

THE MYSTERY OF THE NEW BIRTH

John 3:1-17

*There are moments that change
our lives forever.*

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There are some moments that change your life forever. We have unforgettable events in our lives, and sometimes these significant events change the course of our life's journey. You stand with your beloved before the altar of God and you vow to be married until you are parted by death. However it works out, it changes your life. You see life come into being in the birth of a child. That definitely alters your lifestyle from that point forward. You lay a loved one to rest and deal with the loss of death. These moments are common, but they certainly change your life, don't they?

On January 29, 2006, Bob Woodruff was an anchor for ABC's World News Tonight. He was embedded with the U. S. Army in Iraq, reporting on the war. It was a day that changed his life forever. His vehicle ran over an IED—improvised explosive device—and Bob and his cameraman were nearly killed. Rocks and shrapnel entered his neck, head, and brain. He was unconscious for 36 days. His wife, Lee, flew to Germany, where Bob was recovering. She endured her own painful struggle, having to go into the ICU and see her husband, his skull cut away so his swelling brain could survive, not knowing if he would live, and if he lived, what kind of life he would have. She expressed her greatest fear to a surgeon one day, when she asked, "If he wakes up, will he still love me?"

After 35 days of separation from her children and worry about her husband, Lee couldn't take it anymore. She collapsed in the arms of Bob's brother David and said, "I don't know how much longer I can do this. My kids are up in New York. I'm here away from them. Bob's not waking up. They're talking to me about a nursing home facility for him. What am I going to do?" She went to bed that night praying, "Bob, you've got to do this now. This is in your hands and God's hands right now." The next morning when she walked into Bob's room, he was sitting up in bed with a smile on his face, and he said, "Hey, sweetie, where have you been?"¹

Bob Woodruff spent a year recovering from his injuries, but then resumed his broadcasting career. He has done a lot of work advocating for veterans who were brain-injured. His story is one of awesome courage, miraculous healing, and the great love of his wife and children, who all pulled together to get Bob through his disability. His life would never be the same after that encounter in Iraq. From the depths of horrible physical trauma, it was like he was born again.²

Today in the Gospel of John we read about a significant moment in the life of Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. He came to see Jesus by night, and his life was never the same again. Nicodemus had heard of Jesus, but he had not actually encountered him personally. However, he was very impressed with his reputation: *“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”*³ That he came after dark is significant, because it was probably quite risky for a religious and political leader of the Jews to be seen with Jesus. Still he took the risk.

Why? I don’t know. Nicodemus never articulated his reasons. Maybe he was just curious. Or maybe he had some critical personal need. Or maybe he was just bored and tired of the politics and factions and empty religiosity that often invade and permeate religious institutions. We don’t know; but we do know that Jesus had some words for Nicodemus that turned his life around.

*“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”*⁴ What does Jesus mean by that? One of the interesting things about John’s Gospel is that Jesus often makes statements in such a way that they are misunderstood by the hearer at first. That gives Jesus a chance to say it again in a more detailed way. That happens with Nicodemus. The word translated “from above” can also mean “anew” or “again.” Nicodemus took the latter meaning, and I’m sure he thought Jesus was either crazy or making a bad joke. He said, “Born again? How can anyone be born again after he is old? Can a person enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?”

That wasn’t what Jesus meant at all. So he expanded: *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”*⁵

What Jesus was getting at was the necessity of a spiritual rebirth in a person’s life. Everyone has a physical birth. It happens, and there is not much we can do about it. It is an involuntary experience. But the spiritual birth is an experience that we participate in. We open ourselves up to it; we want it; we pray for it. Then at some point, it happens. We are born again, born anew, born from above. Just as we are all born through the water of the mother’s womb, so every true child of God is born anew by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, it is not simply mechanical or predictable. The new birth is an act of God, and God keeps his own calendar. Sometimes our time expectations are different from God’s. Our spiritual lives cannot be tracked on our day planner. It’s a little more mysterious than that. Jesus compares it to the blowing of the wind. He tells Nicodemus, *“The wind blows where it chooses, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*⁶

Harry Emerson Fosdick was one of the great masters of the pulpit early in the 20th century. In one of his sermons, he remembered when he was a boy, and he would look

out his window and see the leaves in the trees moving in the wind. He could feel the wind moving, and his young mind made the connection. It must be the branches moving that created the breeze that he felt; they were fanning the air! Of course, as he grew older, Fosdick understood the truth that the wind, which was invisible, was blowing and moving the leaves that he could see.⁷

That's the way it works with the spiritual birth. There are things we do to open ourselves up to God. We pray; we worship; we study; we give. There is a definite, consciously willed commitment to Jesus Christ that has to take place. But that is just the leaves blowing in the wind. The wind itself, the Mover that moves our hearts, is the Spirit of God, and how the Holy Spirit moves is a mystery to our human minds.

It's like trying to figure out, if God is an all-powerful God, why did he put so many vitamins in spinach and almost none in ice cream? Why can't broccoli be fattening and chocolate healthy? Some things we just don't understand. Neither can I tell you how and when the Spirit of God will move. Jesus just mentions two things that have to happen before the new birth can take place. Listen again to our Scripture: "*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*"⁸

The reference to Moses comes from a strange little story in the book of Numbers. The Israelites were complaining about the hardships of the desert, and God got so tired of hearing it God sent poisonous snakes into their camp. So the Israelites were dancing around, trying to avoid getting snakebit, and wishing they had kept their mouths shut. Moses prayed for the people, and God told him to raise up a bronze serpent on a pole, and whoever was bitten could simply look at the serpent and be healed and live.⁹ In a similar way, when Jesus was lifted up on the cross, he brought healing to the poison of sin that was loose in the world. That's the first thing that had to happen—the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Then by simply looking to Jesus, any child of God could be saved. That's the second thing—to experience the new birth, believe in him and you will have everlasting life. John 3:16-17 is often called "the Gospel in miniature": "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*"

Snakes of sin, be gone! We believe in Jesus Christ, and we are saved! We are born from above! We have life everlasting!

So Nicodemus had his moment with Jesus. He came close enough to touch him; he heard his voice; he looked into the eyes of Christ. The words that Jesus said that night changed Nicodemus's life. How do we know? Because near the end of John's Gospel, after the crucifixion, two men came forward to ask for the body of Jesus, so that they could give him a proper burial.¹⁰ They were Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two members of the ruling council of the Jews. The one who came to Jesus by night was finally willing to stand before the governor in broad daylight and claim his relationship with Christ. He must have been born anew.

The pressing question for each of us today is simply this: Have you had your moment with Jesus? Have you been close enough to touch—not physically, of course, but spiritually, emotionally, personally? Have you made a commitment of your heart to him? Have you been born again, anew, from above?

I want you to know today that wherever you are on your spiritual journey, Jesus is right there with you. Whatever need you brought with you into this sanctuary, Jesus is able to meet that need. You may know exactly where your pain is coming from. Or you may not know at all, but you know something is not right in your life, and there's a hole deep down in your soul somewhere, and you are aching to have it filled. It's going to take more than a passing acquaintance with Christ to make that happen. You're going to have to come close enough to touch.

There was an amazing event that happened last month at Asbury University and Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. At a regular chapel service on a Wednesday morning, the wind of the Spirit began to blow, and the worship continued long after the service was scheduled to end. A revival broke out. With the help of social media, the outpouring went viral, and over the course of two weeks, an estimated 50,000 people—students from 20 different campuses, parents, children, grandparents—crowded into Hughes Chapel at Asbury to pray, sing, testify, and listen to messages.

Jill and Mitchell Wells happened to be there, visiting their son and daughter-in-law, who is in seminary. They went to the chapel to see what was going on. Jill described it as orderly and respectful, but heartfelt and passionate. Two other words I kept reading were peaceful yet powerful. It was not Pentecostal; it was Methodist. But it was definitely a movement of God. Methodism began as a revival movement. Jill told me, "Being in that space and feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit was truly life-changing and something I'll never forget."

The interesting thing is, that outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Asbury was not unique. In 1970, before the days of social media, there was a week-long, 24/7 revival attended by thousands that they called "One Divine Moment." Smaller outpourings have occurred there several times over the last century. It seems that Hughes Chapel at Asbury University is what they call in Celtic Christianity a "thin place," a place where the physical and spiritual are barely separated, a place where the wind of God blows more freely.

I want to invite you to a thin place today. It's called Holy Communion. This is a place where you can come close enough to touch Jesus. This is where the wind of the Spirit can blow. It's not enough just to read the cold words of Scripture, or to listen to somebody stand up and preach. There has to be a voice, a touch, a movement of the Spirit of God, for us to experience the new birth.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, we experience a mystery. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ is here. If you believe in him, you have everlasting life. You can be born again, anew, from above. Let this be the one divine moment that changes your life forever, because Jesus is close enough to touch—right now.

¹ <http://www2.oprah.com/>.

² <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/>.

³ John 3:2.

⁴ John 3:3.

⁵ John 3:5-7.

⁶ John 3:8.

⁷ Cited by Leith Anderson, "Valley of Death's Shadow," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 131.

⁸ John 3:14-15.

⁹ Numbers 21:4-9.

¹⁰ John 19:39.