

Which Came First

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Preacher: Jeremy Martinson

[0 : 00] You can take out your Bible and turn to the Gospel of John, chapter 3. This week and one more week remaining in our little overview, kind of summary, through various parts of a statement of faith that we are working on here at Steadfast.

We're not covering every point of the statement of faith, and we're certainly not covering them in all of the detail that we could, but trying to give some teaching on various points of the statement of faith so that we remember that whatever it is that we agree to together as a church, as a statement of faith, is really only true to whatever extent it is anchored in God's Word.

Is that right? So let's make sure that whatever it is that we agree to believe together, that those truths are anchored in God's Word, and we hope to do that again today.

John, chapter 3. Lois, would you please come and read John, chapter 3, verses 1 through 10? Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

[1 : 39] Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear it sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be? Jesus answered him, Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Thanks, Loss. Which came first? The chicken or the egg? Which came first?

The chicken or the egg? That is a bit of a riddle, isn't it? If you say that the chicken came first, then where did, what egg did that chicken come from?

[2 : 49] But if you say that the egg came first, then which chicken laid that egg? Now those of us who believe the Bible, we know the answer to this, don't we?

The answer is the chicken came first because God created the chicken. But this is still an interesting little riddle, an interesting little dilemma for us to think about.

Here's a similar but infinitely more important question. Which comes first? Faith or being born again?

Does that question feel a little unsettling? Maybe it makes you a little uncomfortable to think about this and to try to have to sort out which came first, faith or being born again?

Maybe you squirmed in your seat just a little when I asked that question. I suspect this question is unsettling for a fairly simple reason. The doctrine of regeneration, also known as being born again, is like a finger poking our pride balloon.

[4 : 07] and we don't like our pride balloon poked. We want to maintain our independence and our sense of self-confidence and our sense of control of the future.

And then comes along this doctrine of regeneration and it necessitates seeing ourselves differently. That we are not nearly as large and in charge as we would like to think that we are.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes people just like us in Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 12. At that time, you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.

Excluded, foreigners, hopeless, godless. These words will pop your pride balloon, won't they?

And when that balloon is popped, then you will see yourself rightly as a sinner, desperately in need of God's grace.

[5 : 36] And you will see God accurately as the initiator and the instigator and the provider of salvation.

Here is the article from the Statement of Faith. I'm going to read this one in full this week. It says this, We believe that in order to be saved, sinners must be regenerated or born again.

That regeneration consists in giving a holy disposition to the mind that it is affected in a manner above our comprehension by the power of the Holy Spirit in connection with divine truth so as to secure our voluntary obedience to the gospel.

And that its proper evidence appears in the holy fruits of repentance and faith and newness of life. Here's what I hope to convince you of today from the scripture that regeneration is God's gracious miracle causing sinners to believe the gospel.

And here's my hope that this message either makes you more humbly confident and secure in your salvation because your assurance is anchored in God's gracious work.

[7 : 14] Or that this message makes you more acutely aware of your need to be born again. Have you ever thought, you know, I am doing all right.

I'm better than most, not perfect, not perfect, but better than most, better than average for sure. I have done more good deeds than bad deeds.

I don't cheat on my taxes. I don't cheat on my girl. I've got values that would make the White House jealous. Rich Mullins sang that a long time ago.

In chapter 3 of his gospel, John introduces us to Nicodemus. And if anyone has ever had reason to believe that he was doing all right, it was Nicodemus.

He was a Jew. In other words, he was born into God's chosen people. He was serious about religion.

[8 : 28] A Pharisee following the strictest measure of God's law. Obeying all of God's law plus all of the extra commands that the scribes saw fit to add.

He was serious about religion. He's an influential leader. Jesus calls him, we read about him, John calls him the ruler of the Jews, a ruler of the Jews, one of 70 members of the Sanhedrin, a ruling body, kind of like our Senate and Supreme Court combined.

He's a religious authority. Jesus calls him the teacher in Israel. If you had a question, you could go ask Nicodemus.

and when Nicodemus spoke, you would listen. And he has discernment. He recognizes that Jesus performs extraordinary miracles that only God can do.

If anyone had ever had reason to believe that he was doing all right, it was Nicodemus. Look at verses one and two again. Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

- [9 : 54] This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.
- Nicodemus is ethical. he is intelligent. He is well-spoken. You can trust him with your wife. You can trust him with your sister. You can be sure that he will tell the truth and divide the check evenly and only charge you the right amount on Venmo.
- He is a model citizen, an ideal neighbor, and I suspect that his good friends probably call him Nic. But most importantly, he is one of God's chosen people.
- And he religiously maintains the strictest commitment to obeying God's law. There are no scandals in his past.
- There are no skeletons in his closet. Nicodemus surely thought that he was in with God. And all of this makes Jesus' first recorded words to Nicodemus unsettling.
- [11 : 17] Verse 3. Jesus answered him, truly, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
- If Nicodemus' self-confidence was like a sand castle on the beach, Jesus' words are like a tsunami wave.
- But I'm a Jew. You must be born again. But I'm serious about religion. You must be born again.
- but I'm a leader of the people. You must be born again. I know scripture's answer to every question.
- You must be born again. Don't you know I'm one of the good guys? You must be born again. Regeneration is required.
- [12 : 46] your nationality, the color of your skin, the church you were raised in, you must be born again.
- Your achievements, your knowledge of religion, your donations to a dozen different charities, you must be born again. Your spiritual sincerity, your commitment to keeping the golden rule, people.
- You must be born again. Why is regeneration required? Why is regeneration required?
- Because everyone born physically is already dead spiritually. spiritually. This is why regeneration is required.
- Because everyone who is born physically is already dead spiritually. This is Ephesians chapter 2 and verse number 1. And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.
- [14 : 00] Do you see that? You are walking in trespasses and sins. You are alive physically, but you are already dead spiritually from the moment of your birth according to the scripture.
- Perhaps like Nicodemus you have committed to doing more and trying harder and being better. But if you are dead already spiritually then there is nothing that you can do or try or be that will earn you the right to enter the kingdom of God.
- You must be born again. Regeneration is required. Now Nicodemus is certainly shaken but he is not yet stirred.
- Can you just you know rewind? and go back and have a do over? Can I shrink like Ant-Man and go back inside of my mother and be born a second time?
- Verse four Nicodemus said to him how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?
- [15 : 34] I love this about this particular portion of scripture. Jesus does not respond to Nicodemus' really kind of foolish questions though sincere I think.

Jesus does not respond to Nicodemus' questions by saying oh no no no no you've got the wrong metaphor. Let me come at that a different way and help you understand.

No Nicodemus has the right metaphor. He does need to be born again. He has the right category for what needs to happen but he has the wrong context for what needs to happen.

He must be born again spiritually not physically. Listen to Jesus' words in verse number five. Jesus answered truly truly I say to you unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Jesus is saying you have the right category but you have the wrong context.

[16 : 51] There is physical birth and there is spiritual birth and you need the spiritual because you have already had the physical. Do not marvel verse 7 that I said to you you must be born again.

What did you do to be born? I was born on January 16th 1977 at 12 56 in the afternoon.

Do you know what I did to be born? Nothing. I didn't deserve to be born. I didn't ask to be born.

I didn't follow a checklist in order to be born. I didn't do anything to be born. Of course I was there but my mom did all the work.

Thanks mom. Right? Thanks for doing all of the work. She birthed me. Regeneration is God's work.

[18 : 24] Jesus says to Nicodemus you must be born again. Don't miss this. This is not a command but it is a requirement. He's not giving Nicodemus something to do but he's telling him something is missing.

In all of your religious pursuit in all of your spiritual sincerity there is something that is missing but it is not something that you can do.

You must be born again. There is something that must happen to you but like being born physically you will contribute nothing to being born again.

again. You're there. You're there when you're born again but God does all the work. Praise him.

Praise him for doing all of the work. This is from James chapter 1 and verse 18. Listen how God births sinners of his own will he God brought us forth by the word of truth.

[19 : 47] God did all the work. He brought us forth. He birthed us. He gave us spiritual life. Why was it necessary? Because we were dead spiritually in our sin.

1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ according to his great mercy. He has caused us to be born again.

Regeneration is God's work. We should sympathize with Nicodemus.

He is trying to reorient his entire life around Jesus teaching. Can you imagine growing up like Nicodemus finding out here is this one who does these amazing miracles that only God can do and he says to me you must be born again shattering demolishing all of your self confidence everything you thought about your upbringing and your heritage your place in the family of God all of that shattered dissolved down to nothing and now you're having to reorient your entire view of the world around this one phrase you must be born again verse nine Nicodemus said to him how can these things be

Jesus answered him are you the teacher in Israel and yet you do not understand these things as the teacher in Israel with only the Old Testament to guide him Jesus suggests that Nicodemus really ought to understand his teaching about the new birth so let me ask you again which comes first faith or being born again if your answer is faith comes first then would you agree that if we reason convincingly and appeal emotionally that sinners should respond and believe the gospel

[22 : 50] I wonder if you have found this to be true that all it takes is some intellectual reasoning or some emotional appealing and suddenly sinners are responding to that have you found that to be true or have you found Paul's words in first Corinthians 1 18 to be true the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing Paul follows this up a chapter later he says this the natural person does not accept the things of the spirit of God for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned friend if Jesus himself offered you a ticket to heaven without being born again you would rip the ticket up in tiny little pieces throw it in his face scream leave me alone and turn and walk away the preaching of the cross the gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing without the spirit of God the natural man the natural woman we can't make sense of these things it sounds like so much foolish nonsense the natural person does not accept the gospel even when it is explained clearly and even when the preacher is passionate about the presentation of the gospel the natural person does not accept it but Paul writes this in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 4 but God but God being rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved imagine a sinner who hears the gospel

God sent his son Jesus to pay the awful price to redeem you from your sin to rescue you from God's wrath and to reconcile you to God Jesus paid the full price but you are helpless you are hopeless you are godless there is nothing that you can do to get right with God you are dead in your trespasses and sins repent and believe the gospel the sinner apart from the spirit of God hears this preaching of the gospel and says in his heart that is utter nonsense it would take a miracle for me to believe that and we would agree and the scripture would affirm that's true it would take a miracle for a sinner to believe that and that miracle is God's work of regeneration regeneration is required regeneration is God's work third regeneration hear this induces faith

I'm pressing on this birthing illustration this birthing metaphor regeneration induces faith John chapter 1 and verse 12 follow this carefully please but to all who did receive him to all who did receive Jesus to all who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God who were what who were born not of blood not because you are one of God's chosen people a Jew not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God who believes in Jesus it is those who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of

God what happens in your house when you flip on a light switch Elam the light turns on now I know there's sort of this fringe case where the light bulb could be burned out that could happen but most of the time when you flip on a light switch the light bulb comes on regeneration and faith are like the switch and the light bulb regeneration doesn't merely precede Regeneration induces faith it's not merely that the light switch has to be flipped on first in order for the light to turn on if the switch is not turned on the light bulb will never light one is the immediate cause of the other so it is with regeneration and faith regeneration induces faith faith is not the cause of the new birth the new birth is the cause of faith no sinner has ever responded to the preaching of the gospel at their convenience a sinner believes the gospel only and yet immediately after the

Holy Spirit performs the miracle of regeneration and sinners don't believe primarily because they are they consent intellectually to the preaching of the gospel nor because they are manipulated emotionally by the preaching of the gospel sinners believe the gospel when they are voluntarily compelled to believe by the gracious miracle of the Holy Spirit granting them life and we call that miracle regeneration just as it is the most normal thing for a newborn baby to cry out the moment after it is born it is the most normal thing for a sinner who has been born again to cry out I am a guilty sinner but Jesus died for me it's the most normal thing you are compelled to believe because of the new life that you have received have you been born again there's really only one way to know for sure have you believed in

[31 : 24] Jesus because if you have been born again then you will believe in Jesus regeneration induces faith regeneration is God's gracious miracle causing sinners to believe the gospel you say you know my life is a bit of a dumpster fire right now perhaps I ought to clean myself up first maybe you say you know I've been a Christian my whole life my parents raised me right I have good news for you whichever side of that particular line you land on God knows you better than you know yourself the gospel is for whosoever will humbly see themselves as a sinner desperately in need of grace for whoever will see God as the initiator and instigator of salvation you must be born again and our

God is rich in mercy and full of grace will you believe in Jesus right now will you believe in Jesus perhaps your sin makes you wonder if you are a Christian at all perhaps you are struggling to break some bad habits you wonder why don't I do the things that I know that I should do this doctrine of regeneration it is comfort for followers of Jesus who struggle with sin like being born physically being born spiritually is a one way trip if God has brought you to life if he has performed the miracle of new birth in you he will not undo that miracle he will not lose you he will not turn away from you he will not abandon you

God is fully committed to seeing you grow up and mature as a follower of Jesus Peter promises in his second epistle everything that you need for life and godliness is yours in your savior Jesus Christ let this doctrine of regeneration demolish your self confidence so that your hope is anchored in the solid foundation of God's promise to you in Jesus!

we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone let's pray oh great God of highest heaven would you please occupy our lowly hearts father would you please grant that the holy spirit gives life to some sinner this morning perhaps someone who came to worship not expecting to be confronted by the preaching of the gospel and yet now having heard it like

Nicodemus they are wrestling and reorienting their whole world view around these words you must be born again holy spirit please grant life please grant repentance please give the gift of faith so that sinners respond to the preaching of the gospel by repenting and believing in Jesus we ask for your glory great God father you know our hearts and you know that our sin causes us to wonder sometimes whether we have said enough or done enough whether we said or did the right thing in order to be saved would you please much like Jesus did with Nicodemus clear out all of that self confidence and replace it with worship and awe and admiration and hope and assurance not in ourselves not in something that we have done or said but in the calm assurance of knowing that we believe because we are compelled by the miracle of regeneration that you do in our hearts please give us assurance and keep us from awful cycles of doubt and disillusionment and wondering help us to have assurance in these things so that we are more mindful and more faithful in our preaching of the gospel to those who desperately need to hear it as we did holy spirit would you please help us as we take a few moments and quiet our hearts before you please comfort and encourage please convict please work in our hearts in these few moments as we are quiet before you desiring that you will do what needs to be done in our hearts father son and holy spirit we love you and we are grateful for you we are in awe of you we confess our need of you your grace is glorious your mercy is rich please help us as we continue to worship in Jesus name amen amen