

March 28, 2010

Titus 3:5

Alright – welcome, I’m glad you are here today. I need you to grab your Bible and open it up to the book of Titus with me. I know I’ve explained the setting week after week as we turn to Titus – about how Titus is a compact blueprint from God for how to establish God’s church and all that we have looked at in that theme. But today I need you to really connect with that truth.

I explained last week, that in the midst of all the practical stuff here, **the foundation for God’s church is the TRUTH – the doctrines of the Word of God – specifically the incredible truths of SALVATION.** And we need to know them. As we all experienced last week – even if we are confident in our own salvation – even if we think we have a good handle on what that means – our ability to express that – or really to connect the doctrines to what we have experienced is generally more fuzzy than we want to admit.

And that’s part of why we are studying this – do you believe what you say you believe? If you can’t express it, can you really believe it? So last week we started digging this direction, but this week we are going to step even further into deeper waters so to speak, so I need you to stick with me and listen and let the Holy Spirit build His truths into our hearts and understanding. I’m going to ask you to turn to several passages in the Word with me, so get your Bibles ready.

Going back to verse 3 in the midst of God giving us in chapter 3 His blueprint for the church’s relationship with the world around it – what a proper Christian response to a pagan society would be – remember He showed us the key was to remember our own former condition. Look at it – *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.*

Remember we understood that they are the way they are – the way we were – because God has not yet done for them what God has done for us. We will come back to the pre-Christian condition in a moment, but what has God done for us? Verse 5 is the heart of this passage – *“He saved us.”*

Last week we looked at the root – the starting point for that in verses 4 and 5 – look at it again – *But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.*

God saved me BECAUSE of His kindness, love, and mercy. From the why, now we move forward toward how God does that. So let’s look at the rest of verse 5. *He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

This is the MEANS: salvation happens to us THROUGH, verse 5 says, “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

Now quickly – thinking from already being within organizational church life, what does that sound like? ---- Baptism. In fact, this is the passage cited by advocates of baptismal salvation – that baptism is necessary for salvation and is in fact when salvation takes place – whether they are Catholic or Protestant in their views. But understand, the word baptism is not used here and the Greek word *día* that means ‘through’ is used with the genitive case here which I know means nothing to you but that tells us what is being asserted here is that the ‘washing’ is the means of the rebirth (which we will dig into momentarily) but if the sacrament of baptism is what Paul is talking about then we have a physical agency as the indispensable means for producing a spiritual result – something we are going to see Jesus say is not right in just a little bit.

That ‘washing’ then is not and cannot be outward baptism by immersion itself but is the divine inner act of our being cleansed from the defilement of sin by the Holy Spirit – which is what is

symbolically pictured in believers' baptism. John Calvin explains this better than most when he writes, *"The apostles usually base an argument on the sacraments (like baptism) when they wish to prove what is signified in them, because it should be accepted as a fixed principle among godly men, that God does not play games with us with empty figures but inwardly accomplishes by His own power the things He shows us by the outward sign."*

I wanted to address that right quickly but that is not the heart of this passage. What is in focus is the miracle that baptism pictures. The NIV here uses the wording *"washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit"* as what salvation comes to us through. **"Rebirth" is a translation of a Greek word that is too long and hard to say but that is most literally understood as 'REGENERATION.'** This is one of only two uses of that word in the New Testament – the other being in Matthew 19 talking about the recreation of all things at the end of time. But in any case the use of the word 'regeneration' here is the origin of the use of that term in Christian theology for the work of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of our salvation – **re-generate – new genesis – new birth.**

You've probably heard evangelists and preachers tell people they need to be born-again if you've been in churches much. Well it was Jesus Himself who chose this analogy of new birth or being born again or being regenerated. And He did so because the concept has a specificity that relates to the doctrine we're talking about. And the bottom line is simply this – it is impossible for someone to do something in order to be born. **The analogy of being born again itself describes a reality to which the one born can by definition make NO contribution.** I mentioned that last week that we made no contribution to our salvation. Birth happens to us not because we desire it, not because we want it, or not because we followed the steps to be born. And that is exactly the point of the analogy. This idea of regeneration is unmistakably presented in Scripture as the first divine act in salvation – in other words, it is the first thing God does to save us. And that's what we're going to unpack today.

And to understand the doctrine of regeneration – you have to start with the doctrine of TOTAL DEPRAVITY because everything else essentially proceeds from there.

Don't worry if you don't know that phrasing – that isn't really the issue – but we talked about it again last Sunday. The Bible describes those who are in their natural state – their condition outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ. That's what **verse 3** was all about remember? Look at it – just summing it up – foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, being hated and hating everyone. The Bible is full of descriptives of people in that condition – wicked, empty, blind, deaf, hard hearted, unrighteous, full of poison, bitterness, blood shed, destruction, misery, without fear of God, blasphemous, callous, sensual, impure, greedy, sons of the devil, and objects of wrath. Nice group of folks, right? That is what the doctrine of total depravity means.

It doesn't mean that any man is as bad as he could be. Ok – even Hitler probably loved his mom at some level at different times. **The truth of total depravity refers to the effect of sin on the whole person.** To be totally depraved is to suffer from corruption that pervades the whole person – **that sin affects EVERY ASPECT of our being. We are not sinners because we sin, we SIN because we are SINNERS.** Our actions flow from our sin nature. The apostle Paul summarizes this as clearly as possible – look at it with me in **Romans 3:9-18.** TEXT

Now as you hear that and begin to wrap your head around this truth that man is not basically good but instead man is sinful to the core – there may be two questions that pop up. First – you hear that in Romans and you think "but I've seen lost people do a lot of good deeds – how can that be?"

Listen – fallen sinners can do things that conform outwardly to the law of God – they can refrain from stealing – they can do acts of charity – but these deeds are not judged as good in the ultimate sense. When God evaluates the actions of people, He considers not only the outward deeds in and of themselves, but also the motive behind these acts. And **the supreme motive required of everything that is good is the LOVE of God. An act that outwardly conforms to God's Word but that comes from a heart alienated from God is not judged by God as a GOOD deed.** The whole action – including the heart – is brought before God and is found wanting. That's what we saw

last week in verse 5 about being saved “*not by righteous things we had done*” – because as Paul showed us in Philippians 3, our best is nothing better than rubbish, right?

The other question that comes up is that we often hear non-Christians described as or say that our non-Christian friends are ‘seeking God’ or ‘searching for God.’ As Thomas Aquinas explained, people are seeking happiness, peace, relief from guilt, personal fulfillment, and other such benefits. We understand that these benefits can be found ultimately in God alone. So we draw the inference that because people are seeking what God alone can supply, they must be seeking God Himself. That is our mistake. **In a fallen condition, in total depravity, man may desire the BENEFITS that only God can give us but we do not want HIM – we want the gifts without the Giver.** In other words, the search for God does not end in conversion, it begins there.

We can sum up this doctrine of the depravity of man – or at least sum up the description – in **Ephesians 2** – turn there with me. In **verses 1-5**: God says: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.*

We were DEAD. God made us ALIVE. That is regeneration. The chief ‘explainer’ of regeneration in the New Testament is the apostle John. He uses the analogy of new birth all through 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John but the definitive text on regeneration is in John 3 where Jesus Himself is the teacher. And everything else that you read in Paul and John is built on the truth here that comes from His lips. So look with me at **John chapter 3**.

In verse 1, what’s going on here is this guy who is a ruler among the Jews – he’s a Pharisees – named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He comes at night because he didn’t want his buddies to know because this would be not cool with them since the Pharisees were pretty much united against Jesus. But this guy Nicodemus is honest enough to know that he’s got a problem. So he comes to Jesus and says in verse 2:

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.

Now this is a kind of a superficial confirmation of his attitude toward Jesus – but something else was really on his mind. And since he believed that Jesus was from God and that God was with Him, he comes with the nagging question “What do I do to get into the Kingdom of God?”

But he never has a chance to ask the question because Jesus reads his mind and verse 3 says: *In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*

See – what does that have to do with verse 2? Nothing – has nothing to do with the opening comment of Nicodemus. Jesus doesn’t say – well thanks – he doesn’t say – well I’m glad you got that, I mean it is fairly obvious Nick my boy – but at least you have the integrity to admit it. No – Jesus steps right by that first comment and goes to the issue of the heart “No one will see the Kingdom of God unless he’s born again.”

See chapter 2 just a few verses ago ended with John explaining in verse 25 that: *He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.*

And here’s an illustration of that – Jesus knew his heart.

Now Nicodemus had all the tradition and all the religion and all the legalism and self-righteous works but he didn’t know how to be in the Kingdom. He didn’t know about being born again. So Jesus says – let me tell you – unless one is born again – he can’t be. He says it again in verse 5 and then again in verse 7 – “You should not be surprised at my saying ‘you must be born again.’”

The word 'again' there in Greek actually means 'from above.' It is the word used in James 1:17 when James says *"Every good and perfect gift comes down from above from the Father of lights."* It is the same as being born of the Spirit which Jesus also says in verse 5 & 6 – you must be *"born of water and born of the Spirit."* Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. So this is foundational truth Jesus is giving to Nicodemus – **you must be BORN AGAIN - from above - by God through the agency of the Holy Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God.**

Now what is really interesting here is that Jesus doesn't tell him how. And Nicodemus asks in **verse 4** *"How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"* He gets it – he gets the analogy. "You're telling me I have to be born again but there's no way I can do that – I can't go back into my mother's womb."

He's not being literal here – he gets the analogy – "You're telling me I have to be born from above by the power of the Spirit and if it's from above and if it's from the Spirit, then I can't do that." And that's right. There is no formula – there aren't 5 steps to being born again – there aren't any. You don't birth yourself. You don't create yourself and you don't raise yourself from the dead.

But Jesus says it is still necessary. In verse 7 – you must be born again – in verse 5 – unless one is born of water and the Spirit – he can't enter the Kingdom of God. What's Jesus talking about there?

You don't have to turn there, it will be on the screen, but listen to **Ezekiel 36:25-27** *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."*

That's the Old Testament text on this new birth – on regeneration – I'll transform you – God says – I'll take out your heart of stone, I'll give you a tender heart, I'll place a new heart within you, I'll put a new Spirit in you, I'll put my Holy Spirit in you, I'll cause you to walk in my ways. And the key is "I will give you...I will give you...I will give you...I will...I will." This is the new covenant promise of God of His sovereign work of regeneration.

That's what Nicodemus was missing something. He was missing life – he was missing a new heart – he was missing the Holy Spirit. He needed regeneration. And back in John 3, verse 6 we see why – Jesus says *"that which is born of the flesh is what – flesh – and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."* And that's the problem we looked at first. We can't get past our humanness – our flesh – our being dead in sin. And so we sit in that condition with a cold, dead, heart of stone incapable of producing life because the physical can never produce the spiritual - and God says I will do it.

That is something God and God ALONE can do. Look at **verse 8:** *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.*

Wow – we have no control over who it is the Spirit gives life to. Jesus doesn't tell Nicodemus how to get it – he just says your problem is you are dead – you need life – to be regenerated – you need the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit – before you can ever enter the Kingdom of God and that's beyond your control.

So is that the end of the conversation? No. What do you do – there you are witnessing to somebody – you've just given this speech and what do you do? Do you say 'blow wind blow'? Do you – like John MacArthur laughs – get you big gospel fan and aim it at them? What do you do?

The answer comes a little lower in this same passage – this same conversation. Skip down to **verse 14:** *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up."*

What do you do? You start lifting up the Son of Man – you start telling the story of Jesus – you start sharing the gospel and exalting Christ. **When it comes to evangelism, don't try to manipulate the heart – that isn't your job – you LIFT UP JESUS.**

You can tell every Nicodemus you ever meet that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that if you believe in Him you will not perish, but you will have eternal life in that Kingdom. That's what we are to do. Talk about the cross where God gave His only Son and call on them to believe. That's our part – and the Spirit does His part.

The Spirit has to do His part – but He does not do it apart from the GOSPEL – apart from the Word of truth. We don't have time to look at all of them – but in **James 1, Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, 1 Peter 1, Romans 10** – over and over again – this new birth happens in conjunction with the Word of truth. God through His Spirit regenerates and gives life to whom He will in conjunction with their hearing the gospel.

The source of this regeneration is GOD and God alone and He gives it to whomever He chooses when He chooses and since WE don't know who that is or when it is, we continue to give the gospel to EVERYONE – lifting up Jesus in every way – and God in His sovereign kindness, love, and mercy gives life to whom He will.

So going back to our text in Titus this morning – we understand what Paul is saying in verse 5 that God saves us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit – we understand how Charles Spurgeon connects those two phrases, listen –

“The way in which we are delivered from the dominion of sin is by the work of the Holy Spirit...by His eternal power He gives us a totally new nature – a life which could not grow out of our former life nor be developed from our nature – a life which is a new creation of God...Regeneration as the commencement of the new creation can never come twice to any man, [no one gets saved again or re-saved – it happens once or not at all] but the renewal of the Holy Spirit is constantly and perpetually repeated.”

And that's what Paul expresses as well in Titus 3:5 – **the renewal of the Holy Spirit**. Without having to really dig into that doctrine as deeply, this is the doctrine of sanctification being connected to regeneration here in Titus. Paul just makes the point that salvation starts when in kindness, love, and mercy God regenerates us with new birth – but it does not stop there – it continues throughout the rest of our lives and into eternity.

To simplify it and provide some application today, let's just stick with the new birth analogy. **The evidence of regeneration is SANCTIFICATION and that is not that different than the natural actions of a newborn child.** J.I. Packer explains that **first, a baby cries.** Instinctively. And **the born again person PRAYS – crying to God in dependence and hope and trust as a child to his father.** **Secondly a baby eats.** Again instinctively. And **the born again person feels a HUNGER for spiritual food – first the milk and then the meat of God's Word.** Being taught – studying – memorizing – we move from the basics to the deepest truths – like we have discussed today – ever wanting more and ever applying what we have already taken in.

Third – the baby moves. Instinctively – it turns its head, flexes its limbs, then rolls and crawls and totters and walks and runs exploring the world it has been birthed into. And **the born again person LIVES life in Christ** into which he has come- sorting priorities, reshaping life in light of truth, exploring Christian relationships, worship, and responsibilities – **zealous for good deeds.**

And finally – **the baby sleeps** – instinctively relaxing and sleeping soundly in the arms of those it feels firm and safe. And **the born again person RESTS in the knowledge of God's protection, provision, power, and presence – leaving outcomes to God and living in obedience.**

On these truths, God's church is built – the truths of total depravity outside of Christ, of regeneration, of sanctification, all in salvation. And as much as we need to remember our former condition in order to respond properly to a pagan society, it is that awareness of total depravity that enables us to understand that our salvation happens solely because of the kindness and love and mercy of God – but it also today enables us to understand that how God enacts that kindness and love and mercy on a personal basis begins by giving us life – birth – regeneration – through His Holy Spirit.

REGENERATION is no more and no less than the work of God in the hearts of totally depraved man which leads to the gospel being wholeheartedly received and then, in sanctification, lived in light of from then on.

So this morning – if you, like so many, have forgotten where you came from. If you have taken ownership of your salvation as if it was all about something you did. If you have assumed accidentally a position of judgment on God that He owes you or anyone salvation or anything else.

Then...

REMEMBER the condition we were in – remember that the lost around you are still in that condition – and remember that they are headed to Hell in the same way you were.

REALIZE that only God can give them new birth – only God can bring the dead to life – and realize that He only does so when we share the gospel with them.

RENEW your passion for doing life in Christ one step at a time – praying – learning – living – and resting in the God who has saved you! (Worship Jesus, Learn Truth, Build Community, Reach Your World)

REJOICE that you can say “it is well with my soul” – not because of you – but because “He regarded your helpless estate and shed His own blood for your soul.”