

# The Mystery of the New Birth

By David Harrell

**Bible Text:** John 3:1-10

**Preached on:** Sunday, November 24, 2013

Will you join me this morning by taking your Bibles and turning to the gospel of John. We find ourselves this morning in John 3. I've entitled my discourse to you "The Mystery of the New Birth" and this is what we will examine this morning.

Let me read the text to you beginning in verse 1 of John 3 through verse 10,

"1 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 have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.' 3 Jesus answered and said to 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? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?' 5 Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into 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 be amazed that I said to you, "You must be born again." 8 The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.' 9 Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can these things be?' 10 Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?'"

The Son of God is now revealing himself in ever widening circles in his public ministry. He began, as you recall, with the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. He has now moved from there to Jerusalem where he cleansed the temple during the Passover feast. Of course, that was a time of massive disruption. Can you imagine literally thousands of animals stampeding everywhere, going across the mount, probably down into the Kidron Valley, fleeing from their Creator? Can you imagine terrified merchants and moneychangers? Temple police? All of the worshippers fleeing from this unknown prophet? Can you imagine all of them then watching him over the next several days because that Passover festival would have taken about seven days? Can you imagine them seeing all of his miracles?

One of the spectators that observed all of these things was this man Nicodemus. His name means "victor over the people." He is introduced here in verse 1, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." The party of the Pharisees – Pharisees meaning "separated ones" – originated during the intertestamental period when many of the Jews were trying to react against the Greek Hellenists and their secularism. Probably, the Pharisees were an offshoot of the Hasidim which means "the pious ones." Which, by the way, are today the greatest antagonists of Christians probably in the world, certainly in Israel. Having just come back from Israel, I encountered many of the

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Hasidim. They are the ones that typically wear the big fur hats; they are the Pharisees of this day and they hate Christians. In fact, they say that Christians are worse than Nazis. “The Nazis killed our bodies but the Christians kill our souls.”

Although the Pharisees were correct in many of their doctrinal position, like most people, even people of today who react against secularism in ways that are not consistent with biblical truth, they became self-righteous legalists. Their religion was merely external for they insisted that everybody agree with them. Unfortunately, their externalism focused primarily on the outward conformity of the law, especially the Oral Law, the oral traditions of men which, frankly, they esteemed even more highly than the written law and we even see this as a problem in Christian churches today. The Pharisees insisted that outward conformity to what they determined to be the law of God was really the goal of life.

They were notorious for their holier than thou attitude and their ridiculous man-made rules that they adhered to, especially with respect to the observance of the Sabbath, the Sabbath laws. For example: a woman was not allowed to look in a mirror on the Sabbath because they said she might see a gray hair and be tempted to pluck it and, therefore, violate the order of no work on the Sabbath. One was allowed to swallow vinegar on the Sabbath as a remedy for a sore throat but you could not gargle because that would be work. One was only allowed to eat an egg laid on the Sabbath day as long as one intended to kill the hen. And it went on and on and on from there. Imagine living under that kind of oppression. In fact, today if you go to Israel, they have Shabbat elevators and this is for the Orthodox and if you go into them on Shabbat, you will find that the door automatically closes and it stops at every floor as it goes up and as it comes down, it stops at every floor, therefore, the Orthodox will avoid “lighting a fire” on the Sabbath because the buttons are already pushed for you. You say, “This is just insane.” Well, it’s not if you believe that salvation is by works.

Nicodemus held a very prominent position with the Jews. In fact, as we will see, he was *the* teacher of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, a scholar, a teacher of the law and he belonged to this party. Both the New Testament record as well as other documents, expose just the rank hypocrisy among the Pharisees. There was a huge chasm between what they taught and their external adherence to the law and what was going on in their heart. They were zealous for the law and regulated by ritual and yet Jesus called them “blind guides of the blind.” In Matthew 23:14, Jesus said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers.” Verse 23 of that chapter, he says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.” He went on to say, “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”

So, in this context, we can now approach this profound historical narrative where I would like to focus on three things: 1. an arrogant question; 2. a mysterious answer; finally, an inevitable response.

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Now, having witnessed Jesus over these several days, Nicodemus was experiencing, frankly, a Holy Spirit induced curiosity that caused this blind guide of the blind to seek our always accessible Savior and in verse 2 we read about it, “This man came to Jesus by 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.’” Some might ask, “Why did he come at night?” Well, the text really doesn’t say. Some will argue that, “Well, maybe he was afraid of his fellow leaders,” but I don’t believe that that is the case because it’s too early in Jesus’ ministry for there to be sufficient opposition to justify that kind of fear and that type of criticism from other Sanhedrin members. Perhaps this was just a convenient time. Don’t you know, with all of the miracles that Jesus was producing, the crowds were already beginning to gather around him.

So, we don’t know for sure, however, it’s interesting, in other passages in John’s gospel, night is used metaphorically to depict moral and spiritual darkness and to be sure, the spiritual symbolism applies here. Like so many people today, Nicodemus was groping in the darkness of his own sin, of his false religious system and yet he was too blind to even see it. But, folks, it’s not really important why he came but that he came and also that the Savior was willing to receive him.

So, the Father is now beginning to draw this man unto himself by the power of his Spirit, pointing him to the Savior, his only hope of salvation. So, here Nicodemus asks: 1. an arrogant question and I believe this is implied in what we find here in the text. He’s basically asking: who are you? Notice he calls him “Rabbi,” so he addresses him with respect of a colleague and he says “we know.” In other words, I and others that I’ve talked with, “we know that you have come from God as a teacher for no one can do these things that you do unless God is with you.” This seems respectful but bear in mind that this blind guide of the blind was in no position to assess who Jesus was and I believe this can be proven by his own words. Notice that he just acknowledges Jesus as a teacher, not even as a prophet, and certainly not as the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Is this not indicative of people down through redemptive history since Jesus came who, in their arrogance, refuse to acknowledge him as the Son of God? Oh, they will say that he is a teacher, he was a great teacher, some will say he was a great prophet, but due to the utter darkness of their spiritual condition, they do not see him as the Son of God, the Messiah, the only hope of salvation.

So, something supernatural has to happen in order for Nicodemus to see who Jesus really was. Yes, he had seen the miraculous signs that Jesus did but he would not see the Messiah. So, now we have the penetrating eye of divine omniscience in the Lord Jesus Christ peering into his heart, knowing what he is thinking, discerning his spurious faith and although Nicodemus did not ask Jesus who he was, Jesus knew that in his arrogance and in his ignorance, this was exactly what this prominent and blind religious leader was asking.

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This leads us secondly to the mysterious answer, one that completely ignored Nicodemus' reference to the miraculous signs. Instead, we see Jesus going right to the heart of the matter, right to the heart of his arrogance and unbelief. Verse 3, "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" Talk about a shock. Can you imagine what Nicodemus was thinking? What he heard Jesus say and accurately so, is that all of my fastidious law-keeping is worthless. My self-righteous system is to no avail. Hoping in myself is in vain and there is nothing I can do to save myself because he says here, "unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God, the kingdom of salvation, eternal life."

Moreover, implied by this statement, Jesus is saying that the kingdom is far more than the temporal earthly blessings that were evidenced by my miraculous signs, these signs that you were so intrigued with and that the people are so intrigued with. Folks, think about it: man will deify any leader who will give them what they want. We see that today in the idolatrous worship of our President by so many people. But let that leader place high moral and spiritual demands upon the people and they will instantly reject him. This would be the response of the nation of Israel as Jesus offered himself as their Messiah, their Messiah King, and the kingdom for which they so desperately longed. Because of the unyielding power of sin and human nature, man will always reject the one true God that asks them to receive what they insist they do not need and they do not want. That's precisely the dynamics that we have here at this time in Israel.

So Jesus knew Nicodemus was wondering who he was and what he needed to do in order to have everlasting life and before he even had a chance to really ask it, he says, "You must be born again." Now, my friends, this is not an invitation because this is not something anyone can do themselves but this is a statement of fact: you must be born again.

Now, knowing Jesus was not speaking to him in a purely literal sense that a man must literally physically be reborn, he sticks with Jesus' analogy, perhaps even in an effort to express some measure of scorn. After all, what Jesus said was very insulting to this religious leader and his system. In verse 4, "Nicodemus said to Him, '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?' Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'"

An important clarification: some believe the term "water" is a reference to baptism like John's water baptism or like Christian baptism as we understand it today. Some would use this text and some others, to support the heretical position of baptismal regeneration, that there is something mystical in the baptismal waters whereby the Spirit effects new birth. That is so easily refuted by so many passages and I certainly don't want to get off on all of that, but suffice it to say that Nicodemus would have never understood anything close to this. It would have been totally foreign for him to understand that water referred to baptism as the essential requirement for entering into the kingdom. Furthermore, that would have been the last thing you would want to require of a salvation by works ritualist

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because if that was the answer, all they would do is line everybody up, get them dunked and now they're kingdom bound. They would just obey that works, add it to their list.

So what does the water refer to? As we will see, it refers to the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the word "water" is never again used in this entire discussion of the new birth. The emphasis is solely placed upon the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit which is analogous to the wind in verse 8, the work of the Son of Man in verses 14 and 15, and believing in him in verses 15 and 16.

Also, my friends, remember that Jesus is speaking to an Old Testament scholar, one who knew how these terms were used in the sacred text. So, he knew precisely what Jesus meant by connecting water and Spirit together. Namely, he was speaking of spiritual renewal and cleansing. Also, it's important for us to bear in mind that Jesus, once again, is using New Covenant kingdom language and symbolism in keeping with what John has recorded in sequence thus far. Remember, earlier John records for us how the true bridegroom comes and he turns the water of the Old Covenant into wine symbolizing his redeeming and cleansing blood of the New Covenant.

And then you have the Passover cleansing of the leaven of sin in the temple in Jerusalem, a temple that would be made obsolete by the resurrection of Christ which would lay the foundation for the new spiritual temple that would one day replace it, namely the church. Once again, in keeping with the mission as the Messiah King to offer the kingdom to Israel, he uses New Covenant kingdom language and symbolism that this Old Testament scholar would understand. And immediately, this brilliant scholar knew that Jesus was referring to Ezekiel 36:24-27. There we read, "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. 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. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."

Once again, dear friends, please remember: Jesus is presenting himself as the Son of God. He is the Messiah of Israel who is offering himself as their King. He is willing to establish his kingdom upon the earth but there are spiritual elements of salvation that come only through the blessing of regeneration, the new birth and this must come first and it must come from him. As we just read in Ezekiel 36, we find in that whole chapter there is a beautiful tapestry of the spiritual as well as physical blessings of the prophetic kingdom. We're still awaiting for the physical blessings in the Messianic reign but as we just read in verse 24, he speaks of the regathering of Israel back into their land. He speaks of the divine cleansing from sin that is needed in verse 25; the supernatural bestowal of a new heart in verse 26; the gift of the Holy Spirit to come and dwell within that new heart in verse 27. And if we were to take time to continue looking at what is spoken of there in that great passage, we will see in verses 29 and 30 the promise of a great increase in the agricultural yield of the land and an utter cessation of famines during the Messianic reign.

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We will see in verse 31 how there will be a loathing of former sins proving genuine repentance. We will see in verses 34 and 35 that the wasteland will be reclaimed and the ruined cities will be rebuilt. We see in verse 36 that the nations will be made aware that the Lord, the one true God, the God of Israel, is responsible for all of these things. And in verses 37 and 38 we will read of a great increase in Israel's population to once again fill their once desolated cities.

So, beloved, think of these things whenever you come to the word of God because the central theme of all prophecy from beginning to end is that the restoration of man's lost dominion and his reconciliation to a holy God must come through the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the one being presented here. But none of this can ever happen apart from a supernatural cleansing, a supernatural renewal, thus Jesus says "you must be born again." This would have been the context Nicodemus would have understood and because of this, Jesus later rebuked him. You see, the new heart in Ezekiel's prophecy is the result of the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit and as we will see in verse 10, Nicodemus, you should have known this.

Notice Jesus goes on to say in verse 6, "'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.'" You see, only flesh can beget flesh and only the Spirit can affect a spiritual transformation in a person's nature. This is what is necessary in order for a man to enter the kingdom of God so God must do something that man cannot do. God must do something to make us acceptable to a holy God and prepare us for heaven. This literally turned Nicodemus' world upside down. This was contrary to everything that he believed and everything that he lived.

In verse 7, Jesus knowing all of this says, "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" Do not marvel, Nicodemus, this should be obvious to you. Not only because it's in Scripture and you are a teacher of the word, but surely you can look around at this self-evident truth. Just look around at the unrestrained wickedness in the people, even in your own life, that adhere to this salvation by works system. You see, as we look at Scripture, we learn that the natural man, the unsaved man, is devoid of spiritual life. He is under the curse of God; he is dead in his trespasses and sins. He is a spiritual corpse that must be raised from death to life and unless God does something, he will remain under that curse for eternity.

Beloved, let me pause for a moment. This is true of our children that do not know Christ; this is true of our husband, our wife that does not know Christ; any of our family members; all of our friends. They must be born again. That is the greatest need of our children. That is the greatest need of every person that has not placed their faith in Christ. My friend, I would submit to you, I don't care how religious you are, you are wholly dependent upon the sovereign grace of God for salvation. Your most esteemed righteousness is nothing more than filthy rags compared to the righteousness that you need that can only come from the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nicodemus just didn't get it.

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Jesus illustrates the process of how this happens in a most remarkable way. Notice in verse 8, he says, “The wind blows where it wishes.” The analogy is this: like the Spirit of God, the wind is sovereign in all of its actions. It cannot be predicted, it cannot be summoned, it cannot be stopped. It is irresistible. It is inscrutable. Jesus went on to say, “and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going.” In other words, its origin, its direction, its destiny, are all secret to men, so too the Spirit. Then Jesus closes by saying, “so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Think about it: we can only see the effects of the wind, right? So, too, we can only see the effects of the Spirit of God in his sovereign work of regeneration.

When a person is truly born again, he becomes a new creation in Christ, a new creature. The old things pass away, the new things come. We begin to love the things that we once hated. Our desires, our habits, our private and public conduct all change. If this were not so, a man would be miserable in heaven assuming he would even be able to get in. Think about that for a moment: a person that is not born again would be as miserable in heaven as an atheist would be here in this worship service. There would be nothing in heaven that he would enjoy. Perhaps this is you. Let me put it to you very clearly, as practically as I know how: if you come to a church service and you just endure the teaching of the word of God rather than feed upon it, you’re not born of the Spirit. If singing the great hymns of praise to God is not an overflow, an expression of the doxologies of your heart, you’re not born of the Spirit. If you have no desire to be alone with God in private worship, you have not been born of the Spirit. If you don’t deliberately and joyfully seek ways to serve Christ and live for the glory of God, how can you say you’ve been born of the Spirit? If you don’t love the brethren, if you don’t love other believers and long to fellowship with them, you’re not born of the Spirit. Your religion is a sham.

My friend, if all of these things are irksome to you, why on earth do you think you would enjoy these things that will occur routinely in heaven? You will be out of place, assuming you could get in. Dear friend, if you don’t celebrate the grace of God, if you don’t rejoice in the gospel and love to tell others about Christ, if you don’t love Christ and long to see him face-to-face, if you do not have the inner witness of the Holy Spirit of God that causes you to experience the exhilaration of knowing that God loves you, if you don’t loathe your sin and find yourself weary of this world, longing to some day be removed from it and be in the presence of the lover of your soul, you have not been born of the Spirit. You see, you’ve got to have a new nature. You’ve got to have a divine nature or you will never even enter in the kingdom.

So, you ask, how can I be born again? Well, Jesus will go on to answer this. For example, in verse 15, he says, “whoever believes will in Him,” referring to the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, “have eternal life.” And as we will see, what he’s saying here is that when the convicting wind of the Holy Spirit blows upon a man and causes him to behold the crucified Christ and causes him to see that only in Christ can he have any hope of salvation, when the Spirit of God causes that to happen within a man, that man is instantly born of the Spirit.

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Oh, what a bizarre teaching this was to Nicodemus. This spiritual cadaver. He was incredulous because what he was thinking is this: if Jesus is right, then everything that I believe is wrong. Salvation cannot be earned, it can only be received as some kind of a gift. A gift from God alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And probably the hardest thing of all was for him to believe that this Jesus was the Christ.

So, we've seen the arrogant question and the mysterious answer, finally the inevitable response in verse 9, "Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can these things be?'" I have heard that response a thousand times and so have you. In other words, you have got to be kidding me. Do you expect me to buy all of that? Verse 10, "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher,'" there is the definite article, by the way, which the original language would mean that "you would be the preeminent teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?"

Apparently Nicodemus walked away from Jesus that night still groping in the darkness of his unbelief, still in need of new birth, still under the condemnation of a holy God. Here John uses Nicodemus, frankly, as a symbol of the whole Jewish nation, a people curious about Jesus but blind to the truth that he was their Messiah, blind to the truth that what must happen for a man to enter the kingdom of God is for God to do this miraculous work of regeneration.

May I offer you some good news? Evidently the irresistible wind of the Spirit accomplished its sovereign purposes in Nicodemus' heart. Later we learn that he came to faith in Yeshua as Messiah. In chapter 7 we witness his bold defense of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and in chapter 19 we learn that he even assisted Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial. You see, the same work of regeneration will occur some day even with the remnant of Israel when the Messiah returns. This is consistent with all of the New Covenant promises. Ezekiel speaks of this in chapter 39:29, he says, "I will not hide My face from them any longer, for I will have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD." Likewise, speaking of our Lord's return in Zechariah 12:10, he speaks through his prophet and says, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication," and here's why, "so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn."

Here in this amazing story, dear friends, we see so clearly the rich theology of salvation. A theology that is so distorted in our modern era. I wish to give you right now a brief, yet a very concentrated summary of the more important elements of the biblical theology concerning salvation that emerged from this text. To save time, I'm not going to give you all of the references. If you want them, see me privately and I will give them to you. My friend, begin with this: Scripture is extremely clear that unregenerate man, in other words people that do not believe in Jesus as their only hope of salvation, is spiritually dead. Scripture teaches that he is utterly incapable of discerning spiritual truth. It teaches that man is so bereft of understanding that he will never seek after the one true God on his

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own. Man is totally unable to save himself. The word of God teaches us that by reason of depravity, all that man is and all that he does is fundamentally offensive to a holy God. By reason of condemnation, man enters this life already under the sentence of divine wrath because of sin committed in Adam. The word of God teaches that by reason of alienation, man is set in rebellion against God and finally by reason of a corrupted will, the will of man is fully set in him to do evil. There is nothing about man's sinful nature that conforms to the moral character or desire of God and because of his innate corruption, he is not only alienated from God and subject to his wrath but he is utterly unable to save himself.

If man's depravity and inability isn't bad enough, he also has to deal with Satan who blinds them. The word of God says that Satan is the god of this world that blinds the minds of the unbelieving that they may not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. Consequently, man is in desperate need for God's help and unless God does something, he will never make a decision for Christ. We can't get that to happen. Yes, man has a free will, he has a free will to choose Christ but because of his sinful nature, he does not have the desire to do so. He will always not choose Christ. Beloved please hear this: the issue is man's desire not his will. His will is in bondage to his depravity.

In light of this dilemma, God must do something to regenerate those that he has chosen before the foundation of the world in order that they might make that decision for Christ. He must cause this person to be born again. We read of this in the biblical term "regeneration." Regeneration is the instantaneous supernatural impartation of spiritual life to the spiritually dead. Palingenesia in the original language. "Palen" means "again"; "genesia" means "to be born." We read of this for example in Titus 3:5 where Paul says, "He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."

What an amazing thing, amen? What an amazing thing. Don't you feel proud that you made the right decision? In reality, we know that were it not for his grace we would have never made that decision. So, what we see in the word of God is that the author of regeneration is God himself. The agent of regeneration is the Holy Spirit. The instrument of regeneration is the word of God and the proof of regeneration is joyful obedience to the Lordship of Christ. Nicodemus didn't understand these things, at least not at first.

In the imagery of being born again, new birth, second birth, however you want to put it, perfectly illustrates man's utter inability to save himself. You think about it. I would ask you: what contribution do you make to your physical birth? Absolutely nothing. The same is true with your spiritual birth. So, bottom line: salvation is accomplished from beginning to end and in all of the parts in between by God alone lest anyone should boast. Salvation originates from the plan of God, it is made possible by the grace of God and it is brought to completion by the power of God. That's what the word of God teaches. Indeed, every aspect of our salvation, from regeneration to glorification, is ultimately the work of God alone.

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Having said this, we also see in Scripture that no one is saved apart from his will. We are called upon to believe, right? To repent? And we rejoice that by his grace and according to his elective purposes, all who have been chosen to be saved will make that decision. The great mystery here, that inscrutable mystery between God's sovereign grace and man's responsibility. We know that, according to Scripture, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God convicts sinners of sin, he reveals to them the horrible consequences of it and thus drives them freely and voluntarily to fall upon Christ for salvation. I have no idea how God does that but I have no idea how he does anything else.

So, every man is in desperate need of a spiritual heart transplant, a supernatural work of God to give them eyes to see. Every man is in need of a transformation that only God can accomplish. All of us are in need of a work of grace that transforms our heart, that changes our governing disposition. My friend, what folly to claim that somehow a few drops of water on an infant's head is going to somehow perform such a miraculous transformation. What manner of lunacy is it to explain that somehow this inexplicable work of grace could be achieved by immersing someone in the waters of baptism. A ritual experience, it's by that false professor, Simon Magus, you might recall yet Peter found him to be one who remained "in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

While I'm on this, if water baptism were essential to salvation, why would Paul say in 1 Corinthians 1:14, "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius?" What sense would that make if baptism were essential for salvation? When the Philippian jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul did not say, "You need to get baptized." No, he said, "You need to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." You see, my friends, water baptism by immersion is merely an outward expression of an inward reality, a demonstration of our union with Christ in his death and burial and resurrection.

Dear friends, do not be deceived as Nicodemus was. It is God who is the author of regeneration, not you. Not any man. And in ways beyond our ability to fathom, God works upon the desires of the human will so that a sinner will freely and voluntarily choose to come to Christ and be saved. In Romans 9:16, Paul puts it this way, "So then it," referring to salvation, "does not depend on the man who wills," in other words, man's free will, "or the man who runs," referring to human effort. But what does it depend on? "But on God who has mercy."

I don't know how much clearer it can be in terms of practical application this morning. My friend, if you're here today and you know nothing of what I've discussed with respect to loving Christ, serving him and having your faith in him, then today you need to repent and experience the miracle of the new birth and place your faith in Christ. I would plead with you to do this before it's too late.

But for those of us who know Christ, may I suggest that there will be four things, very briefly, four things that will be characteristic of your life. First of all, your life will be

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# The Mystery of the New Birth

By David Harrell

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filled with praise. Praise will be the theme of every song in times of joy or in times of sorrow. Why? Because the wind of the Spirit has blown and caused you to be born again, to be fit for the kingdom and to long for it. Think about it. Peter knowing he was about to be crucified because of his faith in Christ, wrote this to the persecuted saints in 1 Peter 1, beginning in verse 3, and here we see the praise, “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, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.” He went on to say, “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials.”

Beloved, our life will not only be filled with praise but also we will preach, if I could stick with the p’s here. You will be a preacher. Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” I find it fascinating. We never know when the sovereign winds of grace will move upon some poor sinner, do we? We never know. We never know where the word will go forth and the Spirit with it.

I remember several months back, it was about 6 o’clock in the morning, Nancy and I were just waking up on the Lord’s day and the phone rang. Naturally, when the phone rings you immediately, especially in a pastor’s home, you realize there is something bad that we are about to hear but it was quite the contrary. A man with a very English accent wanted to talk with me. He told me that about two years ago he happened to come onto our website and he had heard one of the sermons that I preached in Revelation and he began to listen and by God’s grace, through the power of the Spirit, he was miraculously saved. He said, “I was saved out of the homosexual escort service in London.” And he said, “I’ve been a faithful listener and I’m now enrolled in Bible school and I just wanted to thank you and your church for preaching the word.”

Who knows what the Lord will do? So, we preach but also we pray. We pray for the winds of conviction, the new birth, to blow upon our family and our friends, the countless thousands who are lifeless corpses, dead in their sins.

Finally, we need to be prepared. By that I mean, we need to be prepared to hoist our sails of obedience when suddenly we hear the sounds of a favorable breeze in our life. When we see that the Spirit of God is beginning to work, perhaps, in the life of another person so that we can take full advantage of the Spirit’s gracious power. We need to be alert. We need to be prepared. How tragic to watch negligent Christians miss some unsuspected movement of the Spirit. Sometimes we are like the sailor who was in desperate need of a favorable wind but he missed it because he was asleep in the night when the wind blew.

My friends, stay alert. Stay alert. Listen for the winds. Often it will be a mere whisper. Sometimes it will be a whisper like the rustling of the leaves as the Spirit of God speaks to your conscience. Listen for it and then take full advantage of his gracious operations in our life. God only knows where that breeze that might turn into a wind will carry you,

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right? God only knows. May we all celebrate the miracle of miracles, the great mystery of the new birth.

Let's pray together.

*Father, we are overwhelmed when we understand the reality that were it not for you we would never be saved. Were it not for you we would never choose you so, Lord, we celebrate that work of grace that you have wrot within our hearts by the power of your Spirit. May these truths animate us to praise, to preach, to prayer and to be prepared to hoist our sails when you blow in our life that we might be servants ready to do, ready to go, wherever you take us.*

*I pray finally, Lord, for those that know nothing of these great truths. O God, I would beg you on their behalf and for your glory that you would so overwhelm them with guilt, with misery, that they will make it their priority to confess what they know to be true, to no longer suppress the truth in unrighteousness but by the power of your regenerating Spirit, run to the cross and experience the miracle of the new birth. Lord, we ask you that. We all have the list of names so, Lord, we plead for them this day. Thank you for the joy that we have in Christ for it is in his name that we pray. Amen.*

We pray you've been edified by this presentation. You've been listening to Pastor, Bible Teacher and Author Dr. David Harrell. For more information or for other messages from Dr. Harrell, please visit the Olive Tree Christian Resources website at [otcr.org](http://otcr.org)

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