

The Treasure of the New Birth

John 3:1-17 (v. 3)

Introduction

We become citizens of the United States when we are born on U.S. soil. But one born on foreign soil may also become a citizen by applying for citizenship and going through lessons, passing a test, and being sworn in. Using this analogy, some think that membership in the church and citizenship in the kingdom of God can be accomplished by our own means. This is called salvation by works. In fact, that is the most common way to gain entrance to heaven according to the world. But Jesus Christ, and thus, Christianity, has a different answer: *“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3)*. Today, we look at the treasure of the new birth.

The Problem of Works Salvation

There are two main problems with works salvation. The first is uncertainty. If good works cancel out sin, how can we know when we have done enough good works to make up for our sin? *Psalm 19:12* says: *Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults*. We don't even know how much sin is in our lives. Even if one good work cancelled out one sin, we wouldn't know how many good works are needed to offset our sins. The Roman church came up with a solution to this. They invented the doctrine of Purgatory. This is supposedly a place where all Christians go when they die to work off unconfessed and unforgiven sins. But are human inventions the solution to the problem?

You Must Be Born First

The second problem is this: We are sinners, born in sin, complete with fallen sin natures. Whatever we do is therefore sinful. Even things that seem to be done with altruistic motives, since they are performed by sinners, originate in the sin nature and are inherently sinful. They cannot even be counted as good works. Think of it this way: Jesus says, *“You must be born again.”* One who is not yet born cannot do good works. They cannot do anything.

Born By Faith

The phrase “born again” can also be translated “born from above.” This shows us that this new birth comes from God. Just as we have no hand in being born physically, we have no hand in being born spiritually. We are born by faith. Jesus says those who believe [in Him] will have eternal life (*John 3:16*). When we are born again, from above, by faith, we are born into eternal life.

Good Works

That doesn't mean that good works don't count. We have been accused of denying good works since the Reformation. Paul says in *2 Corinthians 5:7*: *We walk by faith, not by sight*. And in *Galatians 3:11*, he says: *The righteous shall live by faith*. Works of faith are good works. After we have been born again by faith, we live by faith, and can do works by faith, good works. Think of your life as a tree. The roots are faith, the sap that flows through it, bringing it life is the Word, and the fruit are good works. Good works are the fruit of faith, evidence of what kind of tree we are. *The tree is known by its fruit (Matthew 12:33)*.

Born of Water and the Spirit

Jesus says this new birth comes *by water and the Spirit (John 3:5)*. This, of course, refers to Baptism. This is how the new birth takes place. Now, there is much to say about that from this passage. So, this Wednesday, that's what I'll be covering in the midweek sermon. If you want to hear the "rest of the story", as Paul Harvey would say, be here at 9 AM or 6:30 PM. For right now, we continue with the treasure of the new birth, what it means to be born of the Spirit.

The Wind

In both Hebrew and Greek, the words for wind are also the words for breath and spirit. So, Jesus uses the natural analogy of the wind when talking about the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, *"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 3:8a)*. You can feel the wind against your skin and hear it blow around you, but you can't see it. You can't tell where it comes from or where it's going. It is a mystery.

So It Is with Those Born of the Spirit

"So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (v. 8b). This doesn't mean those who are born of the Spirit are invisible. But the fact that they have been born again is. You can't tell that someone is a Christian by looking at him. The wind blows where it wishes. In the same way, the Holy Spirit gives new birth to whom He wishes. The Spirit, working through the Word, gives faith to us so we can believe and be reborn.

How Is This Possible?

When Nicodemus asks, *"How can these things be" (John 3:9)*, Jesus reveals Himself to be the Son of Man and says that He must be lifted up and whoever believes in Him will have eternal life (*John 3:13-15*). This "lifting up" refers to His death on the cross. He is referencing this story in *Numbers 21* (read *Numbers 21:4-9*). The comparison with Moses is that the snake-bitten Israelites who looked at the bronze serpent in faith were healed and would live. Every sinner who looks at Christ on the cross in faith is healed and will live eternally. That is the treasure of the new birth.

Nourishment for the New Life

Another benefit of the new birth is that every week, when we gather here, we receive nourishment for this new life. Jesus gives us His body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion, to feed our souls. Through these gifts He continues to forgive our sins and strengthen our faith to live this new life He has given us through the new birth until this earthly life is over.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
