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The Means of Salvation

John 3:5

Intro: A young Arab boy was riding down the road on a donkey when he saw a small sparrow lying on his back in the road. There was this small scrawny object with two tiny legs pointing to the sky. At first the boy thought the sparrow was dead. When he realized the bird was still alive he got down from his donkey to speak to him. “Are you all right?” he asked. “Yes,” the sparrow answered. “Then what are you doing lying on your back with your legs pointed up at the sky?” “Haven’t you heard the rumor?” the sparrow asked. “They say that heaven is going to fall.” “If it does,” said the Arab boy, “surely you don’t think you’re going to hold up the sky with those two scrawny legs?” The bird looked at him with the most solemn face and then said, “One does the best one can.”

Humorous, yes; but the foolishness of the sparrow only illustrates the folly of human beings who think they can hold off the wrath of divine judgment by the two scrawny legs of human *achievement* and human *intellect*.

According to Scripture, this is impossible. Thus, the first few verses of John 3 have shown us that no man can please God either by his own *achievements* or by his *intellect*. *Instead* a man **must** be *born again*. More specifically, Jesus said, “...*unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (3b). But, what *is* the kingdom of God?

The OT occasionally presents the kingdom of God in a *broad, general* sense that refers to His *eternal, universal rule* (Ex 15:18; Ps 103:19). It’s also used in a *more limited* sense: depicting God’s kingdom *manifested on earth*: where it’s **accepted and obeyed** by men, as among His people Israel or, more specifically, among the *righteous* in Israel. To A Jew of Nic’s standing and training, seeing *the kingdom of God* meant *to witness* or *have a share in* the final consummation of God’s kingly rule, when it would be accepted and obeyed universally. It meant *participating in the age to come*, the *resurrection life*. Of course, Jesus is referring to that but He’s also referring to much more than that!

Jesus is speaking of a *new birth*, a *regeneration* that is to be experienced, not in the *sweet bye and bye*, but *the here and now*. To be born again means to immediately enter into that life of the age to come, receive it and

walk in it!

It's here that Nicodemus asks the question everyone wants the answer to, "Ok, you say a man must be born again. How is that even possible? **How** exactly **can** a man be born again?" In response to this question—one of the most important questions anyone could ever ask—Jesus gives Nicodemus (and us) two solid **answers**.

again – Jesus actually gave the **first** answer to Nic's question **before** he could even ask it. He said in **vs3** that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is **born again**. He repeats it again in **vs7**, "**You must be born again**." The first **answer** is hidden in the meaning of the Greek word translated **again**. Its one of two Greek words often translated **again** in the NT. One is **palin**, which simply means **the repetition of an act**. The other word is **anōthen** (used here), which also means **the repetition of an act** but implies much more. In the first place, **anōthen** can also be translated "from above" as in **3:31**. **Above** directs our gaze to heaven. So, when Jesus uses **anōthen** here instead of **palin**, He's telling Nicodemus that the **new birth is supernatural** and has its **origin** in **God**.

But, there's an even sharper distinction that also bears this out. **Palin** refers to the repetition of an act. **Anōthen** also refers to the repetition of an act, but with one other detail: the repetition of the act **must have** the **same source** as the first. Suppose a concert pianist came in here and played some of Beethoven's works. Now, imagine you're all Greeks and you wanted to hear it again. If you were to cry out "**Palin**" (Play it again!), it'd mean that I could sit down at the piano and try and do it. **Palin** only means you want to hear the **music** repeated. But, if you cry out, "**Anōthen**," it means the repeated music would need to have the **same source** as the first playing. That means the professional would have to play it again. So, when Jesus says, "**born again**," He's saying the **new birth** must have the **same source** as the **original birth**. In other words, **Nicodemus would have to be brought to life spiritually by God**.

Now, I'm not talking about Nic's original birth but the original birth of mankind. This takes us back to the beginning of Genesis, **before** the fall (**Gen 2:7**). Adam was created from the dust of the ground but that's the mechanics of his creation. This verse clearly states that the source of Adam's life came directly from God Himself. He breathed into Adam the

breath of life. When Adam sinned he **lost** God's life, first spiritually and then physically. So, in the 1st answer to Nic's question, Jesus tells him he **needs** to be born again **just as Adam was born**. **God** was the **source** of Adam's life. Thus, Nic also needs a *fresh impartation* of spiritual life; there must be a **new** act of **creation within** him.

The **second** answer to Nic's question is given in **vs5** and it develops Jesus' explanation of the new birth a little more.

5 – Water...Spirit– So far in **ch3**, Jesus has focused exclusively on the **need** for the **new birth**, but here in **vs5** He will reference for all humanity the **means** by which the **new birth** occurs. Jesus has explained to Nic the source of the **new birth** but now He begins to explain in a more technical way **how** the **new birth** comes about in the human heart. It occurs quite literally by “**water**” and “**breath**,” or as most translations render it: **by water and the Spirit**.

There are several interpretations of what this phrase means. Normally, I don't like to bore you with the minutia of doctrinal disparity but we are talking about the new birth here; salvation. One of the most important doctrines we can ever hope to understand. So, it's important that we look at these various viewpoints and try to nail down the most plausible interpretation because an accurate understanding of salvation is critical for a believer's walk and witness.

1) 1st interpretation takes **water** as referring to **physical birth**. Some very well known and well respected Bible teachers hold to this. The connection is the fact that physical birth is always preceded by the release of embryonic fluid from the womb. I must admit, on the face of it, it makes perfect sense but is this what Jesus is talking about?

Remember, Jesus is **not** discussing the **chronology** of the **new birth** but the **means** of it – how it occurs in your heart.

If this were the correct explanation then Jesus would be saying that in order for a person to be saved he must first be born physically and then his physical birth must be followed by a spiritual birth. When it's presented this way the idea begins to fall apart. For **one** thing, “water” is never used in this way any where else in Scripture. For **another**, the need for physical birth is so obvious, why would Jesus waste time saying it. **Finally** and most

decisively, the biggest problem with this view is that since Jesus is stating that a person is born again by water as well as by the Spirit, if water refers to physical birth, this is just not true. Physical birth can never be part of the gift of (and act of) salvation.

2) 2nd interpretation sees water as referring to water baptism. As strange as this may sound to us, it's necessary for us to deal with this because there is an entire denomination that has as one of its major doctrines that baptism is part of salvation. But, this doctrine is not supported in our text or anywhere else in Scripture. In fact, this doctrine is not supported by biblical theology at all. Our text mentions nothing about baptism at all and the Bible consistently teaches that no one is saved by any **external rite** or **ceremony** of religion (1 Sam 16:7; Rom 2:28-29; Gal 2:15). Baptism acts as a physical sign of the spiritual **new birth** that has already taken place in the heart of the believer. Thus, if baptism is **a sign** of salvation it cannot very well be **the agent** by which salvation occurs. It cannot be both!

3) 3rd interpretation takes both parts of the phrase symbolically. **Water** refers to **cleansing**; **Spirit** refers to **power**. Meaning you must be both cleansed and filled with power. It is true that the sinner must be cleansed from his sin and that it is the Christian's privilege to be endued with power from on high, but again, that's not the primary meaning of this passage. Both cleansing and power are part of the package of the **new birth**, but these verses deal with **the way** the **new birth** itself comes about. Plus, this rendering doesn't relate in any way to the **birth metaphor** of the context.

4) 4th explanation proposed by a Greek scholar sees "**water**" as a **metaphor** as used in other NT texts. "**Water**" is often used in Scripture to refer to the **Holy Spirit** – ie. John 4:14 Jesus tells the woman of Samaria that He will give her "**a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life**" (John 4:14). In John 7:37-38, nearly the same verbiage is used. After, John adds an explanation, "**By this He meant the Spirit**" (v. 39). This interpretation would mean a repetition of ideas in the phrase forcing the "**and**" to be changed to "**even**" (**born of water, even the Spirit**). While this explanation may be plausible, another is even better. The Bible does occasionally use **water** as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit but that's not the only spiritual reality **water** is used as a metaphor to describe.

Water's also used as a metaphor for the written Word of God. Eph 5:26

says Christ gave Himself for the church “**to sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.**” **Ps 119:9** declares, “**How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed (living) according to Your word.**” Jesus told the disciples, “**You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you**” (**Jn 15:3**). **James 1:18** clearly identifies Scripture as the **means** by which the **new birth** takes place, he just doesn’t use water as the metaphor to describe it.

From the perspective of these verses **God is** shown as **the Divine Begetter**, the **Father of His spiritual children**, and we now can see that **the written Word of God** together with the **working of His Holy Spirit** is the **means** by which the **new birth** occurs. That’s why the Bible tells us that it pleased God to save people by the foolishness of preaching: **people are reborn through the efforts of those who proclaim God’s Word** (**Rom 10:14-15; 1 Cor 1:21**).

There’s one more verse that makes this connection even clearer. **1 Peter 1:23**. In **ch1**, Peter’s discussing the **means** by which a person enters God’s family. He speaks of the importance of Christ’s death (**18-19**) and the fact that the **new birth** occurs through faith (**21**). Having established these truths, he emphasizes in vs23 that we are born again by means of God’s Word, which he compares to the male life germ. The Latin Vulgate uses the word semen here.

When we take all this together with what the Bible says about **faith** and the **work of the Holy Spirit** in salvation, we can understand the essence of the **new birth** in terms of **human conception**. What happens when a person is **born again**? **1st**) God plants in their heart the “ovum” of saving faith. **2nd**), God sends the seed of His Word (**containing divine life**) which combined with the ovum of faith results in **conception**. This is how **new spiritual life** comes into existence, a life that has its **origin** in God & thus, has **no** connection whatever with the sinful life that surrounds it.

God didn’t use anything of Abram when he made Abraham. He did not use anything of Simon when He created the new Peter. He did not use anything of Saul when he made Paul. He does not use anything of our old sinful and Adamic nature when he produces the new life of Christ within us. That’s why we can now say, “**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new**” (**2 Cor 5:17**).

This is what Jesus was telling Nicodemus. If you've never received Jesus Christ as your Savior, this is what Jesus is speaking to you today! You'll never gain entrance into God's family by your own **achievements** or **intellect**. The work of the **new birth** is God's alone. It is made **possible** by the death and resurrection of Jesus but the actual conception of **new spiritual life** requires **faith** in the **Word of God**. This is the way every believer has entered into God's family, from righteous Abel on down to the last believer who will ever live. Every believer is **born again** by the same process and is thus granted entrance into the family of God through God's direct & active involvement in their life.

Some may say that they are exempt from this because they simply don't believe in any of it. In that case, I would direct you to carefully review verses 3 and 5 of our text. Notice, if you will, in these two verses, Jesus preferences both of His responses to Nicodemus with the words, "**most assuredly**." This is a significant. Some translations render it, "**Indeed and in truth**," while the KJV renders it "**Verily, verily**" which is not familiar to our common vernacular but is pretty close to the original language. It literally reads "**Amen, amen**" or "**so be it, so be it**." This is known as the **double Amen** and it speaks to not only the **veracity** but also the **seriousness** of the statement that follows. When Jesus prefaces a statement with "**Amen, amen**" He's not saying "**Believe Me when I say...**" because He is God, Who cannot lie, and we should believe everything He says anyway. No, what He's saying by using this phrase is that the truths He is sharing are both **undeniable** and **unavoidable**. There will come a time in the experience of every human ever born when they will be confronted with the necessity of the new birth. 😊