases; you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. In other words, you can’t understand the wind, but you can see the effects of the wind. You can hear it. You can see the trees swaying. You can see the grass moving. You can even feel it on your skin. In the same way, you can’t understand the new birth, but you can see its effects.

- iii. The new birth has visible, noticeable, unmistakable effects. When someone is born of the Spirit, their sins are forgiven and they are given power to live for God. This is visible.
- iv. You don't become sinless, but you sin less and you feel worse. You don't become perfect, but you get serious about loving and serving God.
- v. **Thomas Watson** "Where this work of regeneration is wrought, the heart has a new bias, and the life a new bent."
- vi. My personal definition of the new birth, or regeneration is this: When God saves us, He gives us a new heart with the desires and power to please Him.
- vii. The phrase "born again" is two words in Greek. "Born" is *gennao*, and "again" is *anōthen*. The word *anōthen* can mean "again," or "from above." According to all of the commentaries I read, the correct translation here is "born from above," from God. According to the HCSB Study Bible, the only time *anōthen* clearly means again in the NT is in Galatians 4:9; all other instances mean "from above." So what Jesus really meant is that you need to be born from above, from God. That means that the new birth is the reception of God's DNA. And that means that if you are born again, you will look like God, your Father.
- viii. **1 John 3:9** "Everyone who has been born of God does not sin, because his seed remains in him; he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God."
- ix. **Thomas Watson** "In the incarnation, Christ did assume our human nature, and in regeneration, we partake of His divine nature."
- x. The apostle Paul described the new birth like this: **2 Corinthians 5:17** "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!"
- xi. When you experience the new birth, you become a new creation; a new creature. You are totally different. It is impossible to hide this.

## 7. The new birth is the fulfillment of OT prophecy.

- i. This is the meaning behind Jesus' words in verse 10. **John 3:10** "Are you a teacher of Israel and don't know these things?"
- ii. In other words, the Old Testament spoke clearly about the new birth, and as a master-teacher of the Old Testament, Nicodemus should have known these things.
- iii. **Deuteronomy 30:6** "The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live."
- iv. **Ezekiel 36:27** "26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will place my Spirit within you and cause you to follow my statutes and carefully observe my ordinances."
- v. In ancient Israel, the Jews were constantly backsliding and then returning to God; backsliding and returning to God. This hurt God's name, and it resulted in great pain for the Israelites. The OT prophets foretold of a time when God would give His people new hearts; when He would change them from the

inside out; when He would put His Spirit within them and give them the resources to follow Him faithfully and not stray from Him. They were pointing to the new birth that would be possible through Christ.

- vi. **John 3:11-12** “11 “Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”
- vii. Jesus was saying that He was not making assumptions; He was not hypothesizing. He was speaking about things He knew.
- viii. Then He tells Nicodemus, “If you won’t believe me when I speak about things that happen on earth such as the new birth, then how will you believe me if I go on to tell you the deeper, heavenly things?”
- ix. **John 3:13** “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven —the Son of Man.”
  - 1. Some scholars believe that 13-21 are the words of John the author, not Jesus. Since there are no quotation marks, it’s hard to know for sure where Jesus’ words end and John’s begin. But this theory makes sense. In verse thirteen John comments that the way that Jesus has this inside knowledge about the new birth is that He came from heaven, and went back to heaven after His death and resurrection.

#### **8. The new birth is made possible by the cross of Christ.**

- i. **John 3:14-15** “14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”
- ii. Now Jesus gets into how the new birth is going to be accomplished. Remember, the new birth, or regeneration, is a part of God’s work of salvation in our lives. And salvation, from start to finish, is accomplished by the cross of Jesus Christ.
- iii. Jesus is using an old story to illustrate the cross. It’s found in Numbers 21. The Israelites were traveling through the wilderness after leaving Egypt, and they complained about God and Moses. They didn’t like the way that God and Moses were leading them. They didn’t like following God and Moses. They didn’t like the manna that God had provided. So, the Lord sent poisonous snakes to bite them, and many died. So the people cried to Moses for help. Moses prayed, and God told him to make a bronze snake and mount it on a pole. Then, when anyone who is bitten looks at it, they will be healed.
- iv. Jesus said, “In the same way, the Son of Man must be lifted up,” so that everyone who believes in Him will be have eternal life.” He was referring to the crucifixion. Everyone on planet earth has been bitten with sin, and we are dying spiritually. But if we look to Jesus in faith, trusting in His death in our place for our sins, then we will be healed. We will receive eternal life.
- v. Jesus is communicating that the new birth is made possible, purchased, accomplished by the cross of Christ.

## 9. The new birth is the impartation of eternal life.

- i. **John 3:14-15** “14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”
- ii. These two verses also teach something else about the new birth, that it means the impartation of eternal life. Remember, the context of this verse is about the new birth. And here, instead of using the term “born again,” He uses the term “eternal life.” When you are born again, God is giving you the gift of eternal life.
- iii. **John MacArthur** “The new birth, or regeneration, is the act of God by which He imparts eternal life to those who are dead in sins, thus making them His children.”
- iv. This is wonderful news for two reasons:
  1. The new birth means eternal life rather than eternal death, which is what we deserve. It is heaven rather than hell. It is eternity with God, rather than eternity separated from God. It is eternal paradise rather than eternal torment. If you want to go to heaven rather than hell, then you must be born again.
  2. The new birth cannot be lost. The life that God gives us is eternal. It cannot be lost, or taken away, or forfeited. Once saved, always saved. Eternal security. Perseverance of the saints. Once you are born from above, you cannot be unborn. **1 Peter 1:3-5** “3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. 5 You are being guarded by God’s power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

## 10. The new birth is received by faith.

- i. **John 3:15** “so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”
- ii. Finally, Jesus tells us how to receive the new birth. By faith in Jesus Christ.
- iii. Remember, the new birth is a work of the Holy Spirit, but it is a command that we must obey. “You must be born again.” How do we obey this command? By faith in Jesus Christ. When you decide to trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and King, the Holy Spirit gives you the new birth. You will be changed.
- iv. There is a big theological controversy over regeneration between Calvinists and Arminians. As you know, I am an Arminian. The point of contention is the timing of regeneration. When does regeneration occur? Does it occur before you put your faith in Christ, or after you put your faith in Christ? Calvinists say it occurs before. They say that first God regenerates you, and this gives you the ability to trust in Christ. Arminians believe that regeneration happens to you after you trust in Christ, and I believe the Scriptures make this plain.



- v. **John 3:15** “so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life”
- vi. **1 John 5:1** “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God”
- vii. **1 Peter 1:23, 25** “because you have been born again—not of perishable seed but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God.... And this word is the gospel that was proclaimed to you.”
- viii. To be more accurate, however, Arminians believe that a partial regeneration occurs before faith. This is sometimes called prevenient grace, in which God gives the sinner the ability to freely respond to God’s offer of salvation through Jesus Christ. The individual still has the ability and responsibility to accept or reject Christ. If you accept Christ, then you are born again. If you reject Christ, then you remain spiritually lost. To be born again, you must first believe.
- ix. We are born again when we:
  - 1. Admit that we are sinners in need of Christ.
  - 2. Believe in Christ as God’s provision for our sins.
  - 3. Call on Christ to save us.

#### IV. **CONCLUSION**

1. When I was born again, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. God radically changed me. I’ve never been the same. I’ve never gone back to the old me. The old me is dead. God changed everything about me. It is my prayer that you will experience the new birth. That you will be born again. That you will be regenerated. Because unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God.
2. To put it as simply as possible, the new birth is the radical change that the Holy Spirit brings in your life when you get saved.
3. **Tyndale Bible Dictionary** “This renewal involves a mighty change in the person. It is a work of the Holy Spirit, breaking the dominion of sin and implanting proper attitudes and desires. The regenerated person freely and joyously does the will of God.”
4. So, a question to take home with you is have you been born again? Have you experienced the radical change of your inner man so that you aren’t sinless, but you sin less and you feel worse? You aren’t perfect, but now you love and live for Jesus Christ. If that doesn’t describe you, then you need to be born again. You need to put your faith in Jesus today.