



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 3: 1-8

Winter 2021-22

"Born Again"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. Good to be back with you again after a week's absence. Well we're in the Book of John and we're back in, well, I was going to say chapter 2. We finished chapter 2, but I want to begin with chapter 2. We're going to look at verses 1 through 8 in chapter 3. But the last verses of chapter 2 give us something of an introduction to what follows. And you'll remember in chapter 2, Jesus came to Jerusalem. It was for the Feast of Passover and He came to the temple and it was filled with activity; merchants, and money changers, and animals. And He made a scourge and He drove them all out. He cleansed the temple. And then we read verses 23-25,

<sup>23</sup> Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, <sup>25</sup> and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

**3** Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; <sup>2</sup> this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is

with him." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

John 2:23-25, 3:1-8

May the LORD bless the reading of His Word and bless our time of study in it together.

*(Message)* Comedian Woody Allen once joked, "My only regret in this life is that I'm not someone else." Now that's an amusing, but rather bleak revelation about himself. And yet, he spoke more truth than he knew. The fact is, everyone needs to be someone else. That's biblical. And our Lord's words, "You must be born again."

Why is that—and what is that? The 'why', the reason or need for being born again is given by Paul in Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 1. We are all, by nature, born into this world 'dead in our trespasses and sins.' The meaning of the new birth, (what it is), Jesus explained to Nicodemus, in John chapter 3. There is no more important chapter in the Bible than John 3—and no more important chapter in the world than John chapter 3. Bishop J. C. Ryle wrote, "A person can be ignorant of a lot of things and still be saved, but to be ignorant of the matters handled in this chapter is to be in the broad way which 'leadeth to destruction'. (Mat 7:13)"

Nicodemus was in that 'broad way' when he came to visit Jesus one night. John tells us at the beginning that he was a Pharisee, and "a ruler of the Jews". The Pharisees are found all through the New Testament; but not found in the Old Testament. And the reason for that is it was a religious order that was formed during the intertestamental period—during the second century B.C. The name is Aramaic. It means *separated*, so they are *the separated ones*. Probably the idea is *the pious ones*. They were not a large group but they had a large influence over the people. They were teachers. They believed Scripture was the Word of God but were especially scrupulous about observing the Law. And they developed detailed traditions on how the Law was to be obeyed.

The description of Nicodemus as 'a ruler of the Jews' indicates that he was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jewish people and so an influential man. He was a Jewish leader. He was a distinguished teacher of the Law, and that's indicated later when Jesus calls him "the teacher of Israel". (vs10). He taught the *tenets* and the *dogmas* of Judaism, Israel's unique relationship with God and its obligation to keep the Law of Moses, (which the Pharisees believed was necessary for salvation). So a right standing with God was based on a right relationship to the Law of Moses, which required following the traditions of the Jewish sages. It was a religion of Law keeping, and a salvation of works.

Now with this as his background, John states in verse 2 that Nicodemus "came to Jesus by night"—which invites the question, 'Why did John mention that detail, *night*?' Jesus had recently caused a storm when He cleansed the temple. Maybe Nicodemus came under the cloak of darkness to hide his visit from his colleagues. Or perhaps John was simply noting the time of the visit. But all through John's writings there is this theme of night and day, light and darkness, moral and spiritual, (as moral and spiritual symbolism).

For example later when Judas leaves the upper room to betray Christ, John said, "He went out...and it was night." (Jn 13:30). Now that's more than a time note; he was indicating the spiritual condition of Judas' soul. Judas was spiritually of the night.

Darkness enveloped his soul. And here too, darkness clouded Nicodemus' understanding. "His soul", someone said, "was blacker than he knew."

Still, he wasn't blinded by prejudice. He came to Jesus and called Him "Rabbi"; a title of the highest respect among the Jews. So this teacher of Israel called a carpenter from Galilee, "Rabbi." He had a real regard for Him. Was he in the temple when Jesus cleared it of the merchants and money changers, and in that saw the authority with which He did it? He must have had witnessed some of the signs that are spoken of in chapter 2, (while He was there, while Jesus was there in Jerusalem.)

Unlike his colleagues, who would dismiss Jesus as a charlatan, and His miracles as the deeds of Beelzebub, Nicodemus knew God was with Him. He had answers, and Nicodemus wanted to hear them; Nicodemus wanted to speak to Him. "Rabbi," he said, "we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Then, as he was about to ask a question, "Who are you?", or "Are you the Messiah?", or "Is the kingdom near?", Jesus answered him, (and not his question(s) but his condition—his deepest need), "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

At the end of chapter 2, John said that Jesus "knew what was in man". (Jn 2:25). And He knew the question that was hidden deep in Nicodemus' heart, what was really burning in his heart, "How can I enter the kingdom of God? Have I done enough?" That has to be the question that haunts a thinking person who believes in works salvation. It's one of assurance; 'Have I done enough?'

It's what troubled the rich young ruler, you'll remember, when he came to Jesus and he asked, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" (Mat 19:6). 'I've kept the Law but what one thing do I need that will put me over the top?' That's really what he was asking. And the answer is, 'Only those *born again* will see the kingdom.' And that brief statement swept away all that Nicodemus stood for; the central beliefs of Judaism with its confidence in human effort, Law keeping, and personal merit.

The common belief of Jesus' day was that all Jews would enter the Kingdom; (with rare exceptions; those who were guilty of apostasy or extraordinary wickedness). The future kingdom of God was the Jew's birthright as descendants of Abraham. That was the common thinking. But here Jesus told Nicodemus that was not so. Natural birth is not enough, you must be *born again*.

The word *again* also means '*from above*'. The statement has both senses. To be 'born from above' or 'born again' is to be born of God. It's what John wrote earlier in chapter 1 in verse 13, that those to whom God gave the right to become children of God "...were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." This is a supernatural work of God; and the Lord emphasizes that, and the need of it, with the words, "truly, truly."

There is a necessity to the new birth. And that necessity is due to the human condition. The bleakness of that condition, the complete wreckage and hopelessness of it, is indicated in this term itself, *born anew, born again*. We have to become completely new people.

There's nothing salvageable about us. That's indicated in other passages of Scripture, such as Ephesians 2, verse 1, which I referred to earlier and Paul's description of people as "dead", spiritually "dead". Now that is mankind, naturally. Everyone, naturally...apart from God's divine grace. It doesn't mean that people don't have understanding of things. Doesn't mean they don't have volition. But it does mean that the mind is darkened and our will is naturally inclined against spiritual truth.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians chapter 2, verse 14, "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him." God's revelation doesn't make sense to him—so he won't believe it. He can't believe it—it's foolishness. We don't believe things that are foolish. We don't believe things we can't believe. In fact, he will oppose it. Not just not believe it, but oppose it.

Paul wrote in Romans 8, verse 7, "The mind set on the flesh", (And that's the natural mind; that's the unbelieving mind. That's the mind of man apart from grace.) "The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God." There is no neutrality, for the mind is

at war with God. Then Paul adds that such a mind, the natural mind, the mind apart from God's grace, "...does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so."

It's what Luther called "the bondage of the will." It is not even able to do so. In terms of ability to understand God's revelation as true, in terms of ability to accept it, to believe it, to be willing to receive it, man is dead; can't do it.

That's man's condition described under the rubric, *total depravity*—which doesn't mean that people are as bad as they can be; doesn't mean that everyone's a total monster. What it means is, sin has infected every part of man; body, mind, soul, and totally affected him or her. And so after living in that condition long enough, some people have, as their great regret in life, that they are not someone else—that they can't change places or make a personal transformation.

That is how utterly desperate the human condition is. Mankind is lost and guilty before God. And if that were true of a man like Nicodemus, a religious man, a teacher, great teacher, a decent man, what does that say about everyone else? What hope do we have? Our only hope is to be born again, born from above, that's the answer.

But it makes little sense to people. They can't understand that. It's as Paul said, "foolishness to them," and it was mystifying to Nicodemus. He responded to Jesus in verse 4, "How can a man be born when he is old?" That suggests to us that this was probably an old man, very distinguished old man, who had probably made quite a name for himself in the nation as The Teacher. "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

Now he was exhibiting the same spiritual dullness that the Jewish officials showed earlier in chapter 2 when they wanted a sign from Jesus showing His authority for doing what He'd done: The driving the merchants, money changers, cows, sheep and goats and all of that out of the temple and disrupting their great business. And so when He spoke about raising up the temple "in three days", speaking about His body, they thought He meant Herod's temple. He's going to rebuild this magnificent structure in

three days? Well like them, Nicodemus was so blind to the truth and so in the dark, (so much "of the night"), that he could only conceive of the Lord's meaning in the same kind of crass, literal terms.

And so the Lord patiently restated the challenge and solution in a slightly different way in verse 5, "Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Now those two words, *water* and *spirit*, have led to a variety of interpretations.

From physical birth, with the amniotic fluid that accompanies the birth of a child, *water* is interpreted here as that—as physical birth. Or as baptism, either Christian baptism or the baptism of John.

Now I think we can eliminate physical birth, since it goes without saying that a person must be born physically in order to be born spiritually. It's stating the obvious. And baptism is also unlikely. According to verse 10, Nicodemus was expected to understand these things, and yet he could hardly have been expected to understand Christian baptism before the day of Pentecost. And if John the Baptist's baptism was meant, then that's a problem for us since the Lord was making a requirement for entering the kingdom that ended with John.

But the biggest objection to baptism is that it contradicts the teaching of the New Testament. Like John chapter 1, verse 13, "...nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man..." Baptism is a work and it's an act of the *will*. We choose to be baptized. And also, the terms of receiving salvation throughout the Bible, the terms of 'faith alone' and 'faith that is actually given to us by God'; it's not our work—it's His work. We see that in a number of places. I chose Philippians chapter 1, verse 29 as an example, "To you," Paul said, "it has been *granted* to believe..." That word (*granted*) is 'given'. It's a *gift*.; faith is a gift. It's not our work ultimately. It's what we do, but we're enabled to do it in order to do it.

In verse 10, the Lord criticized Nicodemus for not understanding these things since he was "the teacher of Israel"; he should have understood them. And that

indicates that the meaning of *water* and *spirit* is found in the Old Testament, the Scriptures that Nicodemus studied. How did he miss this? Throughout the Old Testament the Spirit is the giver of life and water indicates cleansing; which suggests another interpretation, one that fits the context here. And that is, the Lord is describing a new birth that *cleanses* and *renews*.

It's a way of describing, (in familiar terms), terms that would have been familiar to Nicodemus: The work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, the work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth. That is one of the great promises that God gave in Ezekiel 36, verses 25 through 27 that, 'He would sprinkle clean water on Israel and they will be clean.' Obviously a figurative way of saying that He will cleanse them from their sin.

Then He promised to give them "a new heart and put a new spirit within them", and cause them to "walk in His statutes", to be obedient. It's going to do for them what the Law could not do. The Law can condemn, but the Law can't enable us to do anything. And so what he's talking about is a supernatural act. It's what He does, not what they do.

In the next chapter, Ezekiel 37, is one of the most famous in the Bible, the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, which are brought to life by the breath, or Spirit, of God. Now that's regeneration, or the new birth. And that's what God has promised to do for the nation Israel in the future. And it is what the Lord was telling Nicodemus must happen for anyone to see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus had asked, 'How can this happen?' It was a mystery to him—it shouldn't have been. It happens by the power of the Holy Spirit, who gives life, spiritual life, understanding, and obedience. And to make that clear to him, the Lord sets forth the governing principle in the new birth. It's a very logical, very reasonable, very rational explanation, verse 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Spiritual birth can only take place in this way.

Now what He's saying here, (to broaden it out), is, "like *begets* like". Fish *beget* fish. Dogs *beget* dogs. People *beget* people. A person belongs to an earthly human family because a human, (natural human birth), has taken place.

And it's the same in the spiritual realm. In order for a person to belong to the heavenly family, a heavenly birth must take place; a spiritual birth must occur. Flesh and blood can no more inherit the kingdom of God than a fish can climb out of water and live on land. It can't breathe the atmosphere. It's not adapted to our environment. And a natural man is not adapted to the spiritual environment. He is not capable of living in the future kingdom, which will be a material realm but it is essentially a spiritual one. There must be a change.

But the flesh, what we are by nature in our fallen condition, the flesh cannot produce it, can't produce that change. Only the Holy Spirit can give birth to the spirit. Only He can give us a new nature. Only He can remove the darkness from our spiritual eyes and renew our wills to act in faith and belief. And that's what's necessary.

Nicodemus should have understood that we need a new heart. I say that because Jeremiah wrote about it in one of the great and glorious chapters and greatest promises given to Israel in Jeremiah 31: About the New Covenant—and the new heart that He will give, and writing His law in our hearts and on their hearts—the supernatural work of the Spirit of God. And then Ezekiel, in chapters 36 and 37, all of these things were there in great texts of Scripture that he had studied—and should have known these things. We need to be change and cleansed, given life by God in order to enter in to His family.

The Bible's clear on that. And so Jesus said to him in verse 7, "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' " *"You must,"* He said. That's the Lord's emphasis, just as it was in verse 3 when He began, "Truly, truly." This is an uncontestable fact: "You must be born again".

Sinclair Ferguson told a story about George Whitfield, the evangelist of the great awakening in both England and America. He preached a sermon on this text titled, "You Must Be Born Again"; and he preached it frequently. Many people heard the sermon time and again. One of them was an aristocratic lady who had an opportunity to meet him one day. And she asked him, in a kind of condescending way, "Mr. Whitfield, why is it that you are always going around the country preaching this message to people, "You

must be born again?" And Mr. Whitfield looked at her and he said, "Because, madam, *You Must.*"

And that's true. That's what our Lord is saying. 'There's no other way into the kingdom.' That's what the Lord was saying to Nicodemus, that's what the Lord is saying to us, and that's what is true of all people without exception: "You must be born again." But we can't do that ourselves. We can't change ourselves. We may regret that we are ourselves and not someone else, but we can't change things any more than a leopard can change its spots.

And the Lord was not instructing Nicodemus on what he should do: like 'turning over a new leaf' or 'rolling up his shirtsleeves' to engage in some moral rearmament, (as though man's problem is moral). No, it's not moral, it's spiritual. Jesus wasn't telling Nicodemus to do anything. He was telling him what he needed to experience: He needed God's grace.

But that is completely the work of God. And in verse 8 the Lord explains how it works, the mystery of it, which He did in an illustration, an example. It was evening. Maybe they were sitting on a terrace having their conversation when, at this moment in the conversation, they felt a cool breeze blow by and heard it rustle through the leaves. And the Lord said to him, 'Let me illustrate this great work of the Spirit, Nicodemus. It's like the wind.' "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (vs8).

In Greek and in Hebrew the word for *spirit* is the same word for *wind*; (*ruah*, HEB), (*pneuma*, Gr). So they can function in different ways. Here that word has two meanings and functions in both ways. First about the wind, that's the illustration He uses, and He uses it to show that we can't control the wind. We can't even understand it, really. We can't predict its movements and its effects. It will come from one direction, then suddenly it will move in another. We can't determine that.

A number of years ago we had a very good illustration of this when one of our elders, Jim Fraser, spoke on a Wednesday night. He had been at his ranch that day burning piles of brush when the wind unexpectedly changed direction and caused the fire to spread onto the pasture. And it spread very rapidly and soon got out of control; and it threatened to set the forest ablaze. When, at a critical moment, the wind suddenly shifted again and the fire was put out. There is a sovereignty about the wind. We can't command it. We can't control it. We can't see it or predict its movement. We can just see its effects.

It's the same with the Holy Spirit. He's like the wind. He is sovereign. He moves where and when He wills. He is God. He's the third person of the Trinity and He spreads fire as He wills, (as He did on the day of Pentecost), and He puts it out. He's sovereign and free. He acts according to His good pleasure. He cannot be commanded by us. We have no control over Him. We can't even predict His movement.

Why of all men, did God choose Abraham? Well, not because he was a good and righteous man. He wasn't. He was an idolater, living in spiritual darkness. It was night in his soul. Joshua said that, (not something I'm making up), read Joshua 24. There he states that it was when he was worshiping idols beyond the river, (beyond the Euphrates), that God called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and led him to Canaan. Why did the Spirit of God come to him and breathe life into him? Only because it was His wise and His good purpose to do so. He quickened him and not some other Semite.

Who could have predicted that a proud young rabbi, a man zealous for the Law and the traditions of Israel, and determined to destroy the church would be quickened; brought to life on the Damascus road and changed into the apostle Paul? The Spirit moves as He wills. We can't predict it or command it. His work is mysterious, like the wind. We know where He's been and what He has done by the effects, by the faith He produces, by the understanding and the love that He creates when He changes us into someone else, into a new creation. It's His work, not ours. No amount of logic,

persuasion, or argument of force will produce it in a person. Men are dead spiritually, and must, first of all, be given life in order to respond, in order to believe.

One of David Livingstone's first converts was an African chief, Sechele, who thought he could make his tribesmen believe by force. So he suggested one day to Livingstone, "I shall call my headman, and with our whips of rhinoceros hide, we'll soon make them all believe together." They didn't realize that man is, by nature, dead. Whips can't change that. Not even love.

I heard a preacher today talking about the congregation 'loving people into a relationship with the Lord'. Well that's nice, and of course love is very important, and we need to be characterized by that; and God uses our love for one another and for others. But love, apart from the grace of God, does not change anyone. There's nothing we can do in and of ourselves, with force or whatever. Only the Spirit of God can do that. Only He gives the new birth.

But there's great encouragement in that. It's God's work to change men, and He does that work—and He does it generously. That's an encouragement, and it was an encouragement to Livingstone. In one of his darker moments, he wrote home, "We have a difficult, difficult field to cultivate here. But for the belief that the Holy Spirit works and will work for us, I should give up in despair."

There's no reason to despair. The leopard can't change its spots, but God sends His Spirit and His people are irresistibly drawn to the light, to the truth, and are irresistibly converted. That's grace.

But still, it's teaching that might be disturbing to some. Maybe it's disturbing to some of you here. I know outside of here it's disturbing to a lot of people. And someone might even say that 'That's dangerous doctrine you're teaching. It's not genuine. It can't be because that will discourage people from trying to save themselves and be born again.' And that's true, it should. They should be discouraged from trying to do the impossible.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a careful keeper of the Law, a man of effort. You can imagine a disciplined, very moral man—and a man totally lost. When a person understands that he or she is lost and cannot be found by anyone except the LORD, that he despairs of saving himself and casts himself, or herself, on the grace of God who saves alone, then that's understanding that has a good result, and the right result.

If a person can only be born from above, that should make a person look above to someone greater, infinitely greater, who is able to save to the uttermost. Mr. Spurgeon once preached, "If I were in a state of anxiety, and heard such a sermon as this, it would compel me to breathe from my innermost soul this prayer, 'O LORD, save me.' I think that it would drive me in despair of doing anything to save myself, to cast myself into the Savior's arms, that He might give me of that Spirit, by which I should be born again. And remember," he said, "the moment a sinner does that, he's born again."

Well this doctrine of a new birth is not meant to exclude but include people. Without the new birth none would be saved and all would be lost. So if you know you've only been born once, but you sense things are not right, that you're lost and undeserving, maybe you've got regrets and wish you were someone else, well you can be. Turn to Christ. Believe in Him. He died for those like you who are lost and guilty, who need to be made new, need to be born again, and He will receive you, forgive you, give you new life, and you will see the kingdom to come.

May God help you to do that; help all of us who have done that to rejoice in all that Christ has done for us. And the great sovereign mercy that came upon us, unsolicited by us, because of His grace, His sovereign grace.

Father, You, Your Son, the Spirit, the Triune God is a wonderful Savior. God the Father that chose the lost from eternity past, the Son who came and purchased them, and the Spirit who draws them irresistibly, (it must be irresistibly), to life that's presently

secure, and a life that's being changed continually into someone we need to be and we want to be. Someone like Your Son—and then the glory to come.

Father, we thank You. It's all of grace, and we thank You for Your grace and your goodness to us. You are a wonderful Savior. We pray these thing in our Savior's name.

And now, the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen.

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