

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: I clipped a couple items recently. One is a quote by **Johnny Depp**, who is starring in a new movie as a vicious mobster. He said of his role, “*I found the evil in myself a long time ago, and I’ve accepted it. We’re old friends.*”

Then I was reading *TIME* magazine a couple weeks ago, an article about another forthcoming movie on the life of the Apple genius, **Steve Jobs**, who wasn’t a very nice guy. The screenwriter of the movie, Aaron Sorkin, said, “*I don’t believe that Steve Jobs was a bad person. I have to write the character as if the character is making a case to God why he should be allowed into heaven.*” The *TIME* article concluded, “*And if anybody could talk his way past God himself, it was Steve Jobs.*” That’s an interesting take on God and getting into heaven.

There was one other quote that caught my ear this week. **Patrick Kane**, star for the Chicago Blackhawks, has been implicated in a sexual assault case. But at a news conference on Thursday he said, “*I am confident that once all the facts are brought to light, I will be absolved of having done nothing wrong.*” Wait... what? Kane may be a star in hockey but he has terrible grammar, because what that actually means is “*I will be cleared of innocence,*” ergo “*proven guilty.*” That’s the kind of spiritual doubletalk and muddled thinking that people bring to thoughts about God and eternal life.

- B. Speaking of “the legal process,” John 3 says, “*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.... But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light...*” **Turn to John 3.**
- C. A good man—probably a much better man than Johnny Depp or Steve Jobs or Patrick Kane—came to see Jesus under cover of darkness. His name was Nicodemus. He was very religious, a teacher of the scriptures to all Israel, and I think a genuine seeker. He said to Jesus, “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For*

no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Jesus replied, *“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”*

To which Nicodemus said, **“How is that possible?”**

Jesus explained that a person needed to be born of water and spirit, meaning you have to be cleansed of your sin by God’s own sprinkling of water and you must be given a new heart and life in place of our stone hearts and mortal bodies. To be born again is to be cleansed and recreated by God himself.

- D. In **John 3:9** Nicodemus asks again, *“How can this be?”* **“How is it possible for these things to happen?”** **How** can someone be born of water and spirit?

Jesus begins his answer in **vv.10-13**... I think Jesus begins his answer this way because...

I. YOU WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND NEW BIRTH UNLESS YOU RECOGNIZE JESUS’ AUTHORITY AS THE SON OF MAN (3:10-13)

- A. By “earthly things” Jesus means the spiritual realities of life in this world. “Heavenly things” would be the realities in the world to come. He couldn’t begin to talk about those, *not* because they were too complex, but because they wouldn’t believe him.
- B. Jesus’ point is audacious: he speaks with absolute authority about the spiritual realities on earth and heaven because he came from heaven! And he *is* **the** Son of Man. That’s the Bible’s way of speaking about the quintessential man, sent from God, the Messiah. The prophet Daniel wrote,
- “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”*

There is one man, whose home is heaven, who has been given the very authority of the LORD Almighty. There may have been a lot of things Jesus said that Nicodemus didn't understand but when Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, **Nicodemus knew he was identifying himself as God's Messiah.** Therefore, whatever he says about "earthly things" or "heavenly things" must be believed.

You will never be able to grasp new birth unless you believe this man Jesus has the authority to tell you the truth about new birth.

That said, Jesus returns to the question: how it is possible for God to give us new birth through water and spirit. To answer that, Jesus takes us to a very short and strange story of only six verses in **Num 21**. The people of Israel were making their way through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land. **Num 21:5** says, "*they spoke against God and against Moses.*" It wasn't the first time. Despite all God had done to save them they constantly complained and said they wished they'd stayed in Egypt's slavery. So this is what happened: **Num 21:6-9...**

⁶Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."⁹So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

It is such a strange story. A snake, which God cursed in the garden to crawl on its belly, and which was killing the Israelites, is made of bronze and lifted up for all to see, **the focal point of healing and life.** The snakes killing them were the venomous fruit of their own God-defying sin yet they were healed by gazing on that bronze snake, and the venom that was killing them lost its death-dealing power. All they had to do was look—really *look*—and they lived.

Nicodemus asks, “*How is it possible for someone to be born again—to be born of water and spirit? What do they have to do?*” Jesus replies, in vv.14-15...

II. “JUST AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SNAKE IN THE WILDERNESS, SO THE SON OF MAN MUST BE LIFTED UP, THAT EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE IN HIM.”

What a strange connection. New birth and looking at the snake on the pole.

A. The serpent is the cursed symbol of sin and death, yet up on that pole, it is the very sight of salvation. So it is with Jesus Christ on the cross. **2 Cor. 5:21** says, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God.*” On the cross, Jesus was shot through with our sin. He was no longer innocent and sinless. He was guilty through and through, and when he died there our sin died with him.

B. That expression, “*the Son of Man must be lifted up,*” is important. It has a double meaning. On the one hand, **to be lifted up on the cross** like the bronze snake—**the very focal point of all human sin**, the carrier of all that has killed us and creation, the bearer of the world’s darkness and death.

But on the other hand, **to be lifted up in glory, for the cross is the epitome of God’s love and salvation.** Here is the glory of God! Which is why we sang earlier today, “*We want to see Jesus lifted high.*” It was on the cross that we see the glory of Christ most vividly. **Phil 2:8-9** says, “*And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name....*”

C. Just as the Israelites *stared intently* at that bronze snake on the pole we fix our hearts on Jesus as our Savior. Jesus says, “*that everyone who believes may have eternal life.*” When we look on Jesus to save us we are given new birth. Our hearts are cleansed of sin by God, and we are given new life—the very life and Spirit of God. **Born again of water and spirit by believing in Jesus’ death for us.**

- D. So, Nicodemus, that is how it is possible for someone to be born again. *But why? Why would God do such a thing and have his Messiah suffer such shame?* Here's why: **vv.16-17....**

III. GOD SACRIFICED HIS SON TO GIVE US NEW BIRTH BECAUSE HE LOVES THIS DESPERATELY BAD WORLD (3:16-17)

- A. When we see the phrase, “*God so loved the world,*” we think global; that God’s love is so great he loves everyone in the world from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Which is certainly biblical and true. But that’s not the primary meaning here. I learned from Dr. D. A. Carson: “*The ‘world’ in John is a symbol for all that is in rebellion against God, all that is loveless and disobedient, all that is selfish and sinful. When we read therefore in John 3:16 that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,’ we are not to think that God’s love is being praised by reference to the world’s bigness, but by reference to its badness. This ugly, sinful, rebellious world, this sewer of infidelity, this glut of endless selfishness, this habitation of cruelty, this lover of violence, this promoter of greed, this maker of idols—this world God loved, and loved so much that he sent his Son.*” [Farewell Discourse, p.58].
- B. And if he loves the world, despite its badness, he loves you, too. His love for the whole bad world means that “*whoever believes in him shall not perish.*” *Whoever. Any one.* There are no exceptions, no one whose badness is so bad that God will not let Jesus’ sacrifice count for you.
- C. The alternative, as you can see, is to “perish,” to “be condemned.” We are all born bent toward sin and thus to judgment and death. No exceptions. The Bible says, “*All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory.*” And if all people were condemned by their sin *before* Jesus, how much more *after* rejecting the salvation he offers.

Illus.: I told you in the past about the time when my niece, **Addie Zierman**, was interviewed for an hour on Canada’s National Public Radio. She is a gifted author and was being interviewed about her book on her Christian

pilgrimage. The questions were all prearranged but then the host bushwacked her. This is how she described it.

“Wait,” he says. “Wait. I want to go further here. Like, what about hell?”

I inhale.

“Yeah,” he continues, his voice loud in my right ear.

“A guy comes up to you on the street and says. ‘I don’t believe in Jesus. Am I going to hell?’ What do you say?”

In the studio, the clock ticks, ticks, ticks in front of me, and the audio guy yawns behind the glass, and the question feels like an unexpected blow to the side of the head.

“Am I going to hell?”

Addie hadn’t expected that and she dealt with it humbly and graciously. I think I’d have said to him, *“Would you like to avoid hell? Because God loves you so much that he sent his only Son so you don’t have to perish but have eternal life. But if you’re asking if you can continue life ignoring God’s love and still avoid hell, how would that be possible? If you don’t want God to save you what more can he do?”*

- D. The outcome of believing in Jesus is “eternal life.” Being born again means being changed from a mortal to an immortal. Eternal life begins the moment you are born again and God’s own Spirit fills you. One of the most striking things about Christians in the here and now is that we’re quietly living eternal life already while everyone else is dying on borrowed time.

Illus.: **Alexander Chu** is an outreach pastor at Christ Church in Lake Forest. Which is pretty amazing, when you hear where he started. Alexander was raised in a Buddhist home in Lawrence, KS. His father was a Guggenheim Award-winning science professor and his mother a “tiger mom.” About 20 years ago he arrived at the University of Illinois to study engineering.

He remembers, *“My dorm was full of fervent Christians: the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) students shared a bond with each other and seemed to radiate love. They were the first Asian American Christians I had ever met. They cared about*

things that were important to me—like living with purpose and having compassion for a cause beyond themselves. Living with them, I began to realize that the Buddhism of my upbringing was not in my heart.

“Growing curious about Christianity during my sophomore year, I asked a friend if I could join him at an IVCF gathering. There I heard for the first time God's promises declared in worship songs and saw men and women praising him. I soon joined a gig (Groups Investigating God) and began studying my first Bible, beginning with the Gospel of John. The authority with which Jesus spoke amazed me; it's as if his words jumped off the pages, addressing me directly.”

Alexander spent time exploring the rational basis of the Christian faith. Then, *“In October 1997, during my junior year, I decided to take a study break. I started reading John Stott's pamphlet ‘Becoming a Christian.’ While reading, I grew convinced of my sin and need to be forgiven. I drove to an open forest area that night, knelt down on the grass beneath the stars, and committed my life to Christ. I had grown up in a sea of deities, yet never had a relationship with any of them. On that day, I experienced the living God, Emmanuel: ‘God is with us.’ A peace overtook me as I gazed at the sky. That night I became the first Christian in our family's lineage.”* [CT, 6/11/14, *Beyond Buddha to Beloved*]

Born again.