



Sermon – July 4, 2021  
Wes Wilkinson

**Verses Covered This Week**

*John 3:1 –*

*Ezekiel 36:25*

Well, amen. What a joy to be in worship this morning. I'm always grateful to Pastor Phillip for letting me have the opportunity, church family, to open up with word with you. And this morning, we do celebrate. Today is July 4<sup>th</sup>. We celebrate Independence Day. And independence day, now don't worry, let me just give you a side note. The sermon today has absolutely nothing to do with Independence Day. But we celebrate Independence Day to celebrate something that is so foundational, that is so common, that is, that is the very essence of our citizenship as members of this country. And we do that because things which are so basic like that are easily forgotten, minimized, and the special awe and reality is lost in our hustle and bustle. So we have celebrations to remember lest we forget and take for granted and not be the citizens we're supposed to be.

All the more so with Scripture. There are things that are so basic and so fundamental to who God is, to His heart for people, to you and I as people responding to Him. That in our minds, they can become so common they lose the weight they ought to have and the freshness with which they ought to hit our heart daily. So before we go to the text, I want to ask you to do something real simple. I'm going to give you just a brief moment to bow your head, close your eyes, I'm going to ask you to just simply pray and ask the Lord, "Lord, would You open my eyes to see anew? Would you open my ears to hear anew so that I would take in Your word as if for the very first time?" Do that now and then I'll pray and we'll go into the text.

Father, may we hear Your word with a childlike freshness of spirit? That we would see You, Jesus, high and lifted up and we would be in awe. And, Holy Spirit, You know where each and every one of our hearts are in this room. For the hearts that have a veil of satan over them and unbelief, may Your word shred that veil. For our hearts as children of You, if maybe our hearts have grown cold or they're confused or their hurting, Father, may we find You meeting us where we are at and may we have our eyes lifted up to behold You, exalted in all Your glory. May we walk out changed. It's in Your name we pray, Jesus. Amen.

If you've got your Bibles, I want you to turn to the gospel of John, chapter 3. And some of you are very perceptive and you now know what I mean by so common. Gospel of John, chapter 3. Turn to the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. If you go to Acts, Romans, you've gone slightly too far. And as you turn to John 3, let me give you a little bit of the context. In John chapter 2, Jesus has come to Jerusalem for Passover. He has gone up into the temple and He has cleansed the temple. He has, he has flipped over the tables, He has made the whip. If you're an old Central person, this is like the most favorite scene as a child to be in the Easter Pageant. Because everything just gets blown to shreds. It was great. But as a result of this, He also, we find out at the end of chapter 2, doing many signs and wonders. Things that are testifying to the fact that He is the Son of God. And it says at the end that many people believed. Now it specifies this belief was not a full believe, a true belief, a belief that really accepted Jesus for who He is, but there was an acknowledgement by many people. Something is different with this man. And in a culture that had not seen a prophet step on the scene and speak authoritatively in 400 years, and here comes this man doing things that not even the prophets could do. It had people's attention. And one of those people we see in chapter 3, verse 1,

<sup>1</sup>There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>And this man, this particular man, came to Jesus at 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."

So here's the setting. There's a man named Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee. Now the Pharisees are one of the largest, most influential, powerful, Jewish religious sects of the day. As a Pharisee, he would have entered into this rigorous life of biblical study and observance of both the written law and the oral law. It would have demanded rigor from the time he was young. And he's not just a Pharisee, but it says he is a ruler of the Jews. Which means he is a sitting member of the Sanhedrin. Sanhedrin would be that really, like the Jewish supreme court. That court which first tried and condemned Christ. So he has obviously had enough time, enough poise, there are enough people who follow him that he has worked his way up. This is a man of religious leadership and knowledge. Frankly, I'll just put it this way, I don't think a one of us in this room could match Nicodemus' understanding and knowledge of the Old Testament. He would have had whole books memorized. Likely, he could have gotten up and preached from the Old Testament from memory. This is who Nicodemus is. And as a Pharisee, walking in this high observance of the law for the sole purpose of seeing the kingdom of God. Because the Pharisees believe there would be an end time resurrection where they would see the Messiah and the kingdom of God and they longed for that. And he says to Jesus, Rabbi, which is in a way a complement from his eyes because Jesus is a carpenter. He's not a theologian. He's not, He's not been trained from the time He was a carpenter. He says, Rabbi, teacher, we recognize You must come from God. You must have a connection with God because of what You do. Because no one could do what You do unless God is with Him. And Jesus responds in this night time setting and He says:

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

He says, "Nicodemus, if you want to see the kingdom of God what must happen is a person, you as a person and any other person, must be born again." That word again meaning, born anew, or actually it's got a double meaning. Born anew, born for a new time, but also born from above.

And you can imagine, if you will, if we're hearing this for the first time, like Nicodemus, how shocked Nicodemus must be. Because Nicodemus hasn't had 2,000 years of church history to hear the term born again. Here's a man who spent his whole life and discipline in order to see the kingdom of God. He's buffeted himself, he's organized his works, he's got a biblical knowledge that is bar none. And then he hears, if you're going to see the kingdom of God you have to be born again. And this man who came to Jesus by night in the gospel of John where the night is both literal, it also always, the scene at night in the gospel of John is one of spiritual doubt and darkness. This man who is in deep doubt and darkness in his soul hears this term and he responds in the only way he knows how. Look at verse 4.

<sup>4</sup>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?

And before we laugh, understand the logical thought of his question. He's just been told, imagine the despair. Everything I have spent my whole life working towards is a loss because there is a requirement to see the kingdom that I have never heard and frankly as I process your words, Jesus, it's impossible. No one can reenter their mother's womb and be born again. But you've said that it is necessary. And so Jesus responds and He says:

<sup>5</sup>Truly, truly, I tell you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot, it is impossible for that one, to enter into the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup>That which is born of flesh is flesh, that which is born of Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be amazed that I say this to you, "You must be born again." <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

So if at the beginning Jesus says, there is a necessity of a new birth. It is necessary to be born again. Now He expands on the reality of the new birth. And he says, this new birth, it's not just necessary for you to be born again, but this new birth of water and spirit. Well, what is water and spirit mean? Let me tell you what it does not mean. Water and spirit in the text here, they're two Greek words, neither one have the definite article. Both are governed by the same preposition which all of you who aren't grammarians say, "Who cares?" And I would have agreed with you. But here's why that's important. Because they go together. Water and spirit go together here. It's speaking of one kind of rebirth. So this means it cannot be referring to water as in baptism. This isn't that baptism rebirths a person. No. This is not referring to a person's physical birth and then a spiritual birth. It's referring to one birth. Well, what is it? Well, here's where the background is. You can turn there or you can write it down, it does not matter. Ezekiel 36, verse 26, 25. God is speaking and this is what He promises His people in exile. He says:

<sup>25</sup>Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean, I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup>Moreover, I will give you a new heart and I will put a new spirit within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of the flesh. <sup>27</sup>I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and you will be careful to observe my ordinances.

What Jesus says when he says, unless a man is born of water and of spirit, He is referencing back to what God has already said in the Old Testament which is this. There is a new birth coming that is going to completely and totally cleanse and transform the one who is born by it. What Jesus is speaking to is not just a new birth that is necessary, but one that is necessary because it is going to clean and purify and completely transform the recipient of that birth. And you can imagine as He is saying this, and He says, that which is born of flesh is flesh and spirit is spirit. Understand the distinction. Everyone is born of flesh, but flesh does not evolve into the new birth. The new birth can only come from the Holy Spirit. And flesh does not evolve into spirit. There must be something that moves a person from having been born of flesh to being born of the spirit. Where the reality of that rebirth is they are completely cleansed and transformed. And you can picture Nicodemus has all of the sudden his mind is racing. Not only is there a despair, not only is there a discouragement, that maybe he doesn't have what he needs to see the kingdom. But all of a sudden, now he is hearing truth spoken from the Old Testament that he has spent his whole life studying and never seen. There must have been a look of shock on his face as Jesus says, "Don't be amazed at this. This isn't secret, crazy knowledge. This is right there." But what does Nicodemus say? "How can these things be? How is this actually possible?" He's startled because even in all of his knowledge, he has missed the truth. So what does Jesus say? He says, "Are you the teacher of Israel?" When Jesus says that, He's ascribing a specific title to Nicodemus. This is why we know Nicodemus isn't just a Pharisee. He's not just on the council. Nicodemus is a man of prominence in the field of religious teaching. Are you the teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things? You have all this knowledge, Jesus says, of the Old Testament but you don't grasp this?

<sup>11</sup>Truly, truly. Jesus says, "I say, we speak of what we know. We testify of what we have seen and you do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things. <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Here's what Jesus says. He says, I'm telling you, Nicodemus, it's a question of authority. What I am telling you I know because I have seen it. I am testifying to you of the truth. You may be the teacher of Israel, but I am the author of life. You may have misinterpreted what my word said, but I'm the one who said it and wrote it. It's a question of authority and your issue, Nicodemus is not that you can't grasp it intellectually, but you choose not to accept it as a choice of your own will. And if you won't believe me in something so basic and simple, how can you believe me in anything further? Jesus has said, there's a necessity of being born again. He said, the reality of being born again is it's a total transformation. But he's now going to answer the question how can a person be born again. And listen to what he says, verse 14:

<sup>14</sup>As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

Now he is referencing again is another prominent Old Testament story out of Numbers 21 where the people of Israel murmur and complain against God. They accuse God of trying to trick them, of taking them out in the wilderness to destroy them. And God sends snakes to bite them and attack them. And when they're bitten, what they are to do is, God commands Moses to create this bronze serpent, stick it on a pole in the middle of the camp. And anytime an Israelite is bit, if they will make a choice to turn and look up to that snake on a pole, God will heal them. Not

because the snake is magical, but because God is teaching His people to look to Him in faith. To take Him at His word of promise, I will heal you if you look here. And to believe and to respond. And here he says, it's not that the snake is lifted up, but the Son of Man must be lifted up. And that verb, lifted up, in the gospel of John it appears four times. And every time what it is referencing is it is referencing Jesus being lifted up onto the cross. Where His body was broken, where His blood would be poured out, the very thing we celebrate today in the Lord's Supper, He is referencing this brutal moment where Jesus goes on the cross as a sacrifice. Because in order to bring about this new birth that totally cleanses and transforms, the reason we need cleansing and transformation must be dealt with and that is our sin. Why is the lifting up of Jesus on the cross so brutal? Because our sin is that heinous and weighty. Because our sin is that eternally separating from God. And that sin which we cannot outwork or outrun, we can't out-know, we can't evolve from, Jesus went onto that cross and it says He became our sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. It says that He Himself bore our punishment on the tree. That which we deserve, the eternal wrath of God, He became our sin and bore on the cross that by His stripes, by those wounds, by that broken body and shed blood, we might be healed. You see, the Son being lifted up, He purchases for man, any man and woman who chooses to respond the opportunity to be reborn of the Holy Spirit, cleansed and made new. And how does Jesus being lifted up, and He's not just been lifted up on the cross, He's been lifted up out of the grave, conquering death and He's been lifted up, exalted at the right hand of God and He is returning and we will see Him exalted in all His glory if we have been reborn. But how does that happen? Well, he says right here. That whoever, now understand, that whoever would have been a shock to Nicodemus. Not so that any of the Jews that believe. That word, whoever, whoever, that any man, woman, boy or girl, of any nation, tongue or tribe, that believes, that literally that faiths, that rests in faith in Jesus Christ, that is, who recognizes, who senses, who for what we know from the rest of Scripture, responds to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, that their sin is that weighty, that their sin is that great. That the Son of Man was lifted up. That that sin separates them from their maker, their Creator, their Father, their Sustainer, but that sin can be removed and they can be reconciled to God by resting the full and entirety and the weight of their being upon the person and work of Jesus Christ and not anything upon themselves or anyone else. That's what faith is. It's completely and totally resting the full weight of your being on that which is true though unseen. He says to the one who faith's in Christ will have eternal life, abundant life, life as it was intended. Why? Why? I must be reborn. I need to be totally transformed. I can be by faith in Jesus who was lifted up. But why was Jesus lifted up and why do we even know this truth? Why? For God so loved the world that He gave, He sacrificed, His only begotten Son. And really, that word begotten has nothing to do with birth. That word actually in the Greek means, His one and only, unique, one of a kind, no other like Him, Son. That whoever faiths in Jesus shall not perish, but have eternal life. Why is this message of rebirth, why is the Son lifted up? Why can we be reborn with hope and faith in Christ? Because God so loved the world. God so loved a world by nature children of wrath, hostile and against Him. But God so loved that He sent His Son not because we loved Him, but because He loved us and He sent His Son to be the sacrifice to appease His wrath that any man, woman, boy or girl, who believes could be reborn and reconciled to God and both see and enter His kingdom for eternity.

See, this is foundational to everything we know about who God is, about how He relates to the world, about how we are to respond to who He is and what He's done. But it's easily dismissed and lost. It's easily looked over. And when it's looked over, we miss the very simple truths that

are here which is this. One, this passage makes it abundantly clear, it leaves no question, Jesus leaves no doubt that in order to be in a relationship with God, in order to be a part of the kingdom of God, to use real simple language, in order to be a Christian, you must be born again. There is no other way to be made right with God apart from the new birth. There is no debate. No one gets to inherit the kingdom or no one becomes a Christian because of family ancestry. Because of what culture they're a part of. Because of how hard they've worked at it. Because of how much knowledge they have. Because enough time has passed that they just finally woke up one day and were like, "I'm a Christian." They must be born again. And church family, hear me carefully, I am not saying that in your life if you don't remember the exact date and the exact time and the exact words you prayed, that is not what I mean. But I will say this, you don't forget when you're born. There must be a moment in all of our lives where prior to that moment we were enslaved to sin, we were children of darkness, we were trapped. And in a moment and in response to faith to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, we cried out for Christ to save and in that moment and instant He rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us to His kingdom of light. There must be that moment. But unfortunately we live in a time and throughout church history where there have been various teachings, "Well, I'm a Christian because I was born to a Christian family." False. That's every other religion. If you're born to a Muslim family; you're a Muslim. If you're born to a Hindu family; you're a Hindu. A Buddhist family; you're a Buddhist. But not so for a Christian. My parent's faith did not save me. Cannot save me. I have to respond to Christ. I am born outside of a relationship with Christ. Lost. Understand, Nicodemus' heritage, he has everything you could muster that would make you acceptable to God and none of that heritage rebirths him. Works do not save you. There's not a one of us here who likely would outclass the righteous works of Nicodemus as a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. How much you go to church does not save you. When did you become a Christian? Well, I've always gone to church. Doesn't matter if you've always gone to church. That does not rebirth you. When did you become a Christian? Well, I was baptized as an infant or I was baptized here. Baptism does not save you. Well, when did you become a Christian? Well, I do all these great things. Listen, Jesus says in Matthew 7 that on that day of judgment, there will be people who stand before Him and say, "Lord, Lord, we prophesied in Your name. We healed in Your name. We served in Your name. We did righteous deeds and ministry in Your name." And He will say, "Depart from me you workers of lawlessness. I do not know you." Works do not save and bring a new birth. Ministry does not save. Time does not save. We've talked with students. When did you come to faith in Christ? Well, I just have always known Christ. Impossible. You can't have always known Christ. You can maybe have known about Christ, if you grew up in a Christian family. But you cannot have always been in a relationship with Christ because everyone is born separated from God and everyone is in need of new birth; birth from above through faith in the Son who was lifted up on the cross and lifted out of the grave in resurrection and glorified at the right hand of God. Bible knowledge doesn't save you. This passage, I mean, do you see Nicodemus? His knowledge, you can have all the knowledge in the world of Scripture and still miss Jesus and the new birth. Only the new birth that is from above that is of the Holy Spirit of God, that cleanses and transforms. Titus 3:5 says, where we are cleansed by the washing of regeneration, totally remade in the renewing of the Holy Spirit. Only that birth brings us into a relationship with God. And that happens as you sense the conviction of the Holy Spirit that you stand before Jesus and your sin and you hear the sweet words of this Gospel that for God so loved the world, which means you. He gave His one and only Son for you, who was lifted up, battered and bloody on a cross, who bore hell on your behalf, who took what was rightfully yours that you and I deserve, and He died, and He rose, and He's living

exalted at the right hand of God. And He offers freely and generously this new birth to any that in response to that conviction would look up and reach out and say, "Jesus, who You are and what You've done is enough. Save me. I need to be restored to You."

So undoubtedly, perhaps some of you are in this room today and you know that the night of sin, of darkness, of sorrow, of brokenness has eclipsed your soul and you know you do not know Jesus. Then can I just beseech you, hear the love of God. Hear the words of Christ and know that there is a new birth for you that you can know and have today. That you can have an independence and a freedom from sin that will never cease. That you can be restored to a relationship with God and a citizenship in heaven that will never end. That you can be brought home and be a child of the Father who made you. You can respond today. Maybe there you are in your seat. You sense the Spirit working. Let me just encourage you. You can respond right now. You can close your eyes. I don't care if you close your eyes and bow your head right now. It's not going to mess with me at all. You respond to the Holy Spirit in faith, in who He is. But let me also say this. Perhaps, don't miss in this text, Nicodemus by all rights should have understood this new birth and he didn't. Church family, it is possible to have spent a portion or all of your life thinking that because of who your family is, thinking that because of your church attendance, thinking because of the levels of leadership and service inside of religion you have been given that therefore you are saved. And hear the words of Scripture. If you have not responded personally to Christ, then you have not been reborn and you are out of alignment with God. And today, there may be this stirring of, "Wow! I have never. I have looked to my baptism, to my family, to this. I have never just looked to Christ to save me." And the Spirit is convicting you. And maybe you're hearing this subtle voice whisper, how embarrassing if you, husband and father, come down and say, "I need Christ." How embarrassing if you, son or Life Group leader, deacon, prayer room, if you recognize, "I have never truly been born again," how embarrassing if you come down. Can I just share with you a story that is true? This isn't a fake pastor story. There is a pastor. A very prominent Southern Baptist pastor 40 years ago. At this time, he was president of the Southern Baptist Convention, at the beginning days of the battle over the Bible. And a revival came through his church. And in that revival, his son and new daughter in law, who were in their early 20's, teaching youth Sunday school, came forward and said, both of them, independent of the other, not actually knowing that the other had gone down, said, "I really do not believe I have truly met Christ in a new birth." And they were saved. And someone asked, actually multiple people asked this pastor basically, "Is that embarrassing? You're Mr. Southern Baptist, president of the convention, and your son was teaching Sunday School. Is that embarrassing?" And this pastor's response. "Goodness, no. I have no greater desire than that my children know the Lord and are sure of it. My son found exactly what he was looking for and I rejoice in that." That pastor is my grandfather and that couple is my aunt and uncle. There is no guilt, shame, or embarrassment whenever you respond to the call of Christ to be born again. So in a moment when we have the invitation, that invitation is not my invitation to you. That's just simply a time to respond to whatever the Holy Spirit is doing now. Please respond. Flood the altar. Come, let us talk to you. Let us walk through with you what it looks like to know Christ, to know Him truly, to be reborn.

Church family, there's one other small thing in this text that impacts every one of us who has been born again. It's not hidden, but it's easily skipped. Would you look at verse 8. It says:



<sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it wishes, you hear the sound of it, you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So is everyone born of the Spirit.

It's a wordplay in Greek. Because the word for wind and the word for spirit are the same. Context determines where it is and context in the New Testament is always the spirit, not wind. But there's a wordplay and the wordplay is this. You can't control the wind. You don't fully understand the wind, but you see the effects of the wind. And the Holy Spirit, God Almighty, you don't understand Him fully, you can't control Him, but you see His effects. And the effects of the Holy Spirit are to birth anew, to birth from above a new people. And it says that just like the spirit is not understood and not controlled, that the people born of the Spirit will not be understood by this world and they are never to be controlled by it. And church family, understand, if you have responded, if you have been born anew, can I just ask that perhaps you would go back and remember. For God so love you that He gave His Son and may that strike you afresh to look at your life and go, "Where in my life and the decisions that I make are they easily understood by the world because there's no difference. And where in my life, how I respond to situations, what I choose to value, how I walk amongst people, where is that controlled by the narratives of the world rather than the King of heaven. There's a million ways we can apply that application. But maybe just simple to say this. This message to believe in the Son who was lifted up is so precious to the heart of God that Jesus was willing to meet a man in the middle of the night to tell him one on one. And if we're going to remember and not lose sight of the fact that for God so loved you. We have to remember that that verse says, for God so loved the world. And all around us are Nicodemuses who are struggling, who are seeking, who have various levels of knowledge, who are trapped in the night of their soul and they will not believe in that which they have not heard. And they will not hear unless it is preached and they will not preach it unless they are sent. How blessed are the feet of those who bring the good news. And brothers and sisters, listen, Jesus said, "Go." We've been sent. Church family, may we not quickly gloss over the simple truth of, for God so loved the world He gave His one and only unique Son, lifted up on a cross that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish but would have life eternal. May we, brothers and sisters, be a John 3 people who are gripped and never leave and never think that there's something to move beyond the simple reality that the Lord so loved that He sent His Son. And if we have been reborn, we have a responsibility to be transformed completely and yielded to that. To proclaim to a world there is hope, there is light for the darkness, there is home and it's in Christ.

Pray with me.

Father, You know every heart in this room. God, there are some of us who are Your children who our heart as grown cold. We are, unfortunately, too easily understood and controlled by the world rather than Holy Spirit. Father, may we remember this simple truth. If you loved us like this as sinners, Your love for us is still just as fervent and we just respond. May our hearts be worn, may our hearts be broken. If we need to come down and repent, if we need to come down, Lord, may we respond to You correctly. May we have a heart that recognizes, God, You are a God of mission. And this was Your mission to send Your Son out of love. And if we've been born again, then Your mission is now our mission and we go on Your mission with You and for You. And, Father, You know the hearts in this room that do now know You. The child, the teenager, college student, young adult, middle-aged adult, the senior adult, the married adult, the single adult. You know. God, may the enemies veil not deceive them. May the thought of



embarrassment or shame not capture them. God, there's no desire to manipulate anyone down. Father, my prayer's simple. That, Holy Spirit, as You are actually moving that we would respond to You personally. Jesus, it's in Your name I pray.