

Why Do We Need to Be Born Again? - Part 1

by John Piper

We need to be born again because we are dead in trespasses and sin, and only through the new birth can we be made alive and experience a unique kind of divine love.

Duration: 43:25

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Ephesians 2:1-6

Topics: "Spiritual Rebirth", "Salvation Grace"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding the concepts of mercy, love, and grace. He shares personal experiences of near-death situations to illustrate the overwhelming feeling of gratitude and relief when someone is saved from harm. The speaker then introduces John Calvin's Institutes, stating that true wisdom consists of knowing God and ourselves. He acknowledges that while fully knowing oneself is impossible, the Bible provides clear insight into the condition of our souls, highlighting the need for spiritual rebirth. The speaker emphasizes the seriousness of being born again and warns against treating it lightly or as a mere self-improvement project.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.desiringgod.org The sermon text for today is found in Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 1 through 10. And you were dead in the trespasses and sin in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

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 that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Let's pray. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive.

Oh God, thank you. Father, I pray that a humble gratitude would wash over this people for life in the Spirit. And I pray, oh God, that any who is dead here, who does not embrace Jesus as Lord, rest in Jesus as Savior, treasure Jesus as gold, would tonight, today, North Campus, South Campus, and here, be made alive.

This is your work, not mine. I plead with you to make it happen. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. The first sentence in one of the greatest books that has ever been written about God, about 500 years ago, namely John Calvin's Institutes, begins, or is, this sentence. Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves.

Now, it probably doesn't require any reminding today that the knowledge of God is difficult to come by and to comprehend and to embrace. He's God. That everyone would assume the knowledge of God is a challenge, if he's God and we're not.

However, it might bear reminding that the knowledge of ourselves is also difficult. In fact, I'm going to venture to say it is more difficult than the knowledge of God. And the reason I'm going to venture that risky statement is because to know yourself the way you need to know yourself requires that you first know God.

Therefore, self-knowledge and God-knowledge are both required for self-knowledge. And another reason why self-knowledge is, I think, perhaps more difficult is because we're prone to think we have it when we don't have it. There is not a person on the planet who knows himself as deeply as we need to know ourselves.

Nobody. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it? David, a great knower of himself, wrote in Psalm 19 verse 12, Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.

In other words, we never get to the bottom of our sinfulness. We have to end all of our prayers of confession with, And as well, declare me innocent of the ones that are tucked down so deeply in the folds of my self-justifications that I didn't see them and I'll never see them until the judgment day exposes them. If our forgiveness depended on the fullness of the knowledge of our sins, we would all perish without exception.

No one knows the extent of his sinfulness. No one. I don't care how guilty you feel tonight.

You don't know how bad you are. You don't know. It's deeper than anyone can fathom.

The Bible, however, that glorious book of God, does not leave us without help in knowing ourselves. The fact that you can't know yourself fully does not mean you can't know yourself deeply. Significantly.

And to that degree, truly. Indeed, you must. You just must.

The Bible has a clear and devastating word about our souls. And the reason it has a clear and devastating work about our souls is so that we will know what we need and dance when God gives it. We're in a series on the new birth.

John 3.7 says you must be born again. And John 3.3 says unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. In other words, being born again is serious.

To put it mildly. I feel a tremendous weight in this series. That we not be cavalier about this.

That I not joke around about this. That I not entertain you with this. You will not see the kingdom if you're not born again.

You'll perish forever if you're not born again. This is not child's play. It's not turning over a new leaf.

It's not moral improvement. It's not self-discipline. The question is why do we need this? Why do we need this? What's wrong with us? I mean, can't we just get a new start? Can we just do some steps? No.

Ephesians chapter 2 verse 1 and verse 5 says. Verse 1. You were dead in trespasses and sins. Verse 5. God being rich in mercy.

This is 4 and 5. God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us. Even when we were dead. There it is the second time.

We were dead. In our trespasses made us alive. Made us alive.

Together with Christ by grace. You have been saved. So two times.

Verse 1. Verse 5. We're dead. The remedy in verse 5 is. God made us alive.

And notice the roots of it in verse 4. Being rich in mercy. Out of the great love with which he loved us. Made us alive.

So what's underneath this act? It's wealth of mercy and greatness of love. Which means this. You will never enjoy to the full.

The greatness of the love of God. Until you know you were dead. It'll seem like a light thing.

Grew up in the church. Kept my nose clean. What's the big deal? Why are you saying? Why do people lift their hands? What's so great about this salvation? Those people who talk that way.

Don't know themselves. They don't know themselves. It takes a wealth of divine mercy.

It takes greatness of love. It takes sovereign grace. To make us alive.

And that's what's happened. If you're a Christian. I take this phrase.

He made us alive. To be identical with the new birth. It's not the new birth language.

I know that. Just the same reality. We were dead.

He made us alive. That which is born of the spirit is spirit. It is the spirit that gives life.

John 6.63. So that statement is the spirit that gives life. And he made us alive. Same thing.

So. Now we can say it. Regeneration.

Understanding what's happened to you. And experiencing the regeneration. The new birth.

The being made alive. Is the experience of a unique kind of divine love. This is marriage.

Love. This is covenant love. He plights his trough with the dead.

And makes her his own. Forever. Nobody can pluck them out of my hand.

When I marry, it's over. She's mine. This is unique covenant keeping love.

He doesn't love everybody like this. Or everybody would be born again. Know yourself covenanted with an extraordinary great love.

Riches of mercy. You were dead. Why are you alive? Great covenant love.

Great overflowing mercy. Sovereign grace. Those are the three words in this text.

Mercy. Love. Grace.

So the question is. Why did it take a new birth? Why couldn't you just do it another way? Why can't we just be less dramatic? Less supernatural. Less scary.

Why do you have to do it this way? Why do we need this? That's the focus today. And, Lord willing, next time. So two messages on why is it necessary.

We've spent three messages on what is it. And now two messages on why. Why is this so necessary? And there are one main reason given in this text.

Namely, we're dead. And I want to unpack that with nine other biblical ways of saying it that explain deadness. So think of ten explanations of who we are in need of new birth.

That's where I'm going. Seven of them, Lord willing, in this sermon. And three of them plus next time.

The plus is. Suppose you catch on to how desperate we are in need of new birth. You still might ask, why isn't just forgiveness and justification enough? Just don't count it.

Isn't that what you've been preaching for nine years, for goodness sakes, from Romans? He counts us righteous with an alien righteousness not our own. Why do we need to be born again and change? That's next week. Number one of ten.

All of these are simply an effort to help me know myself. I don't know myself. James talks about the Bible as looking at yourself in a mirror, right? It's because the mirror in the bathroom lies.

It doesn't help at all. It might make you feel bad, but not real deep. Oh shoot, another wrinkle.

That's not the point at all. The Bible is is another kind of mirror, and that's I'm just going to try to hold it up. I want to be faithful.

Don't care about what John Piper says. But if I read Bible. Listen.

So number one. Stay with this for a moment. Apart from the new birth, we are dead in trespasses and sin.

Dead means what? Lifeless, but not physically lifeless. Not morally lifeless. Look at verse one.

Walking. Following the world. We're not dead.

We're following. We got legs. Verse two.

Passions of the flesh. Desires of the body and the mind. Some dead men.

So what's dead mean? You're walking. You're following. You're passionate.

You're desiring. What's this dead business? It means spiritually dead. That is a rock toward God.

Resistant to God. Unresponsive, insensitive to God, to the gospel, to the beauty of Christ, to the lordship of Jesus. No, no moving, no quickening, no loving, no embracing, no treasuring.

Towards that. Oh, we can love all the wrong things. And we can't love the right things.

Spiritually dead. Number two. Apart from the new birth, we are by nature children of wrath.

Verse three. By nature, children of wrath. Let that phrase sink in.

Verse three. We were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. In other words, nobody's excluded.

We're all children of wrath. Now, the point of that is this. To make clear that our problem is not first or primarily what we do, but who we are.

I am my main problem. You aren't my problem. My parents are not my problem.

My job is not my problem. I'm my problem. That's what it says.

I'm by nature suited for wrath. That means that God in his infinite holiness, when he is angry at me, is doing the perfectly suitable thing. We're so quick to tell people God's not mad at us.

We're designed for madness at us. That's who we are. We're woven in our mother's womb like that.

In sin did my mother conceive me. I was brought forth in iniquity, David said. I came in bent and rebellious and selfish and demanding.

It's like you're sitting there right now bristling at this. That's who we are. I didn't have a good nature.

Do some bad things and get a bad nature. There's a name for that, but I won't bother you with the old theological name. Just confuse everybody.

Start off good or neutral. Do some bad things. Enough of bad things give you a bad nature.

Now you're stuck and there'll be some bad stuff in the future. It didn't happen that way. That's not the way the Bible describes us.

We are children of wrath. That's who I am. My nature is selfish.

My nature is self-centered. My nature is demanding. And my nature is that I am really skilled, really skilled in making you feel like you're the problem.

Some people are better at this than others. Everybody's a little bit good at it. A thousand ways to do it.

And if your response to that statement is, I know somebody like that, you may be totally blind to the deceitfulness of your own heart. Paul describes our nature as children of wrath. In other words, God's wrath belongs to us the way a parent belongs to a child.

Children of wrath. Our nature is so rebellious, so selfish, so callous towards the majesty of God that His holy anger is right, natural, good, wise, fitting, and there will be no objection at the last day when it is poured out. Number three.

Apart from the new birth, we love darkness and hate the light. We love darkness and hate the light. John 3, the Gospel of John, Jesus, John 3, 19 and 20.

This is the judgment that light has come into the world, and people love the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his work should be exposed. So Jesus is simply unfolding here some of what our deadness looks like apart from the new birth.

We're not neutral. When spiritual light approaches, we resist it. When darkness approaches, we embrace it.

We're very alive in all the wrong ways. Embracing darkness, stiff-arming light. We can love, we can hate.

I don't need to be born again. I can love and hate all the wrong things. Hate will not be loved.

Love will not be hate. You need a new birth. Number four.

Apart from the new birth, our hearts are hard like stone. We saw this last time from Ezekiel 36. I will take out from you the heart of stone, put in the heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36, 26. But turn over with me if you've got your Bible open still to Ephesians to chapter 4, verse 18. It's one of those amazingly rich, layered verses that's worth about a half an hour meditation or a lifetime.

Ephesians 4, 18. They are darkened. This is talking about the Gentiles in general.

That's all of us, basically. They are darkened in their understanding. Now, trace this back.

He's got four levels here, from darkness to alienation, to ignorance, to hardness. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them. And you might stop there and say, oh, I see, our problem is ignorance.

Don't stop there. Due to the hardness of their heart. At the bottom is not ignorance.

Ignorance is not the main problem. Underneath my ignorance is hard resistance to knowledge. Romans 1, I suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

I could hear it on the radio. I could hear it from Billy Graham. I could read it in a book.

I could hear it at church. I could pick up a track and it's going down. I'm going to resist this truth.

Ignorance is not my problem. Hardness is my problem, which means the ignorance is guilty ignorance. There is innocent ignorance and guilty ignorance.

This is guilty ignorance because it's rooted in resistance, hardness. Number five. Apart from the new birth, we are unable to submit to God or please God.

Romans 8, 7 and 8. Listen to Romans 8, 7. For the mind that is set on the flesh, literally the mind of the flesh, is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot.

That's a serious word. And those who are in the flesh cannot please God. That's terrifying.

We know what he means by mind of the flesh because of verse 9. Next verse. You are not in the flesh, but in the spirit, if the spirit of God dwells in you. In other words, if you've been born again.

So he's describing the mind apart from the Holy Spirit, that is the mind of the flesh, the natural mind. And here's what he says about it. That natural mind that you're born with is hostile to God.

It does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

We must be born again. In other words, we are so resistant to God's authority that we will not and therefore cannot. I'll say a little more about that in just a minute.

If we cannot submit to him, then we cannot please him. That's how dead and dark and hard every human being is apart from the new birth. Which is why we must be born again.

Number six. Apart from the new birth, we are unable to accept the gospel. First Corinthians 2.14. Goes like this.

The natural person, in other words, that which is born of the flesh is flesh. Unregenerate person not born again. The natural person, what we all are by nature, does not accept the things of the Spirit of God.

For they are folly to him. That's an important ground clause. So read again.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God. Because they are foolishness to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The problem is not that they're over his head.

The problem is that they hit him square in the head and his heart hates them so much his head says stupid. Our heads, before the new birth, warrant the desires of our heart. Justify the desires of our heart.

If our heart doesn't like the authority of God, our head thinks of five good reasons why he doesn't have it. And makes him look foolish. Makes the gospel look foolish.

One of the first things that happens in the newborn soul is the gospel doesn't look foolish anymore. It looks gloriously beautiful to me. That's what happens in the new birth.

It's not stupid anymore. It's not wasted anymore. It's essential.

It's at the heart of the universe now. In my need. So, we are unable to understand them because we regard them as foolish and they are spiritually discerned.

Now, mark this. When it says we cannot understand them or we cannot please God in Romans 7, that's a moral cannot. Not a physical cannot.

It's not a hard distinction to think of. A physical cannot would be somebody who's big and strong. He's got his arms around you and won't let you do what you deeply want to do.

You're not responsible when that happens. Because your want to is what you're responsible for. What I mean by impossible and what I think Paul means by you cannot please God and you cannot understand the gospel is you resist it, hate it, dislike it so much it is morally impossible for you to embrace it.

That's a real impossibility. The heart can be so resistant to something that when the word comes, embrace it. You cannot.

And you're blameworthy for it. Because the resistance is here. It's my corruption.

It's my depravity. It's my pride. It's my desire to be somebody.

It's my fear of man. It's all the ugliness of me. That's keeping me from doing what I ought to do and therefore I'm guilty for not doing what I cannot do.

Because my cannot is a moral cannot. I'm not inside saying everything in me wants that and something's keeping me from it. That doesn't happen.

If everything in you wants it, it's yours. Number seven, this is the last one for this message. Number seven, apart from the new birth, we are unable to come to Christ or embrace him as Lord.

Listen to this simple word. You've read it many times. First Corinthians 12 verse 3, Paul says, no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

First Corinthians 12 verse 3. No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. Now there's two things that does not mean. One, it doesn't mean that actors on a stage cannot say the word Jesus is Lord when they're unbelieving.

Of course they can. So can robots. Computers can say it.

They don't have the Holy Spirit. It also doesn't mean there's no such thing as hypocrites, namely somebody who says Jesus is Lord and he's not in their lives. So what does it mean? It just means you can't say it and mean it.

That's all. It's not complicated. No one can from their heart see the authority of Jesus Christ over the universe and say, yes, I embrace him as my king.

Nobody can say that from their heart apart from the Holy Spirit. That's what he means. We must be born again.

John chapter 6 is one of those chapters that's pushing on this. Verse 37 of John 6. All that the Father gives me will come to me. Verse 44.

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. Verse 65. No one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father.

So you've got a drawing, a granting, a giving. All of them describing regeneration. When God draws us into union with Jesus Christ, he's regenerating us.

And nobody comes unless the Father does that. So I'm done with the first seven descriptions of who we are. There are three more, plus, plus.

So I want to end on this amazingly hope-filled set of verses. We're back at the text now. Ephesians 2, verses 4 and 5. Please love these verses.

They have meant so much to me in the last couple of days. I paused a few times in my preparation. I closed my eyes and I said, thank you that I'm alive.

You come close to dying. You're at the bottom of a pool. Have a wave knock the feet out from under you when you're a little kid.

Just miss a speeding car by a quarter of an inch. How do you feel? If your dad sweeps you up and grabs you out of the wave, or you make it to the top of the pool, or took a layer of paint off but didn't kill me. How do you feel? That's what I want you to feel.

Only way more. God, being rich in mercy, out of the great love, so rich in mercy, great in love, made us alive. By grace you have been saved.

So if you've ever wondered, where's a verse where I can always go to make sure I understand the word mercy, the word love, and the word grace? There it is. Let's go there. It just, it's so clear.

I was dead. Mercy was rich. Grace was free.

Starts to sound like a gospel song. Mercy there was grace and grace was free. Pardon there was multiplied for me.

Grace, mercy, love, because he made us alive. There are two responses you could have to that in this, as we close. Two responses.

One response in this room, North Campus, South Campus, one response could be, but what about, but how could he, but I don't, theoretical, impersonal, trying to fit it in, trying to make sense, that's one kind of response. The other one's the one I'm praying for. If you need to go through that first one, got patience.

We've been there. But the other one is the one I'm after. God is after, I believe.

We'd go to something like this. God, I'm in this room tonight for a reason. If you exist at all, I'm here, if you're hearing this word about how needy I am, I'm here.

And I assume that's not a mistake, and you're talking to me. And sounds pretty right to me, because I think I know myself at least that much. And I've seen it, you've softened me.

I don't know why, I'm just sitting here, didn't want to be here. You've softened me, and you didn't let me get up and leave. I'm starting to feel like maybe there's something to this mercy, and love, and grace.

God, I just don't feel like resisting anymore. I submit. I'm done.

I'm just done with my dead rebellion. Fred Johnson and I have worked together. Fred's the Outreach Guy up north.

Thanks, Fred, for working to get these response boxes at every door north, downtown, south. So just from now on, I'll just mention it in this message, and I'll mention it periodically. Anytime you leave a service, including right now, and you want to desperately talk to somebody, and you see eight people lined up talking to me here, and you say, well, nope, no hope there.

You write down on a piece of paper, name, email, or phone number, little question, drop it in one of those boxes. Fred said we'll do everything we can to be in touch within 24 hours. So please don't feel like I'm just, I got to leave here totally adrift.

I don't know where to do next. We don't want that to ever be the case at Bethlehem. We want to be there for you, even if things are crowded at the end of a service.

So that goes for all the campuses. Let's pray. Father, I ask that you'd get your arms around this people on all three campuses and hug them to yourself.

With the riches of mercy and the greatness of love and the sovereignty of grace, would you make us alive. Alive to beauty in Christ. Alive to glory in the cross.

Alive to the wonders of heaven. Alive to the preciousness of salvation. Alive to the seriousness of sin.

Alive to the horrors of hell. Alive to the sweetness of love. Make us alive.

And then give it wings. And give it words, I pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

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