
The Provision for our Union with Christ

1 Peter 1:3, 22-23; Titus 3:3-7; John 3:1-15

God has chosen us to save through His great grace and mercy. To them God will give all that He has planned and purposed through the hearing of the Gospel.

Because of Adam's sin we are spiritually dead, separated from the life of God.

Through the Old Testament, God hinted at the amazing mystery that would be unfolded in the New Covenant.

Behold, the dead man. He is lying in his place, unbreathing, unmoving, unresponsive... dead. He is without life. What is his need?

Does he need to believe? Or more faith?

Does he need more religious works?

Does he need personal affirmation?

Does he need coping mechanisms?

No, he is helpless. He is totally unable to revive himself. He needs life. He needs a resurrection.

This brings us to God's wonderful provision for our sin and deadness. In Christ God has brought us to life. Let's consider two important texts that connect the truths of our regeneration and our union in Christ.

The Doctrine of the New Birth (1 Peter 1:3; 22-23)

The Bible talks about the new birth, being born again and regeneration. These are all terms for the same event - the giving of life to a person through the Word and Spirit.

The Origin of our New Birth (v.3)

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 to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Peter opens his letter with uplifted praise to God who has caused us to be born again. This phrase, "born again" is one of the New Testament's way of speaking of the giving of life through the Spirit and Word to a dead sinner. This great truth should cause us to bless God, to praise and worship Him.

The new birth is an act of God according to God's mercy. Ephesians opens with a similar praise that grounds God's saving acts in His loving and merciful choice of us. The Bible teaches, and we are to believe that the new birth is solely and exclusively from God's initiative. He has caused it. He, by His own power through the giving of the Spirit and caused us to be born again. We were born the first time into the physical realm. Through the new birth, we come to life in the spiritual realm.

This giving of life through the Spirit assures us of our union with Christ and the privileges that go with that union. The words here are "To a living hope, through Jesus' resurrection." Our union with Christ joins us to the new creation. Jesus' resurrection

brought the living power of the new creation into this old realm. The new birth brings the living power of the new creation into these old bodies so that we are made new.

The Means of our New Birth (v.22-23)

How does the new birth actually occur? What is the Biblical method?

²² Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

The Responsibility Entailed (v.22)

Genuine love is the aim of obeying the truth. Obeying the truth purifies, cleans our souls. We have been born again and united with Christ for this very purpose. Because of what God has done for us, we are to love one another earnestly. This is not a higher Christian life. This is fundamental to being united to Christ. You obey the truth because you believe it. But that obedience is moving toward a genuine, earnest love of the brethren.

The Truth Explained (v.23)

We have been born again through the Word of God. The Word of God is that which implants life in the human soul. That life is the living Holy Spirit. We are born again through the Word of God. Make no mistake. The Word of God is a necessary ingredient in our salvation. No Word, no Spirit, no new birth. The Word of God is the seed from which the Spirit gives life.

In summary:

In Christ, we are born again, given life, so that we are brought up out of our spiritual deadness.

In Christ, we are given life through the Spirit so that we have a living connection to our God.

In Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit who is our life through the hearing of the Word of God.

The Details of our Regeneration (Titus 3:3-7)

Another important term is used to speak of the life-giving provision from God in Christ. This term is "regeneration".

³ For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. [ESV]

³ Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other.

⁴ But—When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, ⁵ he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. ⁶ He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. ⁷ Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life. [NLT]

Our Sinful Condition (v.3)

Here aspects of our life before being in Christ that are related to what follows. Paul's descriptions of our life as sinners is usually crafted to lead to what Paul is focusing on in the description of our being saints.

God's Saving Grace (v.4-5)

God's grace is always grounded in the goodness, loving kindness, grace and mercy of God.

Nothing that we do causes or contributes to our salvation. We are sheer recipients of God's initiative to save us. Our activity in our salvation is purely the response enabled by God.

God's Transforming Spirit (v. 5-6)

As sinners we were corrupted, stained and contaminated by our sin. The giving of the Spirit in our salvation is spoken as a "Washing." In what sense are we washed in our salvation? Well, it is explained in the two aspects of the Spirit's work that follows.

God's Spirit regenerates us.

Regeneration is the work that God is doing in doing away with the old sin filled, cursed creation and bringing in the new creation. We live in the day of the regeneration. The new creation is beginning in people. One day, it will be brought to fullness in the new heavens and new earth.

God's Spirit renews us.

Renewal is the process the Spirit is doing to transform us so that through the renewing of our minds, we are more and more putting off the old and putting on the new.

God's Multifaceted Purpose (v.7)

In the realm of the Law, God's purpose is to justify us by grace. We cannot be in Christ through our works, through keeping the Law.

In the realm of the family, God's purpose is to make us heirs of God's promises. When we are in Christ, we are God's sons and daughters and jointly receive the inheritance God has given to Christ.

God's purpose in the realm of the future is to give us a hope, an assurance. When we are in Christ, we have an assurance of life eternal with God.

The Discussion around the New Birth (John 3:1-15)

In the context, many believed in Jesus, but Jesus did not commit Himself to them. What does this mean? Is there a kind of believing in Jesus that does not save? Yes, and Nicodemus is an example...

The Person Presented (v.1-2)

John wants us not only to see this generally, but specifically. It is as though he says to us, "Here is the principle in the crowd. Now let me flesh out for you with an individual. Here is Nicodemus."

Here is a Religious Man (v.1)

Pharisee - Conservative, Bible believing, outwardly holy. By any measurement we would use today, Nicodemus appears to be a godly man.

Ruler of Jews - A theologian, a scribe and a member of the Sanhedrin. Now this is difficult because we do not like to see this sort of mix. But here was a man who was both a Bible student, a teacher and was a religious and political leader of his day.

Here are Religious Words (v.2)

This man not only has the credentials, but he has the vocabulary right. He affirms:

Jesus is a Rabbi and therefore has religious equality.

Jesus is a teacher from God and therefore has religious authority.

Jesus has God with Him and therefore has religious authenticity.

Nicodemus fully expected to be accepted, received, and acknowledged as being a man of God. It is quite clear that he thought this of himself, not in an arrogant, puffed-up prideful way, but in all sincerity. His whole religious background had trained him to see himself as a godly man, a teacher and a leader. Nicodemus comes and expects to place his approval upon Jesus and finds himself in a bit of a controversy with the Lord.

The Provision Described (v.3-13)

John records for us the conversation that went on that Judean evening. Jesus simply responds by making a theological statement. Jesus challenges his religious experience with truth.

³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ 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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its 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."

The Necessity of the New Birth (v.3-5)

What Jesus asserts or declares is that believing requires that one be born again or from above. The new birth is utterly necessary. If one has not been born again, one:

Cannot See the Kingdom (v.3-4)

It is impossible even to see the Kingdom of God without the new birth. This is because the lost are spiritually blind and spiritually dead. Nicodemus shows that he does not see by his reaction in verse 4. Jesus says the new birth is necessary to see; Nicodemus demonstrates it by his blindness (v.4).

Cannot Enter the Kingdom (v.5)

It is impossible to *enter* the Kingdom without the new birth. The reference here to water may be to the Word, something John uses often, or to physical birth, parallel to Nicodemus' objection. Both would be true. The emphasis is on the Spirit. Entering the Kingdom of Heaven is by a birth by the Spirit just as entering the physical realm is by a physical birth.

The Character of the New Birth (v.6-8)

Jesus carefully describes what the new birth is.

God is active, man is passive (v.3,5)

Now understand something vital. Jesus does not use an imperative, or a command. He is not here telling Nicodemus to do something. The verbs are aorist passive subjunctive. Jesus is not saying, "You must hit yourself with the ball." Jesus is saying, "You must be hit by the ball." So the statement here is a statement of what is a necessary condition—but it is not something you can do. You cannot birth yourself into the Kingdom of God.

Is produced by spiritual means (v.6)

The principle stated here is so important in the Scripture and so forgotten in our day. The union of the Holy Spirit with the Word of God in a soul is regeneration. John is showing us the principle on which John 1:12-13 operates. Flesh can only produce what is fleshly. The Spirit gives birth to the spiritual.

Is basic to the New Covenant (v.7)

Jesus expected Nicodemus to have a grasp of this truth. He actually tells him not to be surprised. Nicodemus should have known about the new birth from the Old Testament.

Is solely under God's control (v.8)

Regeneration is a hidden, inner work accomplished by God's sovereign will that produces a spiritual result. It is a very simple illustration. We can see the effect of the wind on the trees. But have no control on where and how it blows. This is the way the Spirit works. We can see the effect of His blowing life giving air into the soul of a man so that he becomes a living spirit.

The Problem Exposed (v.9-15)

As Jesus explains how these things are so, He exposes Nicodemus' unbelief.

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Why He is not Believing (v. 9-13)

Jesus is demonstrating that Nicodemus does not believe in a saving way. Here is the evidence that he is not converted. You are unconverted because:

Your exposure to truth condemns you (v.9). When confronted with truth, you don't get it. Unbelief says, "How is that possible?"

Your rejection of Christ's witness condemns you (v.10-11). Here is the Word of God speaking. He came to His own and Nicodemus did not receive Him.

Your inability to comprehend spiritual things condemns you (v.12). If you do not understand what is plain here on earth, how will you understand what is spiritual? That you do not is evidence that you cannot.

Your focus on self instead of the Sovereign condemns you (v.13). Right before you is the anointed King from heaven where no man has yet been.

What He must Believe (v.14-15)

Here is the gospel from the Old Testament. Jesus takes a story Nicodemus was familiar with and uses it to point to Jesus and to the cross.

The allusion here is to the bronze serpent being lifted up on a pole in Numbers 21:6-9. Sin was being judged. The serpent was raised up as an emblem of redemption if they would look and live. It is the turning point in Numbers. Chapters 10-20 are filled with failure and defeat. Chapters 22 onward are filled with victory. It was when they learned to look to the saving effects of a lifted up tree that victory came.

The term "be lifted up" was an idiom in Greek referring to death by crucifixion. The key here is the comparison *as*. Jesus' death on the cross is the heart of God's redemptive plan.

In Numbers and in John, there is a "lifting up". In Numbers, one must look to that which is lifted up; in John one must believe in who has been lifted up. The conclusion I draw – and it is supported by the rest of the Bible – is that saving belief, faith is a way of seeing with our understanding.

How then is the belief that saves different from the belief that does not? John shows us that saving belief is looking to a sacrificial death on the cross for life.

So the focus of saving belief is on the cross. That is where the crowd went wrong. It is Nicodemus' error. And it is a massive error today. Are we centered on the cross? Or are we searching for signs, miracles and self-centered solutions? Saving belief looks intently on the cross of Christ and the Christ of the cross and passes from death to life.

Jesus lovingly and emphatically tells Nicodemus the truth. What He does here is not harsh or unloving. It is exactly what we should do also.

Reflect and Respond

Respond to the call to believe and bow. Be saved today.

Believe what the Bible is teaching us:

We are dead in our sin. Only the infusion of spiritual life can solve this problem.

We are alive in Christ because God has given us the new birth through the Word of God.

Our union with Christ through the new birth is totally an act of God's power flowing through His love for us and mercy to us.

Our new birth means that we have the life of God through the Spirit in our souls.

Live with your union with Christ in mind:

The new birth radically transforms us. We are now a part of the New Creation in Christ.

The new birth makes us clean from our old sin and sins so that, while we still live in this old world and old body, our hearts are new.

Our union with Christ places on us the responsibility to obey the truth aiming at a sincere and earnest love for one another.

Our regeneration, our new birth by Word and Spirit unites us to God and brings life which is the essence of the union.