

# John 3:5

by St. John Chrysostom

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*The sermon emphasizes the necessity of spiritual birth, represented by baptism, to enter the Kingdom of God and receive eternal life.*

**Scripture:** Luke 12:50, John 3:5, Acts 10:47, Romans 6:4, 1 Corinthians 15:45

**Topics:** "Baptism", "Spiritual Birth"

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## Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the necessity of being born of water and the Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God, highlighting the importance of Baptism as a transformative and essential step in the Christian journey. He explains how the earthly birth is of the flesh and contrasts it with the spiritual birth that leads to salvation and union with God. Chrysostom urges believers to live a life worthy of their baptism, emphasizing the need for unity among Christians and the importance of good deeds and charity as expressions of faith and preparation for the eternal life.

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## Transcript

Verily I say unto you, Unless a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.

1. Little children who go daily to their teachers receive their lessons, and repeat them, and never cease from this kind of acquisition, but sometimes employ nights as well as days, and this they are compelled to do for perishable and transient things. Now we do not ask of you who have come to age such toil as you require of your children; for not every day, but two days only in the week do we exhort you to hearken to our words, and only for a short portion of the day, that your task may be an easy one. For the same reason also we divide to you in small portions what is written in Scripture, that you may be able easily to receive and lay them up in the storehouses of your minds, and take such pains to remember them all, as to be able exactly to repeat them to others yourselves, unless any one be sleepy, and dull, and more idle than a little child.

Let us now attend to the sequel of what has been before said. When Nicodemus fell into error and wrested the words of Christ to the earthly birth, and said that it was not possible for an old man to be born again, observe how Christ in answer more clearly reveals the manner of the Birth, which even thus had difficulty for the carnal enquirer, yet still was able to raise the hearer from his low opinion of it. What says He? Verily I say unto you, Unless a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. What He declares is this: You say that it is impossible, I say that it is so absolutely possible as to be

necessary, and that it is not even possible otherwise to be saved. For necessary things God has made exceedingly easy also. The earthly birth which is according to the flesh, is of the dust, and therefore heaven is walled against it, for what has earth in common with heaven? But that other, which is of the Spirit, easily unfolds to us the arches above. Hear, you as many as are unilluminated, shudder, groan, fearful is the threat, fearful the sentence. It is not (possible), He says, for one not born of water and the Spirit, to enter into the Kingdom of heaven; because he wears the raiment of death, of cursing, of perdition, he has not yet received his Lord's token, he is a stranger and an alien, he has not the royal watchword. Except, He says, a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of heaven.

Yet even thus Nicodemus did not understand. Nothing is worse than to commit spiritual things to argument; it was this that would not allow him to suppose anything sublime and great. This is why we are called faithful, that having left the weakness of human reasonings below, we may ascend to the height of faith, and commit most of our blessings to her teaching; and if Nicodemus had done this, the thing would not have been thought by him impossible. What then does Christ? To lead him away from his groveling imagination, and to show that He speaks not of the earthly birth, He says, Unless a man be born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter into the Kingdom of heaven. This He spoke, willing to draw him to the faith by the terror of the threat, and to persuade him not to deem the thing impossible, and taking pains to move him from his imagination as to the carnal birth. I mean, says He, another Birth, O Nicodemus. Why do you draw down the saying to earth? Why do you subject the matter to the necessity of nature? This Birth is too high for such pangs as these; it has nothing in common with you; it is indeed called 'birth,' but in name only has it anything in common, in reality it is different. Remove yourself from that which is common and familiar; a different kind of childbirth bring I into the world; in another manner will I have men to be generated: I have come to bring a new manner of Creation. I formed (man) of earth and water; but that which was formed was unprofitable, the vessel was wrenched awry; I will no more form them of earth and water, but 'of water' and 'of the Spirit.'

And if any one asks, How of water? I also will ask, How of earth? How was the clay separated into different parts? How was the material uniform, (it was earth only,) and the things made from it, various and of every kind? Whence are the bones, and sinews, and arteries, and veins? Whence the membranes, and vessels of the organs, the cartilages, the tissues, the liver, spleen, and heart? Whence the skin, and blood, and mucus, and bile? Whence so great powers, whence such varied colors? These belong not to earth or clay. How does the earth, when it receives the seeds, cause them to shoot, while the flesh receiving them wastes them? How does the earth nourish what is put into it, while the flesh is nourished by these things, and does not nourish them? The earth, for instance, receives water, and makes it wine; the flesh often receives wine, and changes it into water. Whence then is it clear that these things are formed of earth, when the nature of the earth is, according to what has been said, contrary to that of the body? I cannot discover by reasoning, I accept it by faith only. If then things which take place daily, and which we handle, require faith, much more do those which are more mysterious and more spiritual than these. For as the earth, which is soulless and motionless, was empowered by the will of God, and such wonders were worked in it; much more when the Spirit is present with the water, do all those things so strange and transcending reason, easily take place.

2. Do not then disbelieve these things, because you see them not; thou dost not see your soul, and yet you believe that you have a soul, and that it is a something different besides the body.

But Christ led him not in by this example, but by another; the instance of the soul, though it is incorporeal, He did not adduce for that reason, because His hearer's disposition was as yet too dull. He sets before him another, which has no connection with the density of solid bodies, yet does not reach so high as to the incorporeal natures; that is, the movement of wind. He begins at first with water, which is lighter than earth, but denser than air. And as in the beginning earth was the subject material, but the whole was of Him who molded it; so also now water is the subject material, and the whole is of the grace of the Spirit: then, man became a living soul, Genesis 2:7; now he becomes a quickening Spirit. But great is the difference between the two. Soul affords not life to any other than him in whom it is; Spirit not only lives, but affords life to others also. Thus, for instance, the Apostles even raised the dead. Then, man was formed last, when the creation had been accomplished; now, on the contrary, the new man is formed before the new creation; he is born first, and then the world is fashioned anew. 1 Corinthians 15:45 And as in the beginning He formed him entire, so He creates him entire now. Then He said, Let us make for him a help Genesis 2:18, Septuagint, but here He said nothing of the kind. What other help shall he need, who has received the gift of the Spirit? What further need of assistance has he, who belongs to the Body of Christ? Then He made man in the image of God, now He has united him with God Himself; then He bade him rule over the fishes and beasts, now He has exalted our first-fruits above the heavens; then He gave him a garden for his abode, now He has opened heaven to us; then man was formed on the sixth day, when the world was almost finished; but now on the first, at the very beginning, at the time when light was made before. From all which it is plain, that the things accomplished belonged to another and a better life, and to a condition having no end.

The first creation then, that of Adam, was from earth; the next, that of the woman, from his rib; the next, that of Abel, from seed; yet we cannot arrive at the comprehension of any one of these, nor prove the circumstances by argument, though they are of a most earthly nature; how then shall we be able to give account of the unseen generation by Baptism, which is far more exalted than these, or to require arguments for that strange and marvelous Birth? Since even Angels stand by while that Generation takes place, but they could not tell the manner of that marvelous working, they stand by only, not performing anything, but beholding what takes place. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, works all. Let us then believe the declaration of God; that is more trustworthy than actual seeing. The sight often is in error, it is impossible that God's Word should fail; let us then believe it; that which called the things that were not into existence may well be trusted when it speaks of their nature. What then says it? That what is effected is a Generation . If any ask, How, stop his mouth with the declaration of God, which is the strongest and a plain proof. If any enquire, Why is water included? let us also in return ask, Wherefore was earth employed at the beginning in the creation of man? for that it was possible for God to make man without earth, is quite plain to every one. Be not then over-curious.

That the need of water is absolute and indispensable, you may learn in this way. On one occasion, when the Spirit had flown down before the water was applied, the Apostle did not stay at this point, but, as though the water were necessary and not superfluous, observe what he says; Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? Acts 10:47

What then is the use of the water? This too I will tell you hereafter, when I reveal to you the hidden mystery. There are also other points of mystical teaching connected with the matter, but for the present I will mention to you one out of many. What is this one? In Baptism are fulfilled the pledges of our covenant with God; burial and death, resurrection and life; and these take place all at once. For when we immerse our heads in the water, the old man is buried as in a tomb below, and wholly sunk forever; then as we

raise them again, the new man rises in its stead. As it is easy for us to dip and to lift our heads again, so it is easy for God to bury the old man, and to show forth the new. And this is done thrice, that you may learn that the power of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost fulfills all this. To show that what we say is no conjecture, hear Paul saying, We are buried with Him by Baptism into death: and again, Our old man is crucified with Him: and again, We have been planted together in the likeness of His death. Romans 6:4-6 And not only is Baptism called a cross, but the cross is called Baptism. With the Baptism, says Christ, that I am baptized withal shall you be baptized Mark 10:39: and, I have a Baptism to be baptized with Luke 12:50 (which you know not); for as we easily dip and lift our heads again, so He also easily died and rose again when He willed or rather much more easily, though He tarried the three days for the dispensation of a certain mystery.

3. Let us then who have been deemed worthy of such mysteries show forth a life worthy of the Gift, that is, a most excellent conversation; and do ye who have not yet been deemed worthy, do all things that you may be so, that we may be one body, that we may be brethren. For as long as we are divided in this respect, though a man be father, or son, or brother, or anything else, he is no true kinsman, as being cut off from that relationship which is from above. What advantages it to be bound by the ties of earthly family, if we are not joined by those of the spiritual?

What profits nearness of kin on earth, if we are to be strangers in heaven? For the Catechumen is a stranger to the Faithful. He has not the same Head, he has not the same Father, he has not the same City, nor Food, nor Raiment, nor Table, nor House, but all are different; all are on earth to the former, to the latter all are in heaven. One has Christ for his King; the other, sin and the devil; the food of one is Christ, of the other, that meat which decays and perishes; one has worms' work for his raiment, the other the Lord of angels; heaven is the city of one, earth of the other.

Since then we have nothing in common, in what, tell me, shall we hold communion? Did we remove the same pangs, did we come forth from the same womb? This has nothing to do with that most perfect relationship. Let us then give diligence that we may become citizens of the city which is above. How long do we tarry over the border, when we ought to reclaim our ancient country? We risk no common danger; for if it should come to pass, (which God forbid!) that through the sudden arrival of death we depart hence uninitiated, though we have ten thousand virtues, our portion will be no other than hell, and the venomous worm, and fire unquenchable, and bonds indissoluble.

But God grant that none of those who hear these words experience that punishment! And this will be, if having been deemed worthy of the sacred mysteries, we build upon that foundation gold, and silver, and precious stones; for so after our departure hence we shall be able to appear in that place rich, when we leave not our riches here, but transport them to inviolable treasuries by the hands of the poor, when we lend to Christ. Many are our debts there, not of money, but of sins; let us then lend Him our riches, that we may receive pardon for our sins; for He it is that judges.

Let us not neglect Him here when He hungers, that He may ever feed us there. Here let us clothe Him, that He leave us not bare of the safety which is from Him. If here we give Him drink, we shall not with the rich man say, Send Lazarus, that with the tip of his finger he may drop water on my broiling tongue. If here we receive Him into our house, there He will prepare many mansions for us; if we go to Him in prison, He too will free us from our bonds; if we take Him in when He is a stranger, He will not suffer us to be strangers to the Kingdom of heaven, but will give us a portion in the City which is above; if we visit Him when He is sick, He also will quickly deliver us from our infirmities.

Let us then, as receiving great things though we give but little, still give the little that we may gain the great. While it is yet time, let us sow, that we may reap. When the winter overtakes us, when the sea is no longer navigable, we are no longer masters of this traffic. But when shall the winter be? When that great and manifest Day is at hand. Then we shall cease to sail this great and broad sea, for such the present life resembles. Now is the time of sowing, then of harvest and of gain. If a man puts not in his seed at seed time and sows in harvest, besides that he effects nothing, he will be ridiculous. But if the present is seed time, it follows that it is a time not for gathering together, but for scattering; let us then scatter, that we may gather in, and not seek to gather in now, lest we lose our harvest; for, as I said, this season summons us to sow, and spend, and lay out, not to collect and lay by. Let us not then give up the opportunity, but let us put in abundant seed, and spare none of our stores, that we may receive them again with abundant recompense, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory, world without end. Amen.

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