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 Title: Why I need a Savior – Nicodemus – “You must be born-again”  
 Text: John 3:1-21  
 Theme: Everyone, everywhere, at all times, must be born-again.

#### Introduction:

Under the cloak of nightfall, a leading Rabbi in Israel approaches Jesus with a hesitant heart, but one that is sympathetic if not yet converted. The conversation continues John’s storyline of redemption on a personal level.

“It is particularly John, following the teaching of Jesus himself, however, who is in a unique sense the ‘theologian of the birth from above.’” (Robert L. Reymond, A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith, p. 719)

Consider John’s usage of the word “born.”

There is a birth whose origin or source is rooted firmly in God and incapable of being produced by man (John 1:13). It is distinct from physical or flesh birth (John 3:6). It is a birth produced by the Holy Spirit (John 3:8). There is a sense of urgency to this new birth (John 3:3, 5). This new birth produces righteousness, familial love, cosmic victory, and a sinlessness in its children (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:4, 18). Those who are born anew carry within them parental DNA (1 John 3:9). New birth is the result of believing Jesus is the Christ (1 John 5:1). It is our desire within this study to address those issues as they come out of the historic dialogue between a Pharisee named Nicodemus and the Lord Jesus Christ in John 3.

Systematic theology calls this action of new birth “regeneration.”

#### **Its Eternal Value:**

Like John 1, John 3 forms a non-negotiable truth. There is no question more pressing, there is no declarative more penetrating than what sits before us in John 3:7, “You must be born again.” The question confronting all of us today is rather simple, “Have you been born from above?” In the absence of this one act, weighs the destiny of the individual.

#### **The Present Danger:**

In our quest for human autonomy whereby our independence is openly declared and defiantly expressed, we refuse to submit to the rule of God in the area of our eternal destiny. To be born from above excludes all human achievement. It says, “You can’t only Jesus can.” Your inability is laid bare. You come to the idea of re-birth broken and bankrupt of human ingenuity and initiative. You take your polished self in its entire creaturely splendor and lay it before the crushing weight of Christ and His cross.

Before we get to “in Christ” we must confront “in Adam.” We like feeling good about ourselves and making others feel good, but before you can be born again you must taste and feel the consuming mass of your own wickedness. You and I will never come to

the Great Physician until we realize our condition is terminal. Listen to the words of the song Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me by Augustus Toplady.

Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

Text: Augustus M. Toplady, 1740-1778

Music: Thomas Hastings, 1784-1872

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
let me hide myself in thee;  
let the water and the blood,  
from thy wounded side which flowed,  
be of sin the double cure;  
save from wrath and make me pure.

Not the labors of my hands  
can fulfill thy law's commands;  
could my zeal no respite know,  
could my tears forever flow,  
all for sin could not atone;  
thou must save, and thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
simply to the cross I cling;  
naked, come to thee for dress;  
helpless, look to thee for grace;  
foul, I to the fountain fly;  
wash me, Savior, or I die.

While I draw this fleeting breath,  
when mine eyes shall close in death,  
when I soar to worlds unknown,  
see thee on thy judgment throne,  
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
let me hide myself in thee.

We come to Jesus barren and in that state we continue. We began bankrupt and continue in the same. We must never forget that works and grace are mutually exclusive. **Works can neither merit nor maintain what is granted by grace.** Much of Christian living and preaching is grace free. It is devoid of its message. Let me pause just a moment to stress this idea of continued bankruptcy in quoting a statement by Jerry Bridges:

My observation of Christendom is that most of us tend to base our personal relationship with God on our performance instead of on His grace. If we've performed well - whatever 'well' is in our opinion - then we expect God to bless us (p. 11).

Moreover, we are always challenging ourselves and one another to 'try harder.' We seem to believe success in the Christian life (however we define success) is basically up to us: our commitment, our discipline, and our zeal, with some help from God along the way (p. 12).

However, I think most of us actually declared temporary bankruptcy. Having trusted in Christ alone for our salvation, we have subtly and unconsciously reverted to a works relationship with God in our Christian lives (p. 17). We are all legalistic by nature; that is, we innately think so much performance by us earns so much blessing from God (p. 17). (Jerry Bridges, Transforming Grace, c1991)

Unless and until you come to Jesus with nothing to offer, you will not receive from Him all He is for you.

### **Questions:**

1. Does everyone need to be born-again?
2. Have you been born-again?
3. What does it mean to be born again?

**To Know:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to know the pressing need to be born again.

**To Choose:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose Christ in order to be born again.

**To Feel:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy and rest of being born again.

### **How will they best hear?**

"Childbirth illustrates several truths about regeneration.

First, just as an unborn baby is totally helpless in the birthing process, so no one can contribute to his or her spiritual birth (Eph. 2:9; Titus 3:5).

Second, just as a baby is a brand-new, unique creation of God breathing new air, so a new believer is a 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17).

Third, just as a newborn infant is part of a family, so a new believer becomes part of God's family, the church." (Earl D. Radmacher, "Salvation: A Necessary Work of God," in Understanding Christian Theology, Swindoll and Zuck, General Editors, 865).

"The best-known and most extensive exposition of the concept of the new birth is found in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3." (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 943).

There are eleven simple statements from John 3 that assist us in understanding the idea of being born again.

## I. Its Humility (vv. 1, 2 “A man of the Pharisees”)

“Not many mighty and noble are called; yet some are, and here was one. *Not many* of the rulers, or of the Pharisees; yet. The grace of Christ is able to subdue the greatest opposition.” <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc5.John.iv.html>

“Underlying the doctrine of regeneration is an assumption regarding human nature. Human nature is in need of transformation. The human being is spiritually dead and therefore needs new birth or spiritual birth. The biblical pictures of unregenerate man as blind, deaf and dead indicate a lack of spiritual sensitivity. And not only are unbelievers unable to perceive spiritual truths; they are incapable of doing anything to alter their condition of blindness and their natural tendency toward sin. When one reads the description of the sinful human in Romans 3:9-20, it is apparent that some radical change or metamorphosis is needed, rather than a mere modification or adjustment in the person. To some, this appears a very pessimistic view of human nature, and indeed it is, in terms of natural potential; but our view does not limit its expectations to natural possibilities” (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 942).

He made this address *by night*, which may be considered,

[1.] As an act of *prudence* and *discretion*.

[2.] As an act of *zeal* and *forwardness*.

[3.] As an act of *fear* and *cowardice*. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc5.John.iv.html>

Regardless as to your status or station, pedigree or power, you must come to Jesus and humbly acknowledge who He is.

## II. Its Urgency (vv. 1- 3 – Jesus immediately changes the subject)

### A. A mild rebuke

Jesus appears to ignore the statement of Nicodemus and pushes the issue. Delay is unacceptable. Now is the time, today is that moment.

### B. A direct reply

In verse three, the urgency of regeneration is seen in our Lord=s response to Nicodemus= statement. The reason as to why Nicodemus came is never stated. Regardless as to why he came, our Lord cuts to the quick. Four thoughts bring this out in verses three and five (3:3, 5).

- The doubling of the word “truly, truly” emphasizes the importance of what is about to be said.
- The usage of the conjunctive participle **ean me**, it means Aexcept or unless.@
- The usage of the word **dunamai**. **Dunamai** speaks of one=s ability to accomplish a stated task. Without the Abirth from above@ no one has the ability to see the kingdom of God.
- The usage of the word **dei** in verse seven. **Dei** shows the absolute necessity of new birth. Without which no one will ever see the kingdom of God.

The initial question, >why must I be born again= dovetails with one=s understanding of depravity and to what extent it has affected mankind. Who needs to be “born again,” is answered by our underlying condition. Because everyone, everywhere, at all times is dead by sin, in the darkness of sin, and distant from God because of sin, everyone needs to be born again. Death necessitates new birth, not reconciliation. Separation necessitates reconciliation.

### III. Its Necessity (v. 3 “unless one is born again”)

As it relates to the eternal destiny of a living soul, the matter is settled irreversibly. Unless or except a person is born from above he will not have the power or ability to enter the kingdom of God.

Listen to the Geneva Bible (1560):

“The beginning of Christianity consists in this, that we know ourselves not only to be corrupt in part, but to be wholly dead in sin: so that our nature has need to be created anew, with regard to its qualities, which can be done by no other power, but by the divine and heavenly, by which we were first created.”

<http://www.ccel.org/g/geneva/notes/John/3.html>

“He had in mind a supernatural work transforming the life of the individual. This work, which is indispensable if one is to enter the kingdom of God, is not something that can be achieved by human effort or planning.” (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 943).

“The necessity of the new birth is an indictment of all of us, for it points out that none of us is good enough in his or her natural state; we all need to undergo metamorphosis if we are to please God.” (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 944).

### IV. Its Impossibility (vv. 5-8, 10-21 [v. 3 “you cannot see”])

Here, the Greek language uses a double negative in order to communicate the absolute impossibility of the action happening independent of God.

### V. Its Perplexity (vv. 3-9 “How can a man be born-again”)

Being born from above is in direct contrast to being born from below. Your physical birth is “below birth.” Your spiritual rebirth is “above birth.” What you are physically cannot produce what you need spiritually.

“The secret mystery of our regeneration which cannot be comprehended by man's capacity, is perceived by faith, and that in Christ only, because he is both God on earth, and man in heaven, that is to say, man in such a way that he is God also, and therefore almighty: and God in such a way that he is man also, and therefore his power is made manifest to us.” <http://www.ccel.org/g/geneva/notes/John/3.html>

New birth is fully and totally a work of God done to sinners.

“While Jesus declares that the birth ‘from above’ is absolutely necessary for faith (John 3:7), he never preaches the ‘birth from above’ in the imperative mood as if his auditor could in his own power produce it.” (Robert L. Reymond, A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith, p. 719)

The word *regeneration* is only found twice in the New Testament (Matthew 19:28; Titus 3:5). Of the two occurrences only Titus 3:5 concerns our current study. Our English word “regeneration” comes from Latin and means, “a being born again.”

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

It is a compound word meaning to begin again (**paliggenesiva**).<sup>ⓐ</sup> It is used of the rebirth of a redeemed person (BAGD).<sup>ⓐ</sup> There are a handful of other words that attribute to our idea of *regeneration*.

The John passages use two words to communicate the idea of rebirth. His usage means, “to be born from above” (**gennaō anothen** [John 3:3, 7]). Another is used by Peter in 1 Peter 1:3 and 23 (**anagennaō**).

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3).

“for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet 1:23).

Again the idea is that of being born anew or again. To be regenerated is to be born anew. Apparently in our Lord’s dialogue with Nicodemus, He assumed he should have known what He was talking about (John 3:10).

As we will see later, sinners must receive (1:12) or believe (3:16) God, but the work of new birth rests wholly in God.

## VI. Its Personality (vv. 5, 6 “born of the Spirit”)

In verse four Nicodemus identifies what it is not. It is not physical rebirth. This effectively eliminates the idea of reincarnation. Our Lord goes on to explain what being born again means.

New birth is contrasted with old birth, just as the flesh is set against the Spirit. In new birth the sinner is given the “seed” of God (1 John 3:9). When you are born from above you are born by the Holy Spirit. In the act of salvation you are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. This righteousness is called foreign or alien because such righteousness is not produced by sinner. It only comes from God.

“Although salvation was planned and originated by the Father, and actually accomplished by the Son, it is the Holy Spirit who applies it to the life of the believer; thus bringing to fulfillment the divine intention for humans.” (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 945).

Regeneration results in the imparting of a new nature. What is the new nature? The nature is new in its intellect, will, and emotion. It thinks differently, chooses differently, and feels differently about self, sin, God and life. This is divinely imparted not man made. The saved individual has two natures, but is one person.

Both the author and agent of regeneration are sourced in God. John 1:12 and 13 clearly show how those born-again are “born of God.” First John 2:28 and 29 speak of believer being born of Him.

John 3:6 and 3:8 clearly show how it is the Holy Spirit who produces in the individual spiritual life or rebirth. Verse eight shows how new birth is divine in origin. It is not something man made.

#### VII. Its Destiny (vv. 3, 5 “the kingdom of God” “eternal life” vv. 15, 16)

There is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. Currently, if you have not been born again, you are perishing and you are in the kingdom of darkness. Those who are born from above are given access into the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). What are the results of regeneration? Consider what we were prior to the cross as depicted in Ephesians 2:11-22.

AGentiles, uncircumcised, separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ@ (Eph. 2:11-13).

Glory, Hallelujah; those are just some of the results of regeneration.

#### VIII. Its Mystery (vv. 5-8 “but do not know where it comes from and where it is going”)

How conversion happens is a mystery sourced in God and thus unfathomable. What we do know is this, “you must be born from above.” This event is something new, it is something different than what is normal.

#### IX. Its Simplicity (vv. 14-18 [“whoever believes”])

In order to be born again you must believe. If you believe the record about Jesus Christ, then you will be born from above. He uses the illustration of the brass serpent. Those who were “saved” looked at the brass serpent. Those who perished refused to obey God and look at the brass serpent. As simplistic as this appears, people still refuse to believe God.

## X. Its Immediacy

“It appears that the new birth is itself instantaneous. There is nothing in the descriptions of the new birth to suggest that it is a process rather than a single action. It is nowhere characterized as incomplete, Scripture speaks of believers as ‘born again’ or ‘having been born again’ rather than as ‘being born again’ (John 1:12-13; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:1, 5-6; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:3, 23; 1 John 2:29; 5:1, 4 – the relevant Greek verbs in these references are either in the aorist tense, which points to punctiliar rather than durative action, or in the perfect tense, which points to a state of completion). While it may not be possible to determine the precise time of the new birth, and there may be a whole series of antecedents, it appears that the new birth itself is completed in an instant.” (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 944).

## XI. Its Sufficiency (v. 16 “For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son”)

What God has done is enough. There is nothing more that we can do or needs to be done. It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

“Nothing else but the free love of the Father is the beginning of our salvation, and Christ is he in whom our righteousness and salvation dwells: and faith is the instrument or means by which we apprehend it, and everlasting life is that which is set before us to apprehend.” <http://www.ccel.org/g/geneva/notes/John/3.html>

APPLICATION: (What’s the NEXT STEP?)

None of the arguments we bring for delay can stop what is essential. You and I must be born-again if we are to see the kingdom of heaven.

The narrative of John 3 provides several solid thoughts concerning regeneration. Yet with all that is said, we can still be like Nicodemus in the study of the text, “How can this be?” (John 3:9). We know what the text is saying, but do we understand the significance of what is said? May God open our eyes to the truth of His word.