

**THE SERMONS, LECTURES, AND SONGS OF
SIDNEY EDWARD COX**

CD 90-1
Gospel of John
Chapter 3
Nicodemus and the New Birth

Editorial Note: On many occasions, Sidney Cox delivered what were a series of either sermons or Bible lessons on the Gospel of John.

This appears to be a Sunday School lesson given to a Men's Sunday School Class. The exact date and location are unknown.

J. Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney and Violet Cox. August 10, 2010

The words 'born again,' you will find them in the New Testament fourteen times, and of the fourteen times, thirteen out of the fourteen in the writings of John. Now that's a very significant fact, that you'll only find the 'new birth' as such, definitely mentioned once outside of the writings of John. I Peter 1:23: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever." Now there is the importance of this chapter, because here you find our Lord Himself ringing the changes on this great, essential fact of the 'new birth.' That's where salvation begins. And until the 'new birth' has taken place, there is no possibility of any salvation by any other means or any product of salvation. You'll remember that in this chapter, you will find four things about salvation.

One, you find the absolute necessity of the new birth. The second thing is, you find the statement of the new birth repeated four times. The next thing you find, the third thing, is the method of the new birth – how the new birth takes place. And the next thing you find is what is produced by the new birth. And you've got those four things: the necessity of the new birth, the fact of the new birth, the method of the new birth, and the result of the new birth.

Now, let's look at them there in that order a little bit and see how this wonderful thing unfolds. In the third chapter of John you find a man in company with our Lord; right at the beginning of the chapter you find this man. He is a man who came to Jesus by night. He was a man who was marvelous in his personal character, in his legal righteousness. There was no spot on the legal righteousness of Nicodemus. Now, there are three or four of these great old pharisees that you find in the scripture who are magnificent in the perfection of their legal righteousness, and Nicodemus is one of them.

The rich, young ruler was another. You'll remember what our Lord said to him. "You go keep the commandments."¹ And this young ruler said to our Lord, "All these have I kept from my youth up."² Now, you let that sink in a minute, because you couldn't say that, and neither could I. We haven't kept

¹ Luke 18:20

² Luke 18:21

the commandments ‘from our youth up.’ The thing that marks your life and mine is the number of times we've broken the commandments. But here was a young man who could say, looking into the face of our Lord, “I've kept these from my youth up.” And he told the truth, because Jesus looking on him, loved him. Now, if he'd been a liar, he wouldn't have loved him at all. Now that young man spoke the truth.

When the Apostle Paul in the third chapter of Philippians says, “As touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless”³ he says something that you couldn't say and neither could I. He was another of these that had kept the law from his youth up. Now, Nicodemus was a man like that – spotless and magnificent, as far as the Law is concerned. He was the teacher in Israel. “Art thou a master in Israel?” and master is only another word for teacher. And in the original, the definite article is there. It says, “Art thou the teacher in Israel and knowest not these things?”⁴ Here was a man spotless in his legal righteousness, magnificent in his character - a man that the whole community could look to with pride. A man whose voice was the last word on everything that Judaism had anything to say about. They wanted to know what the last word was about anything? – ask Nicodemus. He'll tell you. And when Nicodemus gave his pronouncement, that was it. Now, that's the kind of man he was – wonderful, magnificent. And yet, that was the man to whom our Lord had to say, “Ye must be born again.”⁵

Now, when our Lord talks to the Woman of Samaria, we can understand him talking to her about the necessity of a new life. But Nicodemus, must he be born again? If there was any way of being saved and coming into favor with God, other than the new birth, then surely Nicodemus would have been the one to find it. If there was any kind of salvation, by the deeds of the Law, then surely Nicodemus is the one who would have been saved by the deeds of the Law. And yet he was the one to whom our Lord had to say four times, “Ye must be born again.” M U S T – Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again.”

In other words, Nicodemus knew everything, but didn't know anything. He had everything, and had nothing as far as God was concerned. He didn't have the starting point as far as relationship with God is concerned. Now this was the man to whom our Lord said, “Ye must be born again.” Now there's the necessity for the new birth. You can see it immediately. If Nicodemus needs to be born again, then everybody else needs to be born again. And when you find the word “must” it means just what it says. There is no other way. Ye must be born again. Now, you will notice again, in addition to our Lord saying to Nicodemus, this fourfold statement regarding the new birth, “Ye must, ye must accept a man he cannot.” Words to that affect.

Now, in addition to that, you find the ground of the new birth. Why is it that God by His grace can so deal with a sinful man, that He can impart His life to him and make him a child of God? For that's what salvation means. Why is it that God can do that? Is it simply because God loves the sinner. Oh, no, that's not the only reason. It is quite true and blessedly true that God loves the sinner, but that's not the reason why God can do what He does do for sinful men. God must have the right to do whatever He does. He must be, “Just as well as the justifier of him that believeth.”⁶

3 Philippians 3:6

4 John 3:10

5 John 3:7

6 Romans 3:26

What is it that gives God the right to be gracious to sinners? Well, you find the answer to that in the second time in this chapter that you meet that word “must”. You meet it three times in this chapter – Ye must be born again. When you turn to John 3:14 you find the words, “The Son of Man must be lifted up.” Now, it's because of the lifting up of the Son of Man that God has the right to be gracious to sinners. That Calvary cross gives God the right to do what God does do for sinners. On that cross, the price was paid and consequently God can now be gracious to sinners. That's the reason. And so the ground of salvation is also given in this chapter.

But the most important thing is the method of the new birth. You'll remember that that was the thing that puzzled Nicodemus. Do you recall that, the question that he asked when he said, “How can these things be? Can a man be born the second time? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?”⁷ Now that was the thing that puzzled Nicodemus, is how can this thing be, how can it take place? And our Lord says a very interesting and positive thing. And it's a thing that has caused some difficulty. Some folks are fastened on to it and have made a false doctrine out of it. These are the words that He says, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”⁸ Now, those are the two things that our Lord says, here's the method of the new birth. He says it is by water and the Spirit.

Now, there are folks that are fastened onto the word “water” and have made a false doctrine out of it, by which they would tell you that unless you have been baptized in water you cannot be saved; that baptism in water is a necessity of salvation. In other words, they add water to grace. Now, there's where the error comes in, and the difficulty is so simple to see and to answer that it is utterly amazing that folks could ever be led astray by it.

The word “water” has no relationship whatever in that verse to water baptism. He isn't talking about water baptism at all. He is talking about something under the figure of water. It's a figure of speech. What does he mean by water? Well, the only way to find that out is to follow through this gospel and see what the same figure means elsewhere, because it certainly isn't going to mean one thing in chapter three and another thing in chapter four, and another thing in chapter five, and another thing in chapter seven. It isn't going to mean one thing in one chapter and one thing in another. We must find out what it means.

And so we look all the way through and we discover that water is a figure of two things. One, is the Word of God, and the other is the Spirit of God. Now remember that he's talking about the new birth, and the first great fact in the new birth is that we receive life we did not have before. The new birth gives us life that we did not possess before. Now, here is something that indicates the way in which that new life is given. Whatever it is, it has to do with life.

Now, let's look at the next chapter, the fourth chapter and you will find that our Lord is talking to the Woman of Samaria and using the very same word. Now when he says to her, “If anybody drinks of the water that I shall give him”⁹, he certainly isn't talking about water baptism there, is he? Now it's

7 John 3:4

8 John 3:5

9 John 4:14

exactly the same word as you find it here. What's He talking to this Woman of Samaria about? He's talking about something that God imparts that gives new life. Remember what He said to her, "You drink of the water that I shall give you and it shall be in you a well of water springing up into everlasting... life."¹⁰ That's it. That water is that which produces life in chapter four. The water in chapter three is that which produces life.

Now when you go to chapter seven, and you can turn to any number of other places, you will find again the figure of water. This time the figure refers definitely and positively to the Holy Spirit, because there our Lord said, "If any man come unto me and drink, he shall not only be satisfied but out from his inmost being shall flow rivers of living water."¹¹ And there you've got the same word again. "And out from this man's being shall flow rivers of living water." And his disciples said, "What do you mean by water flowing out like that? What do you mean?" And the simple statement is made, "This spake He of the Spirit."¹² So that there, the word water and the word spirit are the same and our Lord interprets it.

Now, let's go to the fifteenth chapter of John, and you will find the word again. And this time, you will find that water is that which cleanses. Now notice, if you please, the way in which our Lord uses it. Here, he's talking to His disciples and He says, "Now are ye clean through the word which I have spoken unto you."¹³ So that the word and the cleansing agent are both alike. Now, you've got the word there and you've got the Spirit here. And what our Lord is saying to Nicodemus is, that the way in which the new birth is brought about is by the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

Now, let me give you one more confirming scripture for that. And this is what you will find in the only other reference to the new birth outside of the writings of John. For Peter says, "Being born again," now he's going to tell us how it's done, "Not of corruptible seed, but by incorruptible seed, by the Word of God which liveth and abideth forever."¹⁴ So that the life is in the word, in exactly the same way that life is in the seed, and the Word of God is the seed with the life of God in it, that the Holy Spirit deposits within the heart and broods over it and brings forth a new life – God's life. Now that's the way it's done.

By the way, that's the way in which all life is produced, isn't it? Whether it's the natural world or the spiritual realm, all life is produced by the depositing of a seed, and a period of brooding, and a new life appears. That's the way it's done. Now, in the spiritual realm, God does exactly the same thing - a word that had His life in it, the living word and it's the seed of the word. It has no mark of death upon it. It is not corruptible seed, it's incorruptible.

The old life that you had in the first place that came from Adam was corruptible life, wasn't it? It bore the mark of death. You were no sooner born than you began to die, and you've been dying ever since. That's the mark of natural life. But here is a life that is coming by the simple word on which no mark of death abides at all. Satan hasn't been able to leave one single fingerprint on the life that God imparts by His Son, not one.

10 John 4:14

11 John 7:37,38

12 John 7:39

13 John 15:3

14 1 Peter 1:23

Now, here is this new life and it is planted in the heart and the Holy Spirit broods over it. He's the only one that can ever do that. You can't do it and I can't. Now God in His grace may use you as the channel by which the Holy Spirit plants the seed, but He's does the planting and He does the bringing it to life. It's His work, and He does it by the word and by the Spirit. Now, that's the way in which the new life is brought about.

And our Lord said to Nicodemus, "I'm amazed that you don't know that. If you don't know that, what do you know? If you haven't been able, with all your learning, to see that simple thing, then what do you know? Because unless you can see that you can't even see the Kingdom of God, let alone enter into it." The only way is the way of a new life entirely. There isn't anything about Adam's life that God approves, not anything. But everything about the life that He imparts, He approves it. It has his touch upon it, all the way through.

So in this marvelous chapter, you have the necessity of the new birth, in the best man that Judaism could produce. You have the reason for the new birth, the lifting up of the Son of God. And you have the statement of the new birth four times from the lips of our Lord Himself. And you have the method of the new birth, by the word, the water of the word and the work of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit will take the word and plant it.

One of the things that men who are in this business like I am have to constantly remind ourselves about is this: Every once in a while we give an invitation in a meeting and when we do, we find somebody coming forward and kneel at an altar of prayer and something happens to them. And one of the things we have to watch is this, the tendency to say, "That person was saved in my meeting, by my message." But you know, you don't have to be in the business long before you immediately recognize the fact that when you see somebody coming down the aisle to accept Christ and to confess Him as Savior and Lord, and you can tell by the look in their faces if they're dead in earnest. You see that once in a while, not too often. You don't say, "I was the one who did that." You begin to say, "I wonder what mother taught that child back yonder. I wonder what Sunday School teacher planted the word in that boy's heart. I wonder what friend in the place where they work said that word in season beside him, the word that the friend didn't think had had any effect at all." And yet it was one of the things that the Holy Spirit had taken into his gracious hands and planted it in the heart, and in God's time and way a new life appeared. That's the way it's done. That's the only way.

(Prayer)

Our Father, let Thy blessing be upon our meditation this morning. Bless the men in this class, we pray Thee with thy constant grace. Give to us our enabling as we go elsewhere to preach Thy word this morning. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

(audio ends)