

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON 13th August 2023 am

SERIES "You must be born again"

Part 2 "The nature of the New Birth"

Scripture references from the ESV

John 3:1-7 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus^[a] 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." ³Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again^[b] he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.^[c] ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You^[d] must be born again. ⁸**The wind^[e] 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."**

In 1886, a church minister called William Haslam was converted as he preached! He had assumed that he was right with God and had eternal life because, after all, he was a vicar and had given his life to serving the church and teaching the Bible. That morning he preached from **Matthew 22:42**, asking the question that Jesus put to the religious people of his day: **What do you think about the Christ?**

As he preached, William Haslam realised that the Pharisees and scribes did not know that Christ was the Son of God or that he had come to save them. Not only that, he began to have an inner conviction that he, himself, was not right with God and did not know Jesus as his Saviour from sin. Everything changed as he continued preaching. In his own words:

I do not remember all I said, but I felt a wonderful light and joy coming into my soul, and I was beginning to see what the Pharisees did not.

Astonishingly, this man was a preacher who was preaching a Jesus he did not know, but then got saved by his own sermon as he was preaching! To continue the story: Whether it was in my words, or my manner, or my look, I know not; but all of a sudden, a local preacher, who happened to be in the congregation, stood up, and putting up his

arms, shouted out in Cornish fashion, "The parson is converted! The parson is converted! Hallelujah!" In another moment his voice was lost in the shouts and praises of three or four hundred of the congregation. Instead of rebuking this extraordinary 'brawling' as I should have done in former time, I joined in the outbreak of praise. Those who were merely religious were dismayed and left the building, but praise to God continued to flow forth.

In the passage from John (above), Jesus was having a conversation with Nicodemus, a very religious man who would have assumed that he belonged to God's people because he had been born into a Jewish family and had been circumcised. In his way of thinking, God would be pleased with him because he was keeping all the rules of Judaism.

Jesus revealed to Nicodemus that he was outside the kingdom of God because he has never experienced the New Birth (vv3,5 above)
Just being religious is not enough to make you right with God. Something more is needed.

You need to be born again

You need the Spirit of God to come and wash you clean from all your sin and take up residence in your soul.

A true Christian is a person who has the life of God in their soul. The living God has taken over their life, giving them an assurance that their sin, which excluded them from the presence of God, has been atoned for by Christ's death on the cross. That person will have a new desire to live in obedience to all that God commands.

The desire to obey will come, not out of a fear of punishment but out of a new love for God,

giving a new strength within to say no to sin and yes to Christ, a new love for brothers and sisters in Christ and a love for those not yet saved. It is possible that none of this makes sense to you, and that was just how Nicodemus responded. He was blind to the spiritual life of God's kingdom and did not understand the New Birth (v4).

There is an important lesson for believers in Jesus' response to him. He did not mock Nicodemus for not understanding or make him feel stupid. As believers, we

are prone to saying things that imply to unbelievers that the lack of understanding is their fault. We fail to understand that they cannot see because their eyes are blinded.

When we look at how Jesus responded to Nicodemus (vv5-8 above), we see that he graciously, lovingly and patiently explained how the New Birth works. He used three illustrations with which Nicodemus would have been familiar. The first one (see part 1) was the teaching in scripture concerning God's promise to cleanse people from sin and put his Spirit within them. He followed this with an illustration from the natural world (v8 above).

- In Greek and Hebrew, the word for **wind** and the word for **spirit** are the same – our English translation does not convey this.

In the Bible, the work of the Spirit is often described as a wind that blows. In Creation, God created a corpse from the dust and then he breathed his own breath on it and it became a living being. When the first believers experienced the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, they experienced it as a mighty rushing wind.

- When Jesus makes use of the wind as an illustration for the work of the Spirit, he is making use of something that perfectly describes the work of the Holy Spirit of God.

He wants us to grasp that

**the New Birth, which is essential for us to become true members of the kingdom of God,
is a work of the Spirit in our lives.**

The Holy Spirit is the agent of God that brings about our New Birth. How does that happen? We can see three aspects:

1. **The mystery of the Spirit in our New Birth - you do not know where it (the wind) comes from or where it goes (v8).** We do know which direction the wind is blowing when we feel it, but we cannot, with complete confidence, predict where it will come from or where it will go.

There is a mystery to it.

Despite all our technology, winds still come unexpectedly. The work of the Spirit is like that – we do not know when it will come or where it will go next. When William Haslam

stepped into the pulpit in 1886, no one knew that it would be the day when the Spirit blew on him and on others in the congregation and cause them to be born again. Nor could they predict where the Spirit would go next. That is part of the excitement of preaching and of coming to hear preaching – we do not know what the Spirit of God may do.

We cannot fully understand how the Spirit actually takes over a person's life to indwell them.

That is a mystery known only to God.

2. The freedom of the Spirit in our New Birth - The wind blows where it wishes (v8).

Part of the reason that we cannot understand the work of the Spirit is because of this.

It is foolish to think that we could control the wind. We may be able to harness it via wind turbines or sails on a boat, but we cannot control when it will blow, its direction or its strength. We cannot make it stop! The wind is free to blow as God wishes it to do. This points to an important and humbling truth about God.

God is the only truly free being in the universe.

In our pride, we may imagine that we are free to do as we please, but we are all influenced by things such as our culture, upbringing, internal desires and the sin in our hearts that holds us captive to Satan. God alone is free from all these influences, and this truth is often repeated in scripture. A couple of examples are:

- **Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. (Psalm 115:3)**
- **All these (God's spiritual gifts) are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12:11)**

Just as the wind blows where it wishes, so the Holy Spirit blows where he wishes. He does not blow according to our will. In words which are devastating to our human pride, we are told in **John 1:12-14**:

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

- Nicodemus thought he could take control of his eternal life by keeping the rules God had given and obeying the extra rules that his religion had invented to help do so.
- Nicodemus came to Jesus believing that he could save himself and that he could get into God's Kingdom through his own strength and ability.

If you think like that, then you need to hear Jesus' words to Nicodemus:

the New Birth is a work of the Spirit of God who blows when and where he wishes.

While this is devastating to our human pride,

**if we are willing to humble ourselves under God's hand,
then this is good news.**

- We do not need to strive to get ourselves into the kingdom. We can't do it anyway – all we can do is to come to Jesus confessing our need and seeking his mercy
- We do not need to strive to get our loved ones into the kingdom. We can't do it since God alone gives them new birth – all we can do is come to Jesus confessing our longing to see them saved and seeking his mercy for them.

When the Spirit begins to blow, we will not be able to stop him and nor will those we love.

It is impossible to resist him.

Then we will see:

- 3. The effectiveness of the Spirit in our New Birth – you hear its sound (v8).** Though we don't understand the wind, we know it exists and feel its effect. We cannot command the Holy Spirit to work how we want, but

When he does work in our lives, there will be visible evidence of his influence

We can expect to see:

- Love for God, especially as we see him in the person of Jesus Christ
- Love for God's word, resulting in both a desire and an ability to obey it
- Love for God's people, resulting in sacrificing ourselves for their sake, serving them with humility and love and seeking their eternal good
- Love for those who don't belong to the Lord. God's heart is a heart of love for sinners.

When God comes to dwell in us by his Spirit, we will love what he loves.

We may not understand how the Spirit works to convict us of sin and open our hearts to

Jesus

but a person who comes under the effects of the Holy Spirit will know it.

So we return to the testimony of Willaim Haslam:

So clear and vivid was the conviction through which I had passed, and so distinct was the light into which the Lord had brought me, that I knew and was sure that He had “brought me up out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a Rock, and put a new song in my mouth” (Psalm 40)

The question for you is:

Have you been born again?

You might be wondering how you can experience this, if it is a sovereign work of God’s Spirit that causes you to come alive to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter answers that: **You have been born again, not of perishable seed but imperishable, through the living and abiding work of God** (1 Peter 1:23)

The Holy Spirit works in our hearts through the word of God. This may happen as you hear the word preached, but you also need to keep looking at Jesus Christ as he is seen in the gospels.

- If you long to be born again, then keep putting the word of God into your heart. Do not waste time on the trivialities the world offers by way of entertainment.
- If you have been born again, then be amazed at God’s grace to you, worship him in prayer and song and every day, lift up your voice in thanks to him.

We are meant to be a praising people and that is the ultimate reason God did this:

To the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

(Ephesians 1:6)