

Biblical Anthropology

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion"
(Genesis 1:26 ESV)*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in
place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?
(Psalm 8:3-4 ESV)*

Regeneration (You Must Be Born Again)

May 26th, 2024

John 3:1-8

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to John 3:1-8; that's on page 887 in your church Bibles. This morning we are going to talk about what it means to be BORN AGAIN. Of course we need to be born again, because, as we talked about last week, fallen human beings are DEAD in their trespasses and sins. We are deceived. We are blind. We are disconnected. We are disoriented. We are depraved.

That's not good – and that's not something we can recover from, so we don't need REHAB, as fallen people, we need REGENERATION. Toward that end, hopefully you have your Bible open by now to The Gospel of John chapter 3; I'll be reading verses 1 to 8. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 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?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 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 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

When I was a little boy it was much more common for evangelicals to speak about being “born again” than it seems to be today. In fact when I was 9 years old and attending the Boys J.I.M. Club of America I was assigned a short sermon to memorize called “Life Begins”.

Dr. Harry M. Lintz, a great evangelist and friend of the JIM Club, said this about life: “Nature forms us; schools inform us; sin deforms us; only Jesus Christ transforms us!”

The climax of that little sermon is all about being born again. I remember preaching this sermon all over the tri-state area in my childhood. I remember looking out over tiny little Methodist and Baptist congregations in New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania and saying:

“Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again.” A famous evangelist spoke over a hundred times in a short period on the theme, “Ye Must Be Born Again.” He was asked why. He answered, “Because ye must be born again!” When that happens in your life, you will hate the things you once loved and love the things you once hated. Christ can:

take a crook and make him straight. Take a thief and make him honest. Take a drunk and make him sober. Take a gangster and make him a law-abiding citizen. Take an atheist and make him a God-fearing believer in Christ.

This same Christ can save us boys from any and all these pit-falls as we let him be our partner in these days of temptations and great decisions.”¹

Those words have been rattling around in my soul for more than 40 years, so marvel not that I say unto thee this morning: *Ye must be born again!* I believe that and I count it a privilege to

¹ *Life Begins*, Sermon A-3 Boys Jim Club of America.

return to this old time Gospel passage and to expound upon this foundational Christian doctrine. I want to try and ask and answer 3 questions this morning:

1. What does it mean to be born again?
2. How can we be born again?
3. How should this doctrine affect us as born again Christians?

Firstly then:

What Does It Mean To Be Born Again?

First of all:

1. It means to have your eyes opened

Human beings on the other side of the fall are BLIND – metaphorically speaking. Just like we are DEAD – metaphorically speaking. Modern day evangelicals are sometimes uncomfortable talking about metaphorical meanings in the Bible because they think that the goal is to take the Bible as literalistically as possible. But that’s not the goal. The goal is to treat the Bible as authoritatively as possible and that means respecting the language and forms used in the Bible to communicate truth and so if the Bible uses a metaphor than we should respect that and think about that – and the metaphor of blindness is all over the pages of Holy Scripture. And that’s why Jesus was often found in the Gospels healing people from actual blindness – because the physical miracle was meant to functioning as a SIGN of the deeper spiritual problem within. In John 9 for example, Jesus healed a man born blind and it instigated a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees about spiritual blindness.

Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” 40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?” 41 Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains. (John 9:39-41 ESV)

So according to Jesus, fallen human beings are BLIND. They cannot see the truth about God or themselves. They do not understand how lost they are and even if they could understand they couldn't do anything about it. They are insensitive to spiritual reality. This is a CORE Christian truth. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says:

“the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged.” (1 Corinthians 2:14 ASV)

2 Corinthians 4:4 says:

“In their case the god of this world has **blinded** the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from **seeing** the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:4 ESV)

So fallen human beings CANNOT SEE or DISCERN spiritual realities. That part of their nature has become hopelessly diminished and depraved. And so in order to SEE the truth they are going to need some kind of supernatural blessing. When Simon Peter took his first leap forward in faith and understanding Jesus said to him:

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17 ESV)

So first and foremost, to be born again, means to have your eyes opened. It takes a touch from heaven, but once your eyes are open it's like being born again. You can SEE, you can DISCERN and you are in a position now to make intelligent decisions and choices. And that leads us to the second aspect of being born again. To be born again means to be made willing.

2. It means to be made willing

According to the Bible, not only are we blind to spiritual realities, we are also, in our fallen state, hostile toward the things of God. Romans 8:7 says:

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.” (Romans 8:7 ESV)

Romans 1:18-20 says:

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” (Romans 1:18-20 ESV)

The natural man, Paul says, on the other side of the fall does not WANT TO SEE the truth about God. He knows that if he deals honestly with what creation is plainly declaring then he will have to admit that there is a God and that God is good and moral and ordered and that all things that exist exist because he made them and are therefore subject to him – but that TRUTH is a giant killjoy. That truth means that we can’t just do whatever we want. That truth means that we are subject – so the natural man REFUSES to see that. He SUPPRESSES that truth in unrighteousness - and that’s bad news, obviously, for human beings. If we are blind and we don’t want to see the truth, then we’ve got a double problem – for which we require a double cure. We need to have our eyes opened and we need to have our hearts made willing – and that’s exactly what the Bible prophesies in Psalm 110. In that Messianic Psalm, the Spirit says, speaking prophetically TO the Messiah:

“Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments” (Psalm 110:3 ESV)

Or as many of us learned it in the old KJV:

“Thy people *shall be* **willing** in the day of thy power” (Psalm 110:3 KJV)

So the miracle of regeneration works on the EYE as well as the WILL. It helps us to SEE THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD and to WANT to be reconciled to him.

And then thirdly, and obviously related to that, to be born again means to be made wise.

3. It means to be made wise

I'm using the word WISE here in the biblical, theological sense, as in:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1:7 ESV)

Wisdom in the Bible means to walk down the centre of the road. It means to respect the boundaries. It means to welcome correction. It means to LIVE and THRIVE within the space that God has given and ordained for us.

I've told you the story before about the GIANT DOG that lived in the yard next to ours when I was growing up. I have stitches on my face as a result of getting too close to that dog. He was insane. And the owners knew he was insane. There was something wrong with that dog. The neighbours put up a fence around their property, but that dog would leap up and climb over the fence. I'd never seen a dog do that before. He would climb that fence like he was a bear, not a dog. So the neighbours took it up a notch and they electrified the whole fence. But the dog ATE the electrical box – that's a true story. That dog could not be contained. One of my earliest childhood memories is of my dad, bare chested, in a pair of jean shorts, chasing that crazy dog around our property with a hammer. There was something wrong with that dog – just like there is something very wrong with us as fallen human beings.

We don't want to live within the boundaries that have been assigned to us. We think that all the good stuff is OUT THERE. I could never figure out why that dog was so eager to escape his yard – and so eager to climb into ours. What did he think we had going over here? What was he trying to get away from? Everything good was BACK THERE FOR HIM – just like everything good for us is found INSIDE THE LINES that God has drawn.

But we've gone feral. We are bound and determined to chew our way through the fence – and something has to be done to make us WANT to live within the space we have been assigned and that's what happens when we are born again. This was prophesied in Ezekiel 36:27 where God says:

“I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:27 ESV)

When we are born again, a voice enters in our inner person. A calming voice. A guiding voice. A healing voice. It's a voice that says: "Here is the path my child, walk ye in it". It's a voice that makes HOME feel like HOME again. The Apostle Paul talks a lot about "the obedience of faith". He says that his whole ministry is about that. In Romans 1:5 he says:

"we have received grace and apostleship to bring about **the obedience of faith** for the sake of his name among all the nations" (Romans 1:5 ESV)

To be born again means to WANT to obey God. It's a whole new disposition. It's a peace within and a desire for the things that have been given to us – thanks be to God!

And then fourthly, to be born again means to be made loving.

4. It means to be made loving

Remember, in our fallen state we are hostile toward God and hostile toward each other. The first thing Adam and Eve did when they fell from God was hide from each other. Then they turned on each other and started blaming each other. That's Genesis 3 and then in Genesis 4 it gets even worse. In Genesis 4 we have the story of Cain and Abel – one brother hating and killing the other.

That's who we are on the other side of the fall.

Jealousy, envy, suspicion, anger, hatred and murder are NATIVE to the soil of fallen human hearts. You don't have to TEACH people to hate each other. It comes natural. But love is a gift from God. It is part of the GIFT of regeneration. The Apostle Paul in Romans 5:5 says:

"God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:5 ESV)

Again, this is Christianity 101. This is old time Gospel, right here. 1 John 3:11-14 says:

“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. 12 We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. (1 John 3:11-12 ESV)

The natural man is CAIN, the Bible says. He envies, he hates, he kills. The born again man or woman is characterized by love. Jesus said:

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35 ESV)

The natural man hates. Born again people love! That’s a complete change, brought about by the introduction of an ALIEN RIGHTEOUSNESS. Something from OUTSIDE OF US has to be injected into us in order to bring about all this change, and that’s what it means to be born again.

My wife and I like to watch police dramas on our date nights together and it seems that in many of those shows first responders are always jabbing some kind of hypodermic needle directly into a person’s heart when they DIE from drug overdose or drowning. There is always a little bit of anxiety as we wait to see whether the serum will work, but then sure enough, the person’s eyes will flash open, there will be a big cough and a fresh intake of breath and the dead person will have come back to life – well so it is with the miracle of regeneration. Something from God has to be injected into our hearts in order for us to come back to life.

Nothing else will do. You can’t bring dead people back to life with counselling, encouragement or scolding – because dead people can’t hear and neither can they respond to any of that.

Imagine if the first responder tried to do that. Imagine if he or she said to the dead person: “This is your own fault, you know. You shouldn’t be doing drugs or you shouldn’t be swimming alone; that’s really terribly foolish.” What good would that do?

No good at all.

Dead people don’t need that. Dead people need something powerful injected directly into their hearts. Just like Jesus said:

Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 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 3:7-8 ESV)

Regeneration is the cure for what is dead and diseased in fallen human nature. It is medicine from God. If you were to look on the vile you would see that it has 4 primary ingredients: illumination, willingness, wisdom and love. You need that medicine injected directly into the human heart in order to bring dead people back to life.

So how does that happen?

That’s the second question I want to consider this morning: how can a person be born again?

How Can We Be Born Again?

We’ll move a little quicker here as we consider these last two questions. It is appropriate to say more about the nature of being born again because the Bible has more to say there, whereas, when it comes to the HOW OF IT, there is a little bit of mystery. Remember, Jesus said:

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” (John 3:8 ESV)

So we can’t look at a person and say: “There it is! I just saw it happen! That person was just born again!”

We can’t say that – but we can say a few things. We can say for example that it happens THROUGH the hearing of God’s Word. The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1:23 writes to a group of Christians saying:

“you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23 ESV)

So that's the context. That's the place where good things happen. Regeneration is not going to happen apart from the hearing of God's Word – that's why Paul in Romans 10:14 says:

“how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Romans 10:14 ESV)

We've got to have the Word of God washing over people – that's the start of the process. But then, something of the Spirit has to happen because the natural man receiveth NOT the things of God. The heart of the natural man is HARD. So the seed of the Word falls on it and bounces off or is stolen away by the crows. But if the Spirit supernaturally SOFTENS the heart and OPENS the heart to receive and respond – when that happens, a person is BORN AGAIN!

Dr. Douglas Kelly defines the miracle of regeneration this way; he says:

“God works in us so that we can respond to his call.”

That's it exactly! God WORKS IN US – through his Spirit – so that we can HEAR, UNDERSTAND AND WILL to RESPOND to his call.

That's it!

So if you are listening to this message as an unsaved person and you are thinking: “That sounds great! I want that – what should I do?”; then the answer is you should put yourself under the hearing of God's Word – you should go to church, read your Bible, listen to Bible preaching and teaching – and you should pray and say: “Dear Lord, please open my eyes and soften my heart to receive the implanted and saving Word.”

That's how you position yourself for the gift of regeneration.

That's you saying: “I believe Lord, help my unbelief.”

You pray that, and then you wait for the miracle.

“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 3:8 ESV)

Now, my last question is this: how should this doctrine affect us as born again people?

How Should This Doctrine Affect Us?

I imagine that many of us in this room have already been born again. Many of us can probably remember the moment, or the season, when we found ourselves under the sound of the Word of God and we were helped by the Holy Spirit to hear, understand and believe. Maybe that was when you were a kid, maybe that was when you were a grown up – maybe that was last Sunday, I don't know, but if you are a Christian then you can tell a version of that story, so what are we supposed to do with this doctrine? How should we respond to what we've heard this morning?

Let me suggest three ways it should affect us, and I'll go through them really quick.

1. It should change how we think (and talk) about our salvation

If we really understand what it means to be born again – if we understand that we were DEAD in our trespasses and sins, that we were lost and without hope in the world, that we were blind and hostile towards the things of God and that we would never have seen and embraced God's work in Christ without the PRIOR working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts – once we understand that, it should change the way we talk about our salvation. When we give our testimonies it shouldn't sound as if we were smarter than anyone else or more moral or more loving and good – it shouldn't sound like that at all. When we remember who we were and what God did – then the only hero in our story should be God. As the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:31:

“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:31 ESV)

If you are the hero in your own salvation story then you are almost certainly not saved – or at least you haven't thought very clearly or biblically about your own salvation.

So thinking about this doctrine should change how we speak about our salvation and it should also:

2. It should affect how we relate to the neighbours

When we remember that we didn't REASON our way to salvation nor were we SHAMED or CONTROLLED to the foot of the cross, then it ought to call into question how effective those tools will be on others. I always find it interesting when Christians want to use the LAW to MAKE their fellow citizens behave more like Jesus. In essence they want to build a higher fence and then electrify that fence to force their neighbours to live in the place God assigned them – but that didn't work for you, so why should you think it would work for others?

You were like that crazy dog next door. You were climbing over the fence and chewing through the electrical box – nothing could have forced you to live the life God called you to, so why are you trying to use that tactic on others?

No.

Understanding the doctrine of regeneration should cause us to look at the law as GOOD but not GOOD ENOUGH, like we talked about last week. The only hope for our friends and neighbours is REGENERATION. They need to be born again, so we do everything in our power to put them under the sound of the Word of God and we pray for the Spirit of God to do a work of regeneration in their hearts, that's when the real change will happen.

And thirdly, and finally, understanding this doctrine should inspire in us thanksgiving and praise.

3. It should inspire in us thanksgiving and praise

The default attitude of the born again person ought to be gratitude and humility. Had God not had pity on us we would still be dead in our trespasses and sins. We would still be wandering away in the dark. We would still be blind, deaf and disoriented.

We would be lost.

But in his mercy, in his grace, in his kindness, God came looking for us.

He put us under the sound of his Word and he did something hidden and mysterious in our hearts such that we could see, understand and believe. He opened our eyes and seeing we found JESUS – **thanks be to God.**

Let's pray together.