

Born of the Spirit

The Spirit of Christ

Every person listening to me right now was born once already, and you had no say in it. Nobody chooses their own birth. You didn't consent to your first heartbeat, your first breath, the family you woke up into. It happened to you before you were capable of having an opinion about it. You didn't plan it, you didn't earn it, and you certainly didn't achieve it. It happened to you.

I want you to hold onto that thought, because it's going to matter in a moment.

There's a man in John's Gospel named Nicodemus. He's a Pharisee, a member of the ruling council, a teacher of Israel. By any measure you'd use to size up a person's spiritual credentials, he's near the top of the list. Disciplined. Learned. Respected. He comes to Jesus at night, and Jesus tells him something that must have landed like a splash of cold water.

Here's how John records it, in chapter 3, verses 1 through 8.

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. 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? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again. 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.”

JOHN 3:1-8

Notice what Jesus doesn’t say. He doesn’t say Nicodemus needs to try harder. He doesn’t say he needs a better teacher or a stricter discipline or a sharper theology. All of that, Nicodemus already has in abundance. Jesus says he needs to be born again. Born from above. Born of the Spirit. And Nicodemus’s confused response, how can a man enter his mother’s womb a second time, isn’t him being slow. It’s the whole point landing correctly. He can’t do this. Nobody can do this to themselves. That’s exactly what Jesus is saying.

You didn't choose your first birth. And you cannot produce your second one either. It has to be done to you. It has to come from somewhere outside of you. Born of the Spirit.

This phrase, born of the Spirit, is doing serious work in this passage, and I don't want you to hear it as a poetic flourish. Jesus ties it directly, in the same breath, to something specific. Look again at verse 3. Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And verse 5. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

This is not a private spiritual experience that sits off to the side of Kingdom theology, something you get for yourself while the Kingdom carries on somewhere else. Being born of the Spirit is how a person enters the kingdom of God in the first place. It's the moment your citizenship changes. You were born once into a domain marked by death, and now, by the Spirit's own act, you are born a second time into the domain of the King. Kingdom entry and Spirit birth are the same event, seen from two angles.

This is not a new idea invented in the New Testament. God had promised this centuries earlier, through the prophet Ezekiel. Listen to Ezekiel chapter 36, verses 25 through 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."

EZEKIEL 36:25-27

Water for cleansing, a new heart replacing a heart of stone, God's own Spirit placed within a person so they can actually walk in obedience rather than merely try to. When Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born of water and the Spirit, he is telling a teacher of Israel that Ezekiel's promise has arrived. This is what God said He would do, and now He is doing it.

Paul describes this same reality using different vocabulary. Turn to Titus chapter 3, verse 5.

“He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

TITUS 3:5

Washing of regeneration. Renewal of the Holy Spirit. Paul isn't describing a different experience than John records. He's describing the same act from a different angle. Not because of works done by us in righteousness, Paul says. This isn't earned. This isn't produced by effort or moral performance. It is the Spirit's own decisive act, washing and renewing a person who could not wash or renew themselves. John calls it being born of the Spirit. Paul calls it the Spirit's washing and renewal. Different words, same reality.

Now, I want to be clear with you about something, because I'd rather name a boundary clearly than let you get confused later. New birth, what John and Paul are describing here, is not the exact same conversation as what we find in the book of Acts, where believers are filled with or baptized in the Holy Spirit, sometimes in connection with conversion and sometimes afterward. There is real, serious scholarly disagreement about how those Acts passages relate to conversion. We'll look at that together, a little further into this series. For now, just hold the

boundary. What we're talking about today, being born of the Spirit, born again, washed and renewed, is the Spirit's act of making a person alive in the first place. That's its own subject, and it deserves to be understood on its own terms before we complicate it.

So what does it look like when someone actually has been born of the Spirit? Not, did you pray a certain prayer at some point in your past. Paul gives us something more searching than that. Romans chapter 8, verses 9 through 11.

“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

ROMANS 8:9-11

The Spirit of God dwells in you. The Spirit is life. This is what being born of the Spirit produces, not a memory of a decision you once made, but the ongoing, present reality of the Spirit of God actually living in you, giving you life now, and one day giving life to your body too.

So here's the question I want to leave with you, and I want you to actually sit with it rather than rushing past it. Is there evidence in your life right now that you are born of the Spirit, and not merely born of your own decision? Is there a heart in you that wasn't there before? Is there movement toward obedience that isn't

manufactured willpower but something that feels like it's being worked in you? Is the Spirit of God, right now, giving evidence that he dwells in you?

You didn't choose your first birth. It happened to you, before you had any say. And your second birth is the same kind of thing. You didn't produce it. The Spirit did it, and the Spirit is the one keeping you alive on the other side of it. Born of the Spirit. Kept by the Spirit. That's the whole of it, and it was never going to be something you could do for yourself.

Group Discussion Questions

- 1 Jesus tells Nicodemus, a man with real religious credentials, that he still needs to be born again. Why do you think that was such a hard thing for someone like Nicodemus to hear?
- 2 This session connects being born of the Spirit to entering the Kingdom of God. How does that change the way you think about what happens at the new birth?
- 3 Paul describes the Spirit's work as washing and renewal in Titus 3:5, not the result of our own righteous works. Why does that distinction matter for how we talk about salvation?

Personal Reflection Questions

- 1 Is there a heart in you now that wasn't there before? Where do you see it?
- 2 Where in your life do you sense the Spirit working obedience in you rather than you manufacturing it through willpower?
- 3 What evidence would you point to, right now, that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

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