

A Cleansing Birth

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 February 2019

Preacher: Tom Holland

[0 : 00] The Doctrine of Regeneration We've been studying, of course, the doctrine of regeneration, referred to in the Word of God as new birth or being born again.

! And we've read many times in John 3.3, the Lord said to Nicodemus that unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And so far we've covered the parts of the new birth where we've discovered that it is a necessary birth.

It has to happen for you to be saved. It is a supernatural birth. God does it. It is a scriptural birth. He does it the way He has outlined in the Word of God.

It is an instantaneous birth. It is not drug out over months or years. It happens in a moment in time. And it is a comprehensive birth. It's all-encompassing.

[1 : 10] It does the work that it's intended to do. Well, we're going to go from there this evening, we're going to examine the fact that the new birth is a cleansing birth.

It is a cleansing birth. This touches on the truth that we studied some months ago on total depravity. You have to be cleansed of that.

We have to be made clean of our natural state. And by nature we're sinners. By nature we're fallen. And we have to be cleansed from our depravity, from our fallenness, in order to dwell in the kingdom of God.

In our fallenness we were infected with sin. It touched every part of us, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

In our lostness there is no part of man that is not impacted by sin and by the sin nature. Even when we do good things, and unbelievers do good things, sin is lurking nearby.

[2 : 21] Sin is lurking nearby. We need desperately to be cleansed of this, and only regeneration from God can bring about such a cleansing.

Paul understood the need for all parts of the man to be cleansed from sin. And he captures this truth in one of my favorite chapters in the Bible, the third chapter to the book of Romans. And it is there that Paul uses various body parts to describe the depravity of man. He says there that our throat is an open grave.

Our tongue is used to deceive. Our lips pour forth poison as from a snake. Our tongue is full of cursings and bitterness.

Our feet swiftly shed blood. Before our eyes there is no fear of God. And thus we see five major body parts involved in the depravity of man.

[3 : 37] And the tongue is so depraved it is mentioned twice here. We talked at length last time about the comprehensive nature of the new birth. In that study we saw the fact that God must perform divine open heart surgery and place within the man a new heart of flesh replacing the old heart of stone.

To accomplish this God must cleanse the soul of that man. And we've looked several times at the great systematic theologian Dr. Louis Burkhoff.

He said the governing disposition of the soul must be made holy in regeneration. So let's listen to our focus passage tonight in John chapter 3 and in verse 5.

Truly, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Very interesting passage of Scripture. We're going to focus tonight on those words, water and the Spirit. It is absolutely necessary in the new birth to be born of water and the Spirit.

[5 : 08] If we are not, we cannot enter into the kingdom of God. It has to happen. I've actually been kind of developing this lesson and considering this lesson for several weeks now.

And I've come to discover there are various interpretations concerning this passage. Just what is water and the Spirit?

We note at the outset that a number of verses in John chapter 5 mention the fact that we must be born again. We've looked at verse 3 often.

That is also found in verse 6, 7, and 8. But those passages talk about being born again, but there is no mention of water.

But in verse 5, we have the inclusion of water as a necessary ingredient of the new birth. Now let's consider some possibilities as to what the water in verse 5 is.

[6:17] Some have taken this to be a reference to the water of physical birth. It is a medical fact that fluid is released from the mother just prior to the birth of a baby.

This is referred to as water breaking. It is the rupture of the sack. And that signals that the baby is almost ready to be born.

It's quite a signal. And the baby is coming. But this fact is never mentioned in the Bible or any other place in ancient literature.

Even in ancient writings, there is little reference in the Greek world to the issuing of water at the outset of the birth process.

I believe strongly that this can be dismissed as to the explanation of verse 5. I guess the other reason is when you were born again, your water didn't break.

[7:28] There is a second possibility, and that is that the water described here has to do with water baptism. And when we speak of baptism, we must differentiate between the Jewish rite of baptism and Christian baptism.

The Jewish rite goes all the way back to the book of Leviticus. And it is in that great book that we read of many washings, like on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of the nation.

And it was a 24-hour ceremony, and he did many washings and changing of clothes and all that. In the book of Leviticus, God instructs Jews to cleanse themselves from ritual impurities, contracted through such things as touching a corpse or a leper.

Washing primarily fulfilled the legal requirements of ritual purity so that the Jew could sacrifice at the temple.

Later, as God-fearers or righteous Gentiles who expressed their desire to convert to Judaism, the priests broadened the rite's meaning and along with circumcision performed baptism as a sign of the covenant given to Abraham.

[9:01] So if a Gentile came and wanted to become a Jew, a proselyte to Judaism, he had to go through circumcision and he had to be baptized.

John the Baptist baptized individuals as a sign of repentance and their connection to the covenant promises to Abraham.

John the Baptist, he's often referred to as the last Old Testament prophet. He was in the New Testament, but he was an Old Testament type prophet. It's important that baptism, but it is not Christian baptism as we have experienced it.

This type of baptism did not come close to what Jesus is saying in John 3, 5, the Jewish ceremony. And the other type of baptism already mentioned is closer to home, but even then there are different interpretations depending on one's denominational affiliation.

Many Christians view baptism either as the means of salvation and entry into the church or as a sign of Christ's redemptive work in the converted.

[10:14] In both cases, the new believer is considered wholly regenerated and baptism seals this radical change.

My wife was baptized as a Lutheran as a baby. They sort of clung to the Catholic tradition in that respect and then later went through immersion.

Again, I think we can reject this as to what Jesus is referring to. First of all, Nicodemus would have had no understanding of Christian baptism.

It didn't even exist yet. It wasn't even introduced into Christianity at that time. We also know that water can't wash away sin.

If it could, we wouldn't be in here. We'd be up there walking through the baptismal all night long, you know. But it can't wash away sin.

[11 : 13] That only happens through the work of Christ and the Spirit and the work of regeneration. Many people who get baptized, whether as an adult or a child, very often only get wet.

When I got baptized the first time I was eight years old and all that happened to me is I got wet. I was later baptized at 30 and it had a whole lot more significance to me.

So, I believe strongly that this type of baptism is not in focus here. There's a fourth possibility. It is very popular among believers.

Many hold to this. And it has to do with the fact that they believe the water spoken of here is a reference to the Word of God. There are some verses that indicate this, including one in John chapter 15.

Already you are clean because of the Word that I have spoken to you. Paul writes about it in his letter to the church at Ephesus. Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word.

[12 : 28] And there are a good many other passages. And there are a good many theologians who hold to the washing of water as a reference to the Word of God.

We might be safe even to adopt that position. One theologian who held to this was the late Dr. James Montgomery Boyce.

Great man of God. Mentor to Dr. MacArthur. Mentor and co-pastor with Dr. Sproul and his generation. He's a great guy.

Died in 2000. We would actually be in tall cotton if we believed the way this great man of God believed. But I don't. And I would not want to debate him publicly.

So let me just quickly add that. I think there's another possible interpretation. And I personally believe this is the correct one. Many good Bible experts hold that this water is a reference to the cleansing of the Holy Spirit in the work of regeneration.

[13 : 40] In John chapter 3, there are two representations of the Holy Spirit. Here in verse 5, we have water. When we get to verse 8, we will have wind.

I believe the Lord uses these two metaphors to describe the new birth. It is water and it is wind. He speaks of the cleansing that water is able to do.

He also speaks of the power of the wind. And both of these elements are present in the new birth.

Jesus asked Nicodemus in John 3.10 why he couldn't understand these things.

I mean, he's the great teacher of Israel. And as a teacher, he should have understood them from his knowledge of the Bible. And remember, the Bible that Nicodemus had available to him was the Old Testament scrolls.

He didn't have the King James or the NIV or NASB or ESV or any of the others. Only the Old Testament. They were the only scriptures that had been written to this point.

[14 : 55] Nicodemus should have known that water pictures the cleansing of the Holy Spirit. One passage that Nicodemus had available to him was found in Ezekiel chapter 36.

We spent a little time in Ezekiel last week as we studied the comprehensive nature of the new birth. Listen to this verse from Ezekiel 36.25.

I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from your idols. I will cleanse you.

Obviously, God is speaking there. In the Old Testament, water was often associated with spiritual purification.

And we saw last week that portion of Ezekiel speaking of the new birth. It is very clear that this is God's work. He begins with those two words. I will.

[15 : 55] And when God does this, we are clean indeed. When the Lord does it. He doeth all things well. Because this is true, we should not get hung up on that word sprinkle.

We obviously believe in immersion. Believe it's biblical. But it is God doing the work. And whether He chooses to sprinkle or immerse, it will be done completely and successfully.

In fact, this verse is not talking about water baptism. It has nothing to do with that. It is speaking of divine purification.

We see here divine cleansing. This is certainty. This is certainty. There is certainty here because God is the one doing this.

This is a cleansing that is spiritual. We are cleansed from moral rot. We're cleansed from depravity. We are cleansed at the very heart of depravity, which is idolatry.

[17:02] Idolatry. We're cleansed from that. And idolatry, just to remind you, is anything that replaces God as the center of our life and our being. That's idol worship.

So what is God saying here in Ezekiel 36.25? He says we are cleansed from sin that separates us from Him.

This cleansing comes to us from the inward work of the Spirit of God. So when we apply this to the passage in John 3.5, water becomes the symbol or the picture of the Holy Spirit.

Later, Jesus will use wind as the picture and symbol of the Holy Spirit. Let me read one more time John 3.5. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

I discovered there are some very good Greek scholars that over the centuries have argued this verse in the original language could actually say, unless one is born of water, even the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

[18:19] That's a very interesting interpretation. When we read that way, the concept of water and Spirit are used interchangeably. We see that, right?

For me, in my journey in making a decision, what I believed, I think there is a definitive passage recorded for us by the Apostle Paul, obviously writing by inspiration of the Spirit of God.

I think it settles the issue. It is found in the little book of Titus. And we read this in the third chapter of that great, great book.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us. Not because of works done by us in righteousness, aren't you glad?

But according to His own mercy, now listen to this, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

[19:39] That's Titus 3, 4-7. Our focus is on those words, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

I believe that captures precisely what the Lord was telling Nicodemus back in John chapter 3. This is the work of the new birth.

This is the work of God the Holy Spirit. It is the life of God making the governing disposition of our soul newly converted holy.

We know that we're born again. And when that happens, we start out as babies. Paul said, don't try to eat meat. You'll choke. That's not a literal interpretation.

He said, you need milk. You're a baby. Babies need milk. But there is change that eventually culminates in our sanctification.

[20:43] Now we're going to study that great subject later, but the process begins at the new birth and culminates in glory when we see Jesus as He is.

But the divine act itself encompasses a washing of regeneration. I believe that is what Jesus says to us in His Word unless one is born of water and the Spirit.

This doesn't have anything to do with water baptism. I don't believe it has to do with the Word of God necessarily, which had not even been completed at this time.

I believe it is an analogy of the Holy Spirit as He cleanses us and washes us to make us clean so God can put a new heart and a new life into our soul.

How many times have we come crying to our mothers when we were young because we'd scraped a knee or an elbow?

[21:49] The first thing she did was to clean out the wound and then apply medicine and gauze. It was a lot better than going to your dad. He just said, oh, you're alright. You'll see that you're on your way.

This washing spoken of in John and Titus is a divine cleaning out of a wounded heart and more than wounded, dead heart.

Dead in trespasses and sins. Listen to the word of Isaiah. By the way, that book is often referred to as the fifth gospel.

Isaiah 118. I think you probably have it memorized. Come now. Let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

Though they are red like crimson, they shall be like wool. I always love the imagery in that verse. I mean, you've got something that's scarlet and it's red like crimson.

[22:54] And Jesus, only the Lord can make it white as snow. That's amazing. Absolutely amazing. And I've always been very fond of that passage.

It is in that passage that we see the cleansing power of God as He exercises grace toward sinful creatures.

And that's what it's all about. That's all He has to work with. Sinful creatures. God does not put a new heart into a dirty soul.

He puts a new heart in a soul that has been washed and sanitized. Not sinless, but washed.

He can then take that life and make something beautiful of it. I think often of John Newton who as a result of his divine cleansing went from a traitor in African slaves to the writer of the great hymn Amazing Grace.

[24 : 04] What a journey. Study him sometime. What a journey. You know, it's interesting too. He ended his life in a church, big church, mopping floors.

He never got over the fact he was a slave trader. And he mopped floors. That's what he did. That was quite a journey of the washing of regeneration.

I dare say that all of us are quite familiar with Ephesians 2.8 and 9. Many of us have it memorized.

For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing.

It is the gift of God not a result of work so that no one may boast. Two fantastic verses of Scripture. We read that passage.

We memorize even that passage. Unfortunately, we often ignore the verse that follows which is connected to it. Because verse 10 says, For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus Why did he create us in Christ Jesus?

[25 : 14] For good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. It's a fantastic passage. We are God's workmanship.

Chew on that this week. We are the workmanship of God. We have been created or we could say recreated in Christ Jesus.

That is the new birth of regeneration. creation. And the word workmanship there is really interesting. Very interesting. From it we get the word masterpiece.

The Greek word for workmanship is poema and you can hear in English some English words in there. You can hear the word poem and you can hear the word poetry.

Poema means something made and in context something made by God himself. Something made by God. So what is a poem? It is a literary masterpiece.

[26 : 23] It's a masterpiece. Especially if you like to read Robert Frost like I do. We speak of the great artist of history that created paintings as the masters and they were called the masters and their works were known as masterpieces.

When I was in the Louvre in Paris, France, I was drawn to the masterpieces by men like Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt. By the way, does anybody know Rembrandt's first name?

Rembrandt. Rembrandt. Rembrandt. Yeah. His full name was Rembrandt Harmanzun von Rij. That is not Delaware. That's Dutch.

He was a Dutch artist. And there is beauty in these works of art. There is infinitely more beauty in the Christ of regeneration.

The beauty is the image of Christ being restored in us. He is our hope of glory and it is a settled hope. We are being made more and more or more accurately recreated into the image of Christ.

[27 : 37] The process that begins all this is regeneration. New birth. Being born again. Born from above. Old things disappear. New things fill the void.

We have read many times the passage in 2 Corinthians. therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away and behold the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5.17 fantastic fantastic verse of scripture. These old things have passed away but I can assure you they do have a way of rearing their ugly heads from time to time.

They try to come back to life and haunt us. That is the war within. We have a war within us that we have talked about. That is the spiritual battle we fight from within.

We are fighting the world, the devil and the flesh and I would submit especially the flesh. Especially the flesh. But the spirit of God says through Paul that new things have come.

[28 : 50] Because we are a new creature or a new creation. At rebirth or regeneration we have a new life that begins to emerge from us.

And it is a lifelong process. unlike Wesley you are never going to arrive to perfectionism in this life. It is not going to happen.

And even Wesley near his deathbed said I never made it. I couldn't achieve it. Well John why did you make other guys try to achieve it if you couldn't achieve it?
It is a lifelong process but it is in process if we have been born again. If it is not happening we need to go back and examine ourselves.

Again that is an instruction from Paul. We are to be growing through sanctification in knowledge and in grace that is found only in Christ.

[29 : 50] And that work all began at the new birth. There is change because we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus.

Fabulous passage of scripture. Let me talk about another artist. Michelangelo. Anybody know his first name? Michelangelo. I love this.

His full name was Michelangelo de Lodovico Bonarotti Simone. Now if that sounds Spanish it's because I don't speak Italian but they are both Romance languages. When the great artist made his famous sculpture of David and I was shocked to learn it's in Florence Italy.

I saw it at the Louvre but found out it was on loan. But it's housed in Florence City. They ask him how could you do this? How could you make a statue of David?

He had I can't remember now it was like 19 feet tall foot tall block of granite. Huge.

[30 : 55] Dozens and dozens of tons. tons. And they asked the great artist how did you do this? How were you able to carve David out of that block of marble weighing tons?

And he said all I did is I just looked at it and I removed every piece of marble that didn't look like David and there he was inside. He said he was hiding in there. Great, great response.

He just chiseled it away and there was David. God is the great sculptor isn't he? More so than Michelangelo. God is the great sculptor chiseling away at our life knocking off pieces that are not holy not washed by regeneration.

And he's making a masterpiece fitting it for heaven. we're being fit for heaven and one day we're going to receive a new body and it's going to be fit for eternal life.

These things aren't. These are not. He's removing everything in our life that does not look like and act like Jesus Christ because we are being recreated at his image.

[32 : 19] He's bringing out the beauty of Christ and his children. Isn't that amazing? Don't forget that.

That's who you are in Christ. Don't forget that. This is the product of the new birth. See the question is are you a new creature in Christ?

And I've been asking myself that throughout this whole study. are you a new creature in Christ? Have all things passed away?

And I think we'd be safe to even say and are still passing away. He's knocking off pieces, chiseling. I apologize for the briefness of this message.

You've only been here 33 minutes. Let me give to each of you perhaps the best advice you will ever receive as a product of the new birth and now a child of the king.

[33 : 23] Now this advice presupposes that everyone in here is born again and are a new creation in Christ. And this isn't original with me, but I've been mulling this over in my head all week, all weekend.

The old man is dead. Make sense? You're a new creature, right? The old man is dead. Bury him. Whatever it takes, bury him. And when something comes your way, that's not of God, that's sinful, that could be sinful if you play it out, remember, that old man's buried.

Bury him. The old man's dead. The only place good for him is to be buried. So that's my counsel to you for tonight. Let's close with a word of prayer.

Father, thank you for the day, for your grace and mercy, for the peace that we have with the Lord Jesus Christ, who has made us and is making us into new creatures in Christ, regenerated by the Spirit of God, by the washing of regeneration, even the Spirit.

[34 : 50] And Lord, may we take that old man with his depravity and his sinfulness and may we put him where he belongs, and that's in a grave. Just bury him.

And let the new man reign until Jesus comes. We pray in his name. Amen. .