

## God Has No Grandchildren

Romans 3:20-26 & John 3:1-18

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church  
1001 W. Colfax Ave., South Bend, Indiana 46616  
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### Romans 3:20-26 (NIV)

<sup>20</sup>Therefore no one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. <sup>21</sup>But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup>This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup>and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup>God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice, because in [God's] forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — <sup>26</sup>[God] did it to demonstrate His justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

### John 3:1-18 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

<sup>3</sup>In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." <sup>4</sup>"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup>Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup>You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup>The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

<sup>9</sup>"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. <sup>10</sup>"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup>I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but

to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

### God Has No Grandchildren

On a children's TV program, the announcer asked a little boy what he wanted to do when he grew up. "I want to be an animal trainer," said the child, loudly and clearly into the mike. "And I'll have lots of wild lions and tigers and leopards," he continued boldly. "And then I'll walk into the cage..." Here he hesitated for a second, and then added softly, "but, of course, I'll have my grandpa with me."

Grandfathers and Grandmothers are special. Ask any boy or girl. Grandsons and granddaughters are special. Ask any grandparent. Grandparents and grandchildren are special. God is special too, but God has no grandchildren. God only has children. Every generation and every individual must embrace the faith for themselves. Jesus said, "You must be born again, or you will never see the Kingdom of God."

William Gibson, in his autobiographical book, "*Mass for the Dead*," relates how after his mother's death, he yearned for the faith that had strengthened her during her remarkable life — the faith that had upheld her during her courageous dying. So he took his mother's gold-rimmed glasses, and her faded and well-worn prayer book. He opened the prayer book and sat in her favorite chair. He opened the prayer book because he wanted to hear what she had heard. He put on her glasses because he wanted to see what she had seen. He sat in her place of prayer and devotion because he wanted to feel what she had felt, to experience what had so deeply centered and empowered her. But nothing happened. It did not work.

It never does! We cannot claim another person's faith for our own. The example and contagion of commitment in other persons may inspire and nurture us, but we cannot substitute their commitment for our own. We can pattern our faith journey after someone else's, but no one can make that journey for us.

I doubt if anything Jesus ever said was more important than this, "You must be born again." That is the hinge pin of the Christian faith. Let's look at it by asking three simple questions: One, what is the new birth? Two, who needs the new birth? And three, how are we born again?

#### FIRST, WHAT IS THE NEW BIRTH?

We all need to know who we are and where we came from.

A little boy came in from school one day and asked his mother, "Where did I come from?" The startled mother drew her thoughts together and decided that it was time to face the issue squarely. So she said: "Ask your father when he comes home from work." When Dad arrived, he faced a questioning son: "I've been talking with my school friends, and I wonder if you could tell me where I came from?"

The father took a deep breath, and proceeded to tell his son about the birds and the bees. The boy's eager eyes got larger and larger. When his dad finished, the lad jumped up and said, "Thanks, Dad. That was great!" My friend, Johnny, he's just from New Jersey."

We all need to know where we came from. So in response to the question "What is the new birth?" let's begin with an obvious assertion: If you're going to grow up, you must first be born. Jesus made it clear to Nicodemus that there are two kinds of life: biological and spiritual. For either life, for the physical and the spiritual, there must be a beginning. There can be no life without birth.

So Jesus is saying that what is true of the physical is also true of the spiritual — you must be born into the spiritual life. Jesus uses the words flesh and spirit to talk about this: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit."

Now whatever else that means, it means far more than we can fathom, much less explain in one point of a sermon, it means that we are brought into a father-child relationship with God.

Humanities original relationship with God has been broken by our sin, broken beyond the possibility of human repair. The Gospel, the Good News — that's what the word Gospel means, Good News, is that God, through Jesus Christ, has made a way to repair what we have destroyed.

The universal picture of it is Adam and Eve in the Garden. Their relationship with God was intimate and unbroken. But by deliberate choice, by their sinful disobedience, they broke that relationship. One of the saddest pictures in all the Bible is that which is presented at the close of chapter 3 of the Genesis story, where God expelled them from the Garden. The Revised Standard Version says: "He drove them out."

John Steinbeck picked up that image in the title of his book, "*East of Eden*". Instead of being a resident in the Garden, in an ongoing intimate relationship with God in that paradise which God had prepared for them, the dwelling place of Adam and Eve was now "East of Eden"—outside the Garden, outside the relationship.

And that's our story too because of our sin. So the new birth is a birth from God. It is having the relationship with God — which was broken by sin, restored by grace — by the loving acceptance of God through Jesus Christ.

In his gospel, Matthew reports Jesus saying in another setting with other words, the same thing He said to Nicodemus: "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:3 KJV)."

The image is that of becoming a child in relation to our Father God. And notice, too, that Matthew ties the word converted to the image of becoming as a child. That's what the new birth means. It means being converted. The Old Testament word is "shubh," and it occurs almost 1200 times. It means

basically to turn or return. If you're going in one direction, it means to turn around. It means turning from sin and self, and turning toward God and faith. The New Testament Greek word is "metanoia."

We have an English word, metamorphosis, which comes from the Greek word meta, meaning "to change" and morphe, meaning "form." We're familiar with that process. A little caterpillar will crawl along in the dirt and the leaves and finally the great forces of nature — the warm weather, flowers and all — begin to work changes and he climbs up on a stem and gets real still and then something great begins to happen. He begins to split open his skin and out of that little caterpillar emerges a fragile, beautiful monarch butterfly.

Jesus says that's what must happen to us in order to live in the Kingdom. "That little caterpillar can't reach down and get the nectar out of the flower. He can't even get up to the flower. He's got to have wings. He's got to have a different nose. He's got to have a different form." And Jesus is saying, so it must be with you — you must meta-morph. That's what the new birth means.

#### NOW THE SECOND QUESTION. WHO NEEDS THE NEW BIRTH?

I think we can find our answer rather easily by looking at Nicodemus. Do you know who Nicodemus was? He was an aristocrat, an educated man, a scholar. We can assume that he was an older man, old in honor and old in years. In a sentence, he was cultured, refined, decent, religious. Let's look at him, in our imagination, as he goes through the night and knocks on the door where Jesus is staying. Jesus answers that knock and Nicodemus stands face-to-face with the Savior of the world.

Here is one who knows the mind and heart of God, and before Nicodemus can tell Him what the matter is, Jesus Christ has answered his question — not the question on his lips, but the question on his heart.

"What did He say to this man who had dared to come to Him through the night? He did not say to him, "Nicodemus, I know what the trouble is with you; you are not honest. Nicodemus, you must quit swearing. Nicodemus, you must quit Sabbath-breaking. You must quit breaking your marriage vows. You must stop yielding to the lusts of the flesh." No, He did not say any of that to this religious leader in Israel. Had he done so Nicodemus would have blazed upon Him, for he was guilty of none of these things. He was a clean man, a moral man, a religious man.

But what Jesus did say was this: "You must be born again." He said, I know what is the matter. You have been trying to find peace and rest and joy and salvation by doctoring the outside of life. You have found that your well is poisonous and you have tried to remedy it by painting the curb. You have found that the clock of life does not keep good time and you have spent endless hours polishing the hands. You have found the fountain of the heart sending forth a bitter stream and you have tried to remedy it by pulling up a few weeds that grew around it. Nicodemus, you must be put right at heart. That is what it takes. That is fundamental.

So Jesus declared to this pious and earnest and honest man the one supreme and universal necessity, and that is the necessity of a new birth.

So that's the bottom line, isn't it — who needs the new birth? Every one of us. You see, Jesus didn't say this to an outcast. He didn't say it to one who had wasted his substance with riotous living. He said it to one of the most cultured and refined and decent men of his day.

I need the new birth. You need the new birth. Anyone of us who has not yet come back from our "East of Eden" sojourn away from God, we need the new birth, and we can be "East of Eden" in a lot of different ways.

A character in one of Flannery O'Connor's short stories asked the question, "Have you ever looked inside yourself and seen what you are not?" Well, have you? Have you ever looked inside yourself and seen what you are not? That's sin — denying or neglecting who God is calling us to be. Sin is falling short of the glory of God. Sin is searching for self-glory and security in ourselves. Sin is living the unexamined life to the point that we convince ourselves we have no sin. Sin is ordering our lives as though we were not dependent upon God. Sin is convincing ourselves that we are good when the only goodness we know is our pride-producing performance that receives the acclaim of the world.

Who needs the new birth? Anyone who is still trying to save himself or herself by good works — anyone who has not yet accepted forgiveness of sin by God's grace.

### NOW THE THIRD QUESTION. HOW ARE WE BORN AGAIN?

Even as I share with you some specific responses that we must make to receive the gospel, I am aware of what Jesus said to Nicodemus when he asked the same question.

Jesus said, "The wind blows where it wills, and you may hear the sound of it, but you don't know from whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is of everyone who is born of the Spirit."

So let's acknowledge right off that no set formula is the answer to our new birth in Christ — the Spirit gives that birth. Even so, there is a response that we can make in order for the Spirit to work.

First, we must repent — that is, be genuinely sorry for our sin, sorry for our sojourn "East of Eden" away from God, and genuinely desire to turn from our sins and our own efforts at saving ourselves.

Two, we must admit our need for Christ, and accept His forgiveness. His forgiveness is offered — we must accept it.

Three, we invite Jesus to come into our life, and we make the willful decision that we will accept Him as our Savior and we will follow Him as our Lord.

In all of this, we must remember who Jesus is, what Jesus has come to do for everyone — to save us, to give us the new birth. It helps us sometimes if we can see that dramatic work in others.

While on a tour of mission stations around the world, the late Bishop William F. McDowell, of the Methodist Church, came to a village of India. There one night he met with forty believing men. Knowing that they all had been outcasts, he decided to test their understanding of the faith.

“Brothers, who is Jesus Christ?” Instantly forty hands went up. Then the bishop singled out a man who didn’t look very bright. At once the native Christian arose, bowed, and testified:

“Sir, I know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world because He loved me and gave Himself for me, and for all of us here, when no one else would touch the hem of our garments. If He looked on us in mercy, and then died to make us free, He must love everybody. He must be the Son of God. Only the good God would do what Christ has done for us outcasts.”

When the bishop came home and spoke of what he had heard, there shone from his eyes the glint of unshed tears. After his recital of the facts, he concluded: “It was worth going round the world more than once to hear those humble native Christians bearing witness to the grace of Jesus Christ.” “Whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

That’s what we have to keep in mind — that this is who Christ is — the One who wants to give us new birth. Nothing pictured this more clearly than the parable of the Prodigal son. The central truth of the parable of the Prodigal son is this: When the prodigal returned home, his father accepted him as though he had never been away. It will be so with any one of us who turn back to God through Jesus Christ.

“You must be born again.” That’s what Jesus said. In response to His word, we simply turn to Him and accept His grace and let the Spirit blow where it will to refresh our spirits, to give us life.

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