

# The New Birth

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Date: 14 June 2026

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, how do you make lifestyle changes that last? Promoting lifestyle change is really big business these days.! The internet bombards us with strategies about transforming your life for the better.

! Shops are full of books that promote positive life change. Podcasts are dominated with discussions about lifestyle improvement.

And social media is full of life hacks with advice from influencers. And so whether it's Jordan Peterson's online lectures or his best-selling books like 12 Rules for Life or 12 more Rules for Life, or perhaps it's Joe Rogan's top-rated podcasts with a mixture of different guests, the advice and the discussion is geared towards living a better life.

Now, perhaps you're here this afternoon and there is an aspect of your life that you would really like to change. Perhaps your fitness or your diet, your career, your relationships, an aspect of your behavior, or whatever it is.

And you might sometimes wonder, having tried to change, well, is real change actually possible? Whether for yourself or for those around about you, for other people. Well, today, what we're going to look at and consider together is the greatest life change that is possible for any human being.

[ 1 : 32 ] Not a lifestyle change, let's be clear, but a life change. So not just picking up a few good habits, but change that is real and lasting.

Change that is so radical that it's described here as a rebirth. Because it's a spiritual transformation, regeneration.

And that's what Jesus is talking about here in John chapter 3 in this conversation with a man called Nicodemus. Because Jesus speaks of being born again.

About a new birth that leads to eternal life. Which is a massive change, the biggest life change possible, and it's one that lasts forever.

And so if you're here today and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, then such a radical life change is not only worth exploring, but it's necessary according to Jesus here.

[ 2 : 34 ] So we need this life change. And we can have this life change. Jesus says we must be born again. And it's so important because he says nobody can enter the kingdom of God without this new birth.

And so what Jesus says here in this conversation with a religious man called Nicodemus basically reveals humanity's greatest need, but also God's greatest gift.

So Jesus' words to Nicodemus are as vital for us now as they were for him then. So let's see three things from this text this afternoon. First, the necessity of the new birth.

Second, the source of the new birth. And third, the process of the new birth. The necessity, the source, and the process. First, the necessity of the new birth there in verse 1 to 8.

If you've got your Bible open in front of you, you'll see at the end of chapter 2 that John says Jesus knew what was in each person. Or some translations, Jesus knew what was in a man.

[ 3 : 38 ] And then we come to the beginning of chapter 3 and we read, Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, or there was a man. So this man, Nicodemus, is a member of the Jewish ruling council.

As we're being told by John here, Jesus knew exactly what was inside this man. So, yeah, he may have been religious on the outside, but Jesus knew what he was like on the inside.

So Nicodemus, we're told, was a Pharisee. That's a religious teacher, religious leader, who was scrupulous in keeping God's law. He's also a member of the Jewish ruling council.

That is like the highest Jewish court called the Sanhedrin. And then later, if you look down to verse 10, Jesus calls him Israel's teacher, suggesting that he is one of the top men, if not the top man, in

terms of religious leadership of his day.

So we're talking like chief rabbi, very reverent professor. That's the caliber of this man, Nicodemus. You could not get a more distinguished or more religious man than him.

[ 4 : 54 ] And it's interesting, Nicodemus seems to be impressed by Jesus. Verse 2, he came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know you're a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.

Notice that John says Nicodemus went to Jesus at night. Now, it could be he couldn't get near Jesus during the day, or it could be he didn't want to be seen talking to Jesus for fear of what other people would think of him.

But I reckon we're actually meant to see a symbolic significance to this nighttime meeting. Because the night or darkness in John's gospel always symbolizes spiritual darkness.

And so there's a sense in which we're being told that there's a darkness in Nicodemus. And so the issue for him is, he's in the darkness. Would he come into the light after his conversation with Jesus?

So it sounds like Nicodemus here speaks on behalf of his religious colleagues when he says, we know that you're a teacher who has come from God. So he's made some kind of judgment on Jesus, and he wants to assess Jesus further.

[ 6 : 09 ] But Jesus doesn't give him a chance. Instead, Jesus gives his assessment on Nicodemus. So look at verse 3. Jesus replied, Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

Very direct and no-nonsense response by Jesus. So Nicodemus must be born again if he is going to be part of the kingdom of God.

Now this must have been a massive shock for a man like Nicodemus. Because of his religious credentials, he just assumed that as a top Jewish religious teacher, he was already in the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is God's reign over the world, both now and in the future. And Jesus, of course, is the king of this kingdom. But Jesus is saying to the most religious person there is, that to belong to the kingdom of God, he must be born again.

And so here's the deal. You can't get into the kingdom of God by being religious. Your religious observance, your religious understanding, your religious performance, your religious position, doesn't earn you eternal life with God.

[ 7 : 37 ] And so if somebody like Nicodemus must be born again, then so must we all. Rebirth for each one of us is essential. Now what Jesus says can mean born again, but it can also mean born from above.

You'll see that in the footnote. And Nicodemus assumes Jesus is talking about the former, like a second physical birth. So he says in verse 4, How can someone be born when they are old?

Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. So Nicodemus doesn't get what Jesus is talking about. But Jesus makes it clear that he is talking about a spiritual birth.

Verse 5 and 6, Jesus answered, Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit.

See what Jesus is saying? There's a difference between physical birth and spiritual birth. And the new birth that Jesus is talking about is spiritual birth.

[ 8 : 48 ] It's produced by the Spirit. And so when Jesus talks of being born of water and the Spirit, it's likely that he's alluding to this promise of God through the prophet Ezekiel.

The one that we read earlier in our service where water and Spirit come together to speak of cleansing, water, Spirit, transformation.

Cleansing and transformation. Listen to those words from Ezekiel 36 again. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I'll cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

And so the water signifies cleansing from the old life of sin. And the Spirit is the power that transforms the heart to give new life.

[ 9 : 51 ] Being born again. Rebirth. And so being born of water and the Spirit speaks of this new birth. One that both cleanses and transforms.

And Nicodemus should have known this. Look at verse 7. You should not be surprised that my saying, says Jesus, you must be born again.

So Nicodemus hadn't understood what the Scriptures were actually teaching. Because they clearly state that this new birth is a necessity for all people, including Nicodemus.

So Nicodemus needed his life cleansed from sin. He needed his heart to be transformed by the Spirit. We all do. We all do.

And here's the thing. We can't do this cleansing thing or this transformation thing ourselves. And no amount of religion, even if it's been accumulated over many, many years, even if it is so strict, no amount of religion can produce this kind of radical rebirth that Jesus is talking of.

[11:08] And so Jesus says in verse 8, Interesting, the Greek word for wind and for spirit is the same word, pneuma.

Guess where we get our words pneumatic drill from. So Jesus is describing here how the effects of the wind and the effects of the Spirit are undeniable.

And so you can hear the sound of the wind, especially because we live in Glasgow. Even if you can't fully understand where that wind comes from or where that wind is going.

And so I think Jesus here is pushing back on Nicodemus who just hasn't grasped the new birth.

Because while Nicodemus can't understand the wind, he still sees and believes in the wind and he sees its effects.

And Jesus is saying it's the same with the new birth. It may be like the wind where you can't tell where it comes from or where it's going. But the reality is that God's Spirit moves amongst human beings and gives them new life and gives them new birth.

[12:22] And so Jesus is emphasizing here to Nicodemus the necessity of the new birth. And we need it if we are to enter the kingdom of God. Because Nicodemus' religious credentials can't do it for him.

And so in the same way that Nicodemus contributed nothing to his physical birth, the same way that you contributed nothing to your physical birth, you didn't choose the time, you didn't pick the day, had nothing to do with you.

So we're being told Nicodemus or us contribute nothing to our spiritual birth. We can't earn it by what we do.

Nicodemus, us were spiritually lost and we need a new birth. And so Jesus here, what he does is he smashes any notion that you can enter the kingdom of God through your religion.

Outward religion clearly doesn't help you get into God's kingdom. What we need is a new birth. And so being born again is the most radical life transformation that can happen to someone.

[13:38] In other words, becoming a Christian is much more than just a few tweaks or a few changes to your life. It's not simply a case of just picking up a few habits, changing your lifestyle a bit, or even turning over a new leaf.

It's far more. It's much more radical. It's not about some kind of self-improvement that you do yourself. It's a regeneration. A spiritual rebirth on the inside that then impacts everything on the outside.

And so that's the necessity of the new birth. Secondly, let's look at the source of the new birth in verse 9 to 15. Because the new birth is only possible through Jesus.

We must believe in Jesus if we're going to have this new life. And that's what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus in this next part of their conversation together. Because Nicodemus still hasn't grasped what Jesus is talking about.

So verse 9, How can this be? Nicodemus asked. Then verse 10, You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus. And do you not understand these things?

[14:51] So Jesus has just said the new birth is a supernatural work of God. And so the fact that Nicodemus is even saying, How can this be?

Simply proves Jesus' point. Because Nicodemus' response is one of bemusement. Nicodemus will never enter the kingdom of God unless the Spirit of God opens his spiritually blind eyes and regenerates his dark heart.

And that's why he doesn't get what Jesus is saying. Verse 11, Very truly, I tell you, We speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

So Jesus now points Nicodemus to himself as the one that Nicodemus should believe in.

Remember, John wrote his gospel so that his readers would believe.

[16:03] When we began our series, we looked at his purpose statement in chapter 20, verse 31, where he says, These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John, the gospel writer, wants his readers to believe because Jesus wants us to believe. To believe what he says, to believe who he is, to believe in him.

Because that's the only way to get the eternal life that's being spoken of. That's why Jesus here identifies himself as the Son of Man. And it's a title from the Old Testament.

We mentioned it before, where Jesus associates himself with this figure in Daniel chapter 7, a heavenly Son of Man who looks human but is far more, who is God.

And this Son of Man is the one to whom God gives authority and glory and sovereign power over all peoples. It's the Son of Man who will appear at the end of history in the clouds of heaven and judge and rule forever.

[17:16] And Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, Hey, that's me. I am the Son of Man who's come from heaven and will return to heaven again and will come back and judge.

So he's saying to Nicodemus, You must believe in me. And then Jesus gives this other example from the Old Testament scriptures to drive this home in verse 14 and 15.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. Now this is a reference that Jesus uses to a passage in Numbers chapter 21.

But it's a reference to Moses leading the Israelites through the wilderness after the Exodus. And so the people were complaining against God and they were complaining against Moses.

So what God did was he sent some venomous snakes amongst the people to punish them. And then the people didn't like these venomous snakes, obviously.

[18:25] And so they admitted that they had sinned and they wanted God to take away the snakes. And so what God did was he told Moses to put a snake up on a pole.

And anyone who'd been bitten by the snake could look at the snake on the pole and live. And so Moses then did exactly as God said.

He put this bronze snake up on a pole. And anyone who'd been bitten by a snake could just look at this bronze snake and then they'd be healed. Looking at the snake was the only way that people could be saved.

And so Jesus uses this to explain his own death. Where God's salvation from judgment comes through Jesus being lifted up on a cross.

And it all connects with what Jesus has been saying about the new birth. Where just as God gave physical life through this bronze snake lifted up on a pole to the Israelites.

[19:26] So God gives spiritual life, eternal life through Jesus being lifted up on a cross. To people like you and me.

And this language being lifted up refers to Jesus of course being physically lifted up to die on a cross. But in the Gospel of John he uses this phrase lifted up to refer to Jesus' exaltation.

In fact Jesus being lifted up on the cross is the manner of his exaltation. It's saying that he is this son of man. He is the son of God come to save us.

And Jesus says this happened on the cross. It's got to happen because it's through his death that God is working out his salvation plan for this world. And so Jesus lifting up will result in eternal life for everyone who looks to him and believes in him.

So we're being told Jesus is the source of the new birth. And so the way to eternal life in the kingdom of God is not through religion.

[20:38] It's through believing in Jesus. Let me try to illustrate. You may have heard of a man called Charles Blondin. In the 19th century he was a French acrobat and a tightrope walker.

And he was famous for crossing the Niagara Falls on a tightrope. And when he was crossing the Niagara Falls huge crowds came to watch Blondin. And he walked across this tightrope a number of times with different kinds of stunts.

He was on a chair one time. He fried an omelette apparently another time. And different kinds of things to show that he was this great man who could walk across this tightrope. And one of his tricks was he carried somebody on his back.

And the person he carried on his back was his manager called Harry. And the story goes that they came up with this idea to impress people. Blondin would just put someone on his back and walk across this tightrope over the Niagara Falls.

But the problem was though they came up with the idea together. Charles Blondin and Harry. Nobody wanted to do it. Nobody wanted to go on Blondin's back. But Blondin apparently asked everybody and said.

[ 21 : 52 ] Do you think I can carry you across on my back? Do you think I can carry someone across my back? And everybody said yeah absolutely. No doubts. You can do it. And then he said well will you let me carry you across the Niagara Falls on my back?

And everybody said no way. Why? No way. Nobody would do it. And so Blondin said to his manager. Listen we said we would do this.

Harry you've got to do it. You've got to jump on my back and come across. And Harry did it. He had to trust Blondin completely or else they'd both fall to their deaths.

And so what's Jesus saying here? Well it's one thing to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and gives eternal life.

But it's another thing to believe in Jesus yourself. But the new birth, eternal life, only comes when you believe in Jesus.

[ 22 : 53 ] When you actually entrust your life to him. When you choose to jump on his back as it were. Placing your faith in him completely and trusting him wholeheartedly.

That's what it means to be a Christian. It means you're not trusting in yourself to get to heaven. To get into the kingdom of God. To get near God.

You're not trusting in your religion or the things that you do. But you're trusting fully in Jesus Christ. By believing in Jesus.

By looking to the cross. And trusting that his death there was for you and for your sin. You know you've got eternal life when you trust in Jesus.

And you know that Jesus has given it to you. You've not earned it. And you know that Jesus can't drop you. He won't drop you when you're trusting in him.

[ 23 : 55 ] So there's the necessity of the new birth. There's the source of the new birth. And then thirdly and finally there's the process of the new birth. If you look down at verse 16 to 21.

The emphasis here is unbelieving. And it's expanded upon in these verses. And so this section I think seems to be the gospel writer John.

He's commenting on the conversation Jesus has just had with Nicodemus. And in this comment we see that there's this stark contrast between those who believe and those who do not believe.

And we hear why believing in God's son Jesus is essential. And it's there in verse 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

So the coming of Jesus is grounded in God's great love for this world. For people like us. So God loves all people. And we know this is true because he gave his one and only son for us.

[ 25 : 02 ] But what's remarkable about God's love for the world is not that the world is so big and there are so many people. But that the world is so bad.

Because at the beginning of John's gospel in the prologue we're reminded that this world is a dark place. We know that. We've just watched the news in this past week. This world is full of people who are in rebellion against God.

And yet it's into this world that God gave his son. Why? So that we can be saved from perishing. Because when we believe in Jesus we receive the gift of eternal life.

And without eternal life do you know what that means? It means that we are separated from God forever. For all eternity. But God has acted out of love by sending Jesus to save us from the condemnation that we deserve.

So verse 17 says, For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned.

[ 26 : 13 ] But whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son. God gave Jesus. God gave Jesus.

Not to condemn us. Don't think that God wants to condemn you and send you to hell. He gave Jesus to save us.

The fact is we all stand condemned before God. We're all natural born sinners. We're not sinners because we sin.

We sin because we're sinners. That's why we need this new birth. We're hopeless and helpless to do anything about our plight ourselves.

And yet the fantastic news is that nobody is beyond the reach of God's love. But we're being warned the danger is if we resist God's gracious gift of Jesus by refusing to believe in him.

[ 27 : 16 ] Then we remain in our condemned state. And so the way, the only way to eternal life is personally believing in Jesus.

And so we think, well, why would people refuse to believe in Jesus? Well, we're told here, verse 19 and 20, this is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but people love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. This is the real reason why people reject Jesus Christ.

They love darkness instead of light. Meaning they love their sin and they love their sinful lifestyle so much that they don't want it to be exposed to the light.

They fear their evil deeds will be brought out into the open and they can't stand that thought. In other words, the reason why so many people don't believe in Jesus is moral.

[ 28 : 21 ] It's not that they can't believe. It's that they won't believe. Because believing in Jesus means such a radical life transformation, they can't bear to give up the life that they have.

And so people don't believe in Jesus today, not because Christianity is too difficult to understand. The real reason is that Christianity demands real life change.

I reckon for many people, a bit of Christianity sounds like a good thing. So if you can just keep living the life that you enjoy, but you can bolt on a bit of Christianity to your life, so long as it helps, then that's surely a good thing.

But nothing too much. It can't be allowed to take over. It can't dictate how I should live. It can't tell me how I should conduct myself in my relationships or with my time or my behavior, my language, my money, whatever.

But we're told the verdict is light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. But Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus tells us it can't be that way.

[ 29 : 38 ] It must be another way, as we see in verse 21. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

And so as we wrap up this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, the question is, did Nicodemus come into the light?

Remember, he met Jesus by night and in darkness, but did he step out of that darkness after being confronted by Jesus?

Nicodemus actually shows up two more times in John's Gospel, so we will come back to him again. But here, and even later, we can't really say what Nicodemus did after Jesus said to him, you must be born again.

And I think that's deliberate by John. I reckon we're left hanging at the end of this conversation because we are meant to respond to Jesus' words ourselves.

[ 30 : 48 ] Because what matters for you and for me is that we have this new birth.

Has my life, has your life been transformed by believing in Jesus? It can be, and it must be.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together.