

Born of God: John 1:4-13
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Last Sunday we began a study in the Gospel of John, which we continue this morning. Last week I introduced the book, introduced the human author (John the son of Zebedee, one of the 12 disciples, one of the 3 disciples who were especially close to Jesus, apostle and leader in the early church, writer of this Gospel as well as 1, 2, 3, John and Revelation). There is much to learn from what God has revealed to and revealed through this man. It's a great privilege for us to be studying this book together.

I basically covered the first 3 verses last Sunday, talking about the eternal Word, Jesus Christ. He has eternally existed with the Father. Everything was made through the eternal Word. And so we talked about creation. We also talked about revelation. Our God is a God who speaks. He has spoken in the written Word, the Bible. And He has revealed Himself fully in the Person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word.

We'll pick it up in verse 4 now, and I'll say some things about certain themes that are being introduced here, themes that will continue to unfold as this book continues. And then we'll focus on a particular theme that comes at the end of our passage for this morning (in verses 12-13), the theme of new birth, being born again, regeneration.

Read John 1:1-13

Pray

Continue to think of the creation account in the background here. Remember that John is calling our attention to that account with his opening line in verse 1, "In the beginning . . ." Those are the first words of the Bible, at the very start of Genesis. Life and light feature very prominently in the creation account, and John uses both of these words to describe the eternal Word, Jesus Christ. See in verses 4-5

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:1-2, ESV)

God spoke, and by His word everything was created. There was darkness, and then light pierced into that darkness. There was nothing, except the Father, Son and Spirit, and then life sprang up – plants and animals, and then people!

With those miraculous events in the forefront of our minds, we read John's description of Jesus coming into the world. Here is

the light that pierces into the darkness of this fallen world, bringing light and life.

And yet there is a sad tension here, because the darkness resists the light. The world pushes back against the life and light that has come in Jesus Christ. Verse 5 has some ambiguity to it. It may very well be that John intended the ambiguity. You'll notice this if you compare some translations. In some of your Bibles verse 5 reads, "and the darkness has not overcome it." In other Bibles it says, "and the darkness has not understood it." The Greek word there can mean either. It's basic meaning is to grasp, and can refer to grasping with the hands (which would mean something like "overcome"). Or it can refer to grasping with the mind (meaning "to understand").

There's this disconnect and discord between the light and the darkness. The darkness does not understand the light, does not receive the light, does not know the light. But make no mistake, the darkness will not overcome the light. The light will triumph.

We then have 3 verses about John the Baptist, which I won't dwell on here. We're going to hear much more about John the Baptist later in the chapter. But here we're introduced to him, basically just to distinguish John from Jesus. John was a witness to the light. He, Himself, was not the light.

But there's an important thing to notice in the midst of these brief comments about John the Baptist. Notice the purpose of John's ministry, at the end of verse 7, "that all might believe through him (referring the light, Jesus Christ)." Do you remember what we looked at last Sunday about the purpose of this Gospel? In John 20:31, John (the Gospel writer) says that "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

John the Baptist and John the Gospel-writer (note that these are 2 different individuals) . . . they had the same purpose in their ministries. To point people to Jesus. To persuade people to put their hope and trust in Jesus.

And that's our purpose in studying through this Gospel together. That's our purpose in this church. We want to point people to Jesus. It was a blessing this past Tuesday evening to share the Gospel with a group of folks who came here for dinner. Each month we've been having an outreach dinner, and it's a wonderful way to bless people with food for their bodies and food for their souls. I shared a few things from John 1 at the beginning, and then we were able to have many conversations with folks as they ate. And then afterwards some of the guys took the leftover food to some homeless individuals and got to share the Gospel with them as well.

In cooperative efforts like that, and individually, let's look for ways to be witnesses of who Jesus is and what He's done for us. Let it be the mission of our lives to point people to Him. May it be our burning desire that more and more people will believe in Him!

After the parentheses of verses 6-8, introducing John the Baptist, verse 9 continues to describe the light and the disconnect between the light and the darkness. It is unthinkable, but even as the light comes into the world, comes to His own, He is rejected. The world is blind to Him, blinded in darkness.

If we ended with verse 11, it would be a very discouraging message. But this is an important part of the message of John 1. And it's something each of us needs to realize about ourselves. Left to ourselves, we are trapped in darkness. We are blind in the darkness of this fallen world, the darkness of our sinful nature, in the darkness where Satan wants us to remain.

I remember as a kid visiting Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. I was born in Midland, Michigan, but when I was 9 we moved to Elizabethtown, KY. My dad stayed with the same company, but transferred to a new job there. And then we moved back to Michigan 6 years later. But during our years in Kentucky we visited some cool places, like Abraham Lincoln's birthplace and Mammoth Cave. I remember us taking a few different tours there. And it was always nice walking in there in the heat of the summer because the cave was always a cool 54 degrees. One of the things I remember on one of those tours was when the guide turned out all the lights. And it was as dark as dark can be. You couldn't see your hand if you put it right in front of your face. But then I remember the guide lighting one small match, and what a difference that made. There were dozens of us standing in a wide cavern, and just that little match seemed to light up the whole place.

Darkness can be oppressive. It's debilitating. It's frightening. But the light invades the darkness, bringing hope and freedom.

This is what Jesus does. He comes into the darkness of the world and shines His light. And it is way brighter than a small match. It's brighter than 10,000 torches. But, you see, there's another miracle that has to happen as well. Because, as we've seen the darkness resists the light, does not comprehend the light. That's because we're not only in the darkness, we're also blind.

Which reminds me of something else from Mammoth Cave. There are fish that live in rivers in the depth of the cave, and those fish have no eyes. Very interesting phenomenon. So if that tour guide were to put a spotlight onto that river, it wouldn't make

a difference for those fish. There's light shining now, but there's still blindness.

That's our condition, too, as long as we're dead in sin. We not only need light, we need life. We need new life, including eyesight, in order to see the light and to see everything else illumined by that light.

This is the exciting news that verses 12-13 communicate. There is widespread rejection of the light, as verses 10-11 tell us. But that's not the entire story. That's not the end of the story. There are also those who do receive Him, and these are the individuals who are born of God.

Let's spend some time now investigating this theme in Scripture. Here's what our Statement of Faith says about regeneration, which simply means "born again." This is the biblical teaching on the new birth. As our passage says it, being born of God. The **Abstract of Principles** says, "Regeneration is a change of heart, wrought by the Holy Spirit, who quickeneth the dead in trespasses and sins enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the Word of God, and renewing their whole nature, so that they love and practice holiness. It is a work of God's free and special grace alone."

Regeneration is new birth. It's being born again. It's getting a new heart. It is new life. It is something God does to a person's heart to transform them from the inside out.

Let's start in the Old Testament and read a couple passages that describe God's work of regeneration. Jeremiah 24:7 says, "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart." And Ezekiel 11:19-20, "And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." And Ezekiel 36:26-27 is very similar, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

These are great pictures of what new birth is. It's a heart transplant. Before God regenerates us, we have hearts of stone. Spiritually, we have cold, dead stone hearts. There is no spiritual life. No desire for God. No love for His glory. And as long as we have a cold, dead heart there be no faith in God. But then God does this heart operation where He removes the stone heart and

gives us a heart of flesh. He gives us a heart that beats, and has life, and yearns for spiritual things, and loves Him, and trusts in Him. That's regeneration. It's a transformation from the inside out. And God initiates it.

It's not something we do. In fact, we are entirely passive in regeneration. We don't have anything to do with it, other than the fact that we're the ones who get the new heart. But it's not as though we went and asked for the new heart. We didn't have any desire for something different. With our stone heart we were set on pursuing sinful desires, and we didn't want God. But then God comes and gives us a new heart, a new spirit, new life, new desires. And that changes everything.

In the New Testament we see this language of being "born" or "born of God," or "born again." Here in John 1:12-13, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." To become a Christian, one first has to experience this spiritual birth. One has to be born of God. And the fact is, to be born is not at all our doing. The analogy of birth is very meaningful, because when we're born physically, we're completely passive. We don't decide to be born. It's not by the will of man, as John writes here. You don't make a decision and then become born again. It's actually the other way around. We must be born again, and then we will choose Christ and follow Christ and love Him. We don't take the initiative in being born physically. It's something that happens to us, not something we do. And it's the same with spiritual birth. It's something God does to us, not something we do ourselves. As the verse says, this birth is not of the will of man, but of God.

Nor is it of blood or of the will of the flesh. Which is to say, it doesn't come through family lineage. No other mere human can do this for you either. You can't make it happen, and nobody else can. Only God can do this. Your parents can't baptize you into being a Christian. Your family heritage doesn't get you in. Nothing like that. You could have the godliest parents, you could have godly grandparents and great-grandparents. But that doesn't mean you have spiritual life. Each person, individually, must be born of God, must be born spiritually.

Then in John 3 there is the famous dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Read 3:1-8

In verse 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to be born again (or born from above, the Greek is intentionally ambiguous, it could be either) in order to see the kingdom of God. And this confuses Nicodemus. He is baffled at what this birth could be. Then Jesus says in verse 5, "unless one is born of water and the

Spirit.” And that phrase is most likely a reference to Ezekiel 36: 25ff. I read verses 26-27 a minute ago, but verse 25 says, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” Then it goes on, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.” Those verses seem to be the background for Jesus’ statement that one must be born “of water and the Spirit.” It’s this spiritual cleansing from sin that is connected with rebirth here.

In verse 6 we see the special role of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Flesh produces flesh, but the Spirit produces spirit. This is a different kind of birth. It’s not just another physical birth, as Nicodemus envisions. It’s a spiritual birth that the Spirit brings about.

Verse 8 adds to the emphasis on God’s initiative and our passivity in the miracle of regeneration. Because the Spirit is like the wind, and He blows where He wishes. He is not waiting around to see who is going to exercise faith of their own free will, and then He’s going to grant new birth in response to that. No, He works where He wishes. And we cannot fully understand the activities of the Spirit, nor can we predict what He is going to do. But we can see the effects of what He does. Just like we can’t see the wind but we can see the effects of the wind, neither can we see the Spirit, but we can see the effects of the Spirit. And the effects of the Spirit will be evident in those who have been born again. I’ll talk about that more in just a bit.

John writes in 1 John 5:1, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.” Here’s another place where the analogy of birth is used, and it is also a verse that shows the relationship between belief and regeneration. Let me read it again, and pay attention to the verb tenses. “believes” is in the present tense, indicating a continuous action. “have been born” is a perfect tense verb, indicating a completed action with on-going effects. The point being, the verse shows that those who are believing are those who have been previously born of God. The birth happened, and the believing is a result of the birth. Not the other way around. Those who believe are those who were previously born of God.

Peter and James also use the analogy of birth. See 1 Peter 1:3, 23 and James 1:18.

When we turn to Paul, he communicates the idea of regeneration in terms of resurrection from the dead. Ephesians 2 begins with the statement that “you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.” Then in verses 4-6, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the 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—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” So here is another very vivid picture of what God does to us in the act of regeneration. He raises the dead.

We were absolutely dead in our sin. And dead people don't believe. Dead people don't choose to put their faith in Christ. They can't. They can't because they don't want to. UNTIL God acts. When God raises the dead, all of a sudden there are new desires. There is new life. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

In regeneration, God brings totally new life to a person. He does so by bringing the person out of spiritual deadness to spiritual life. It's interesting to think of Lazarus' resurrection as an illustration of this. In John 11 Jesus “cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’” And Lazarus came out! This is the kind of life that God's effectual call brings about. When He calls effectually to one of His elect, that person is given new life. He or she comes to life. Dead people don't make decisions. Dead people don't ponder whether or not to come out of the tomb. It was the call that awakened life in him. Like in creation, God saying “Let there be light,” and there was light. In regeneration He's saying “Let there be life,” and there is life. Out of nothing, there comes new life. We don't decide to trust in Christ and then we are reborn. The rebirth has to come first. God has to breath life into us, and only then can we come out of the tomb and see His beauty and trust in Him and love Him.

A good illustration of this from Scripture is the conversion of Lydia in Acts 17:14 where it says, “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” That is evidence of regeneration. Because if God was not working in her heart, she would not have an interest in Paul's words. At least she would not have an interest that led to conversion. But the Lord opened her heart so that she wanted to know what this man was saying, and as she listened to Paul she understood and believed.

So there is the picture of getting a new heart, the picture of being born, and the picture of being raised from the dead. If you are a Christian, this is what happened to you that enabled you to believe. And you had nothing to do with being regenerated. God did that to you, and then you were irresistibly drawn to Him because now you have a new heart, now you are born to a new reality, now you are a new creature, and you can see God for who He is.

Regeneration happens first, and then faith. First there is the new birth, and then a person repents of their sins and trusts in Christ. That's the process. Because nobody will repent and

believe apart from God's prior working in their heart. That's the reality of our depraved nature. The stone heart, the deadness in sin, keeps us from ever wanting to turn away from our sin and turn to Christ. God must first remove the stone heart and give us a new heart, He must first cause us to be reborn, He must first raise us from the dead. And then we will most certainly mourn over our sin and cling to Him as our only hope of salvation. That's repentance and faith.

For the last few minutes I want to talk about the effects of regeneration. Another way to say this would be to ask the question, "How do you know if God has done this in your life?" Is it true that everyone who says they believe in Jesus have been regenerated? I think most of us know that's not true. There are many people who claim to be Christians who are not. So what are the effects of regeneration? What are the distinguishing marks of a person who truly has new life in Christ?

The book of 1 John has quite a bit to say about this. 1 John 2:29, first of all, "If you know that he [Christ] is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him." So one of the evidences of being born again is practicing righteousness. Those whom God regenerates will live a changed life. They will begin to live righteous lives. Not perfectly righteous. That will never happen in this life. But there will be a clear and evident change from one's previous sinful lifestyle. The new desires will produce new behavior.

Next, in 3:9 John writes, "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God." Again, this shouldn't be read to say that we live perfectly. John clearly doesn't mean that. After all, in chapter 1:8 he wrote, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." So John is not denying that we are sinners and that we will continue to sin in this life. But the point is that we will not live in sin. We will struggle against sin and fight against sin. That's evidence that there is new life in a person. We won't make a practice of sinning, as this translation renders it. We won't keep on sinning. In other words, the patterns of sin that were present in our lives before God gave us new life, those patterns of sin will be broken, at least gradually.

1 John 4:7 gives another evidence of regeneration. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." Love is another distinguishing mark of being born again. Those who have new life will demonstrate a genuine love for others. Sin will still be present in our imperfect love for others, but there will be a

growing love in our hearts, especially for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I'll finish with 5:1, which I read earlier: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him." Belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, is an obvious evidence of regeneration.

The effects of regeneration will be seen in a person who is truly born again. It won't be perfection. But you can ask yourself whether or not you are seeking the Lord, submitting to the Lord, and fighting sin. If there is a desire in your heart to overcome sin, and resist temptation, and a desire to obey God and live a righteous life. Those desires are the result of a new heart, new birth, and new life.

John Bunyan, the writer of the Christian classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, preached his last sermon on these verses in John 1:12-13. Here's one of the things he said: "You that are called born of God, and Christians, if you be not criers, there is no spiritual life in you; if you be born of God, you are crying ones; as soon as he has raised you out of the dark dungeon of sin, you cannot but cry to God." That's a good summary. Are you crying out to God for help and for hope? Are you aware of your dependence on Him? Are you aware of what He's saved you from?

And let me speak to unbelievers here at the end for a moment. If you're not yet a believer, I hope you will desire new life. I hope you'll begin to see, that God will give you eyes to see, your desperate need for something to radically change inside of you. I hope you'll begin to see that the changes that need to happen in your life are far beyond your ability to make happen. The self-help ideas are not going to get to the real problems. You need a new heart. You need to be raised from the dead, spiritually. You need to be born again, born of God.

Maybe God is doing that in you right now, by His Word, by the power of His Spirit. If so, your response will be to mourn over your sin, to confess your sin to the Lord, and to trust that Jesus Christ is your only hope for salvation. And you'll put your trust in Him, that He paid the penalty for your sin so that you can be forgiven.

It's wonderful news! I'd love to talk to you more about it. It's wonderful news that God has not left us to ourselves, in our spiritual death, with our stone hearts. He sent a light into the world. He sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to become one of us, live among us, and go to the cross for us even though we so harshly rejected Him.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”
(John 1:12–13, ESV)

Just think of it, friends. Meditate on this, brothers and sisters in Christ. We, who deserve to be outcasts forever because we’ve rejected God’s Son, we can be adopted into God’s family, we can become children of God. And this happens through the new birth. Being born of God, receiving Him, believing in His name . . . this comes with the immense privilege of being part of the family of God.

Let’s rejoice in this as we turn our thoughts to the Lord’s Supper.