

Weakness of the flesh

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[0 : 00] Together now to the Gospel of John, Chapter 3. We can read verses 6 to 8. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Marvel not that I said unto thee, ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listed, and thou hearest the sound thereof. But canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth.

So is everyone that is born of the Spirit. This morning we were looking at John 3 in verses 1 to 5 very briefly.

Just covering the surface really. But there were two things that we noticed. First of all, that religion does not make a man a Christian.

There was Nicodemus a Pharisee, a ruler, someone who respected Jesus, listened to his teaching. Somebody who's sorting you with the purposes of God, and that Jesus was once sent by God.

[1 : 17] He was a man, we were saying that if he were among us, we might have been tempted to welcome him to the Lord's table. Simply because of his religion.

But no amount of religion can make a man a Christian. What there needs to be is regeneration. Not religion, but regeneration.

A new birth. In order to be a Christian, in order to enter heaven, you need to be born again. And there is no exception whatsoever.

No one is exempt. He must be born again. George Whitefield, this was one of his favorite texts. He used to preach on it again and again and again. Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. He must be born again.

[2 : 23] And one day somebody came up to George Whitefield and said to him, Mr. Whitefield, why are you preaching that text again? And he said, because you must be born again.

And that's it, you see. The reason that this text must be preached is because we must be born again. It's a necessity.

And the sad thing about our age and about the church in our age is that this message is not always stressed sufficiently. And people live with the notion, a dangerous notion, that they can come to Christ whenever they wish.

That they can put it off until the day before they die, or when they leave school, or when they go on to the academy, or whatever. They think that then they'll be able to come to Christ.

It's as ridiculous a notion of thinking of someone that hasn't been born saying, I'll be born in such a year, in such a time.

[3 : 38] I'll make it happen just by crying. And that cannot be. It cannot be. There are two main messages in the verses that we look at tonight.

First of all, the weakness of the flesh. And then secondly, the power of the spirit. First of all, then the weakness of the flesh.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh. There shall limit to human ability. And there's no doubt about it.

If we are to compare ourselves with some of the other life forms in creation, then indeed we have great ability. We have more ability than a tree.

More ability than a sparrow. More ability than a lion. More ability than an eagle. We have more ability than all the animals in the world put together.

[4 : 40] We can form things. We can make things. We are technologically superior. We can compose poetry. We can make great epics. We can dramatize all these things.

We can speak great oratory. We can go to the furthest reaches of the world. We can head out into outer space. We can go to the furthest reaches of the universe.

We can measure the universe to our own minds. Yes, we can do all these things. We are really a very able people. But there is a limit to our ability.

Because that which is born of flesh is flesh and only flesh. There is a limit. There is a limit.

Just like water, it can only reach its own level. Left to itself, it cannot reach any other level. If you add a pump to that water, it can do greater things.

[5 : 38] But on its own, it can reach its own level and no further. And it's the same with flesh. The flesh can do much.

But there is a limit to what the flesh can do. There is a limit to what human beings can do. There is a limit to what man, woman, boy or girl can do.

Why? Because we are weak and we are impure. That are the two things to remember about flesh in the Bible.

The Gospel of John normally emphasises the weakness of flesh. And Paul in his epistles emphasises the impurity of flesh.

Man then is weak and man is impure. And because of his weakness and his impurity, there are limits to what he can do.

[6 : 46] And one of the things that flesh cannot do is deal with sin to God's satisfaction. Now note these last words, to God's satisfaction.

We can dress it up. We can put a cloak over it.

We can learn to live with it. We can learn to quench the arrows that seem to strike from our conscience. We can learn these things to satisfy man.

I have no doubt that there are people here who are convinced that they are sinners. And yet they have this ability, when they go out of the doors of the church, no matter what sermon was preached, no matter how searching into their spirits, that they are still able to cope with their sins. And yet they are still able to deal with sin. Yes, but you can never deal with sin to God's satisfaction.

[8 : 05] That is not something that is in our power to do. We were born in sin.

We all have original sin from the moment we were conceived and brought into the world. And together with that original sin, we have actual sins that we have committed.

And these two, we cannot deal with. We cannot remove them. We cannot cover them. We cannot forgive them.

Sin stands between us and God. Something else that flesh cannot do, that the human cannot do, he cannot, he cannot give himself eternal life.

He just can't do it, you see. He can ask for it, but he cannot make it happen. There are many people here who want to live forever.

[9 : 16] But can you make it happen? No. The cemeteries are full of a testimony to our limited ability.

We cannot deal with sin. We cannot gain eternal life. We can't do these things.

Why? Because of our weakness. And because of our impurity. You cannot bring clean out of an unclean.

It is not possible. You see, flesh is only flesh. Doesn't our generation need to remember that?

In a day when they are somehow trying to build themselves up, put themselves in front, almost as if they believe in God at all, as if God is just a little notch higher than they are.

[10 : 24] They say, yes, we are flesh. But they say, with that kind of boastful pride, we are human.

When the Bible says, you're only flesh. And that which is born of flesh is flesh. There's this massive gulf between us and God that nothing in our flesh can ever master.

But at this we just take it down to something to apply to our own situation. We want to evangelize things more.

We want to reach out to those poor people who are living in these houses. Very bonny houses, some of them. And they're there inside tonight watching their TVs or reading their papers or whatever.

Some of them will be in a social club. Some of them will be here and there. But they're not listening to the gospel. We want to reach those people. Some of us have a burden to want to go out among them.

[11 : 37] We want to evangelize them. We want to see them converted. We want to do it in our own flesh.

But we try to do it resting on our own ability. Outreach Sunday School. We want to see people come. We want to revitalize it.

We want to reach out to the young people before they grow up hardened. We want to reach them. So that if nothing else, we could shape the morals of our generation to grow up in Dingwall.

The danger that we could try to do it resting in our own flesh, on our own ability. We want to raise our children in their fear and in the knowledge of the Lord.

We want them to have Christ as their Saviour. We want them to grow up to be a holy people who will not scorn the gospel of Christ. We want them to grow up to be a holy people who will not be a holy people who will not be a holy people.

[12 : 55] Danger for someone who is not a Christian. And that person wants to be right with God and to deal with his sins.

He wants to have his sins forgiven. He wants to make himself acceptable to God. He wants to be ready for that moment when his eyes will close in this life and when his heart will beat for the last time before he goes into eternity.

Danger! But he will try to prepare himself for that. Resting on his own flesh, on his own human ability.

See, it can't be done. Nicodemus, the man at the centre of this story, when Jesus said to him, you must be born again, his mind started thinking of going back into the womb of his mother and then being born again from there.

As if he had a new start in life, that things would be alright. But listen, it doesn't matter if you had a hundred or a thousand new starts in life, because it would still be flesh.

[14 : 23] You might be here tonight and you might think, if only I had done such and such different those years ago. If only I had fixed a different pattern of life then and I hadn't sunk to the depths that I did.

If only I hadn't allowed myself to become so hardened in sin. Aye, there's all these if onlys. If you wanted to start your life again.

And many people, because they know they can't do that, they try to turn over a fresh leaf now. But you can't do it. Because no matter how many fresh leaves you turn, no matter how many beginnings you try, it's still only flesh.

It's not in your ability to cope with sin to God's satisfaction. It's only flesh.

[15 : 26] All the religions of the world, and this is a very dogmatic statement, all the religions of the world, Christianity being the only exception, true Christianity being the only exception, all these other religions are flesh.

Flesh are nothing but flesh. As some may say, you ought never to make such a statement from the pulpit.

Would you rather I was a hypocrite? What do you think Christ would say, were he preaching tonight? How do you think he would address these other religions?

Would he say, well at least they're trying. We'll give them a hundred out of a hundred for effort, and we'll accept them.

He would look on them, and he would say, flesh, it's all of man. It's dealing with sin to man's satisfaction, and it does not rely upon the Spirit of God.

[16 : 57] Remember the word, flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Not just a matter of human people entering into that inheritance, as if they were born into it, in the natural way.

Does that in any way sum up anyone's life here tonight? That your religion, your relationship with God, it's all been born of the flesh.

It was conceived in your own heart. It is measured by your own abilities. It deals with sin to use satisfaction.

But really, it's only flesh. Well that's the first thing, the weakness of the flesh. Secondly, thankfully, the power of the Spirit.

[18 : 05] That which is born of the Spirit, is Spirit. Be careful to notice, it's not man's Spirit that's spoken of here, but God's Spirit.

That which is born of the Spirit of God, is Spirit. And this is what Christianity, true Christianity, is all about.

It's not about the religion of the flesh. It's about the religion of the Spirit. It's not about something that was conceived in man, and that strives to reach a ladder going up to God.

Christianity is about God doing something in man, that makes man right with God. That which is born of the Spirit, is Spirit.

What does the Spirit of God do in this context here? First of all, remember that the Spirit is the one who creates.

[19 : 21] He creates. Remember when in the beginning the heavens and the earth were created. And by these heavens and earth, they weren't all the way we have them just now.

They were without form. They were void. They were in the darkness. And there you have the Spirit of God hovering over the water. Just like a bird brooding over the eggs in her nest.

Brooding. Brooding. Ready for the command of God. And the moment the command came, let there be light.

Do you think the Spirit did nothing? Oh no. As soon as the Word of God came, the Spirit created light.

The Word of God was not enough. But the Word accompanied by the power of the Spirit brought light into being.

[20 : 25] And that's the way it is still today. When someone is in spiritual darkness, who can bring them into the light?

Can they do it of themselves? Could Nicodemus do it with all his pharisaism? No, he couldn't.

He came to Jesus in the night. And that's really the way he was. He was still in the dark. But when God's Spirit works our work in Nicodemus, He creates in Nicodemus a change.

A new life. A wonderful transformation. So the Spirit creates. Please remember that.

But in particular, the Spirit creates a spiritual people. That which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

[21 : 35] You find a Christian tonight, friend. And you ask, What is it that's different about that Christian? And the answer is, that that Christian has a new nature.

He has been changed. And who brought the change in him? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gave him a new life.

A new nature. As if he was born of the Spirit. Just think of how beautiful and moving that picture is. I'm sure it must be a wonderful moment when a child leaves the womb and is embraced by its mother.

But how much more beautiful when someone has been born of the Spirit and is embraced by God forevermore.

[22 : 44] We know, you see, that we have been born of the Spirit of God. We know, because we are a spiritual people.

We first of all have spiritual discernment. Remember, we read these words in 1 Corinthians 2.

Words that are often misquoted. I have not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for them that love him.

There is God saying, I have prepared something for those who love me. But he says, I have never seen it. Ear has never heard of it.

The heart of man could never conceive of it. So people say, that means we don't know. But then God says, that God has revealed them unto us by his Spirit.

[23 : 53] The same Spirit who lives in the heart of God. He knows God exhaustively.

It's the Spirit who gives us birth and brings us a knowledge of God and of what God wants to give us.

That is the work of God's Holy Spirit. He gives us discernment so that we might know the things that have been freely given us by God.

Can I speak to the Christians? Christian people, there was a day when you were in darkness. There was a day when it mattered little to you what was preached in the pulpit.

There was a day when really your heart was not moved with spiritual thoughts. But tonight, is it not true that you see the world so differently?

[25 : 13] You look upon the sinner who is unconverted and you see him as a tragic case. You look upon a person who is brought to Jesus Christ and you rejoice over him.

You read of a Christian dying and you're still able to have hope in the midst of your sorrow. You're confronted with temptation and you seek to overcome it.

You want to tell others about Jesus. Why? Why do you do any of these things? You never used to. It's that the Lord gave you spiritual discernment and you see things so differently. You see the kingdom of God. And do you know how you see it? You see it the way the Spirit of God sees it.

Not with the same completion or perfection, but it's as if the Spirit is pointing things out to you in the kingdom.

[26 : 26] It's pointing to the beauty of the Christian, to the beauty of King Jesus, to the preciousness of the forgiveness of sins, to the marvel of justification by faith, to the wonder that you will be in heaven one day.

It's pointing out these things to you and you can see them. You never used to. But now you do because you have been born again of the Spirit.

Surely you would never say it was the flesh that taught me these things. Surely you will not say that you learned these things with your own academic bent of mind.

You don't educate people into Christianity. That was a great failing in the 19th century missionary movement.

You cannot educate them into Christianity. It requires the Spirit of God to change them.

[27 : 44] But not only spiritual discernment, but spiritual reception. If you're born again, what do you do? You enter into the kingdom of God and you share in the blessings that are given to you there.

You know, when you're born again, you're never outside the kingdom. Everyone who is born of the Spirit of God sees and enters the kingdom of God.

There is no one who is born of God's Spirit and remains outside of the kingdom of God.

Why not? Well, when you're born of the Spirit, the Spirit does to you what it did to Christ. Do you remember what the Spirit did to Christ in Mark 1?

The Spirit came upon him and thrust him into the wilderness. Well, the Spirit comes upon us when we're born of the Spirit and it thrusts us not into the wilderness but into the kingdom of God.

[29 : 04] Now, there are people who say, I don't want to go. There are times, my friend, when people can be reluctant converts.

At least if you go by what they say. The trouble is, I don't go that much by what people say these days. If God's Spirit does a work in your heart, you have a desire to go into the kingdom and you can't stay out.

You can't live on the outside. You can't live on the fringe because you know, you know that these kingdom gifts have become precious to you and the King's presence is everything to you.

Who made that change? It was the Spirit of God gave you that spiritual discernment and then enabled you to spiritually receive the call of the Gospel, the teaching of the Cross and in the end you put your faith in Christ and you repent.

The Spirit gives life. The flesh profits nothing but the Spirit gives life. It's a definite change.

[30 : 49] It's an irreversible change. It's an irreversible as the incarnation of Jesus.

You know, the Spirit created a body for Jesus. The flesh didn't produce it. It didn't come from Joseph.

That body of Jesus was created by the Spirit and nothing could change it. And it's the same with those who are born of the Spirit.

They are creations of God's Spirit, a definite creation, an irreversible creation. Same with the resurrection of Jesus.

The Spirit of Him who raised Him from the dead. The Spirit raised Him. He will never again die.

[31 : 50] The Spirit glorified His body. It will never enter humiliation again. It's irreversible.

And so it is with Christians. The work that God does in them, it's definite. It's irreversible. He brings them to be born again of the Spirit.

And whoever is born of the Spirit is spiritual. You cannot be anything else.

You take a group of Christians and what do you and I do in our foolishness? We say, Oh, this one is a spiritually minded Christian.

This one is a spiritual. But oh, this one here. Oh, that one there. Not spiritual. You cannot be a Christian without being spiritual.

[32 : 56] Because that which is born of Spirit is Spirit. Thirdly, The Spirit not only creates, creates a spiritual people, but He creates sovereignly.

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. So it's everyone that is born of the Spirit.

The wind, you know, in Greek, and in Hebrew, the same word can be used for wind and Spirit. You can think of many reasons why that would etymologically be the case.

We'll not go into that. But it's the same word for wind as for Spirit in the Greek of this passage. Now, something about the wind, we can't comprehend it.

We can't comprehend it. We don't know where it came from or where it will go to next. That's true, you know.

[34 : 13] We don't know exactly where the next development and weather pattern will be. We can watch it forming. You can see that on the weather forecast chart on the television.

They so proudly show you this nice swirling thing that's always coming in from the Atlantic towards us. But they can't tell when it will happen, when it will begin.

They have no idea when that wind will form and where it will blow, where it will go next. That is beyond our comprehension.

We can see it. We can hear it. We can mark and note its effects as it passes through. But wind, we cannot comprehend it.

And you know this, the work of God's Spirit is like that. It's not something you can comprehend. And I do wish Christians would stop trying to comprehend what is incomprehensible.

[35 : 28] You might try to look back and find a reason why you were converted. You'll never find it. Never will you find it.

You might try and find a part in your growth of grace. As if you were able somehow to measure the relationship between a sermon and your growth as a Christian.

There is a link, but you can't measure it. My friend, the Holy Spirit's work is a mystery.

And as with most other things, if you take away the mystery, you take away the majesty. And if there is anything wrong with the evangelism movement in our day and generation, and I'm not against it wholly at all.

But if there is anything wrong with it, it's this. That is, try to make the Spirit of God a predictable power. As if somehow they were able to contain it, measure it, plan it.

[36 : 49] As if they were able to set their targets as to who would be saved. And somehow to make it happen.

But the wind blows where it listed. We cannot comprehend what happens. We can watch God's Spirit working.

We can hear the noise of those who have been converted. But we cannot comprehend it. I cannot comprehend my own salvation.

I cannot. I cannot comprehend my own regeneration. And let's be very careful that we don't ever take that kind of fleshly addition into our evangelism that one and one makes two.

It doesn't work that way. Because God, when He works, He doesn't begin with additions.

[37 : 56] He doesn't add anything to our work. He begins His own work. That's the first thing.

God's Spirit is so sovereign in His work that we cannot comprehend it. It's beyond comprehension. But it's also beyond our control. The wind bloweth where it listeth, where it wills. Can anyone change the storm of this morning into the calm of this evening?

Could anyone have diverted the wind away from the British Isles? Could anyone somehow have shouted to the wind, blow the other way?

It couldn't happen. And yet, sometimes, we think we can do that with God's Spirit.

[39 : 03] As if this great divine passion was at our beck and call. As if we could say, convert that passion.

Convert this passion. Change him. Change her. Like the nonsense of people who would advertise revivals to begin at 6.30 on Saturday evening.

Okay, they might be winning no more by that than evangelistic meetings. But what a misuse of the word. What lack of discernment that they are behind it.

The kind of people who advertise healings and healing meetings. And they say, you come tomorrow evening. You come to this big stadium.

You bring all your little folks. You bring the people with MS. Bring them onto the stage. They will be healed. Who said? Is the Spirit at our beck and call?

[40 : 12] He is not. He is God. And whatever we are planning, let's be careful to leave God to do His work.

We have to be humble before Him. Three things as we close, very briefly.

First of all, this should bring us to see the need for humility. Especially for any who are unconverted in our midst tonight.

You must be born again. And you can't make it happen. And I can't even guarantee that you will be born again.

And nor can you. But I know that if you are to be saved, you must be born again.

[41 : 24] Nothing less will do. Because there are no works that you will do that will be so good that God would owe you eternal life.

Nothing. God owes you nothing. Indeed, you are infinitely in the debt of God. And surely that should humble us.

And surely should humble you, lost sinner. Christless sinner. Surely you realize that you cannot save yourself.

And you cannot choose the time. And you cannot choose the place. And you cannot choose the method.

You cannot do it. You cannot choose the time. You cannot choose the time. All you know is that you must be born again. Go to God in your emptiness, in your fear that you will be left behind.

[42 : 35] Some of us had to do that. We were afraid that we were becoming so hard. We were afraid that we would one day be lost.

That God had passed us by. What a fear can come over a man or a woman or a boy or a girl when you think God has passed you by.

And that you have no right to say to him, you've got to come back. You've got to come and save me. My friend, you could be lying in your deathbed loaded with sin and iniquity, ready to walk into the presence of God knowing that you're not ready.

And you can't say to God, God, you've got to change me. You've got to give me this eternal life.

You've got to deal with my sin. God does not have to save one sinner.

In this church tonight, He doesn't have to. He does not have to. And we must respect the glory of God.

[43 : 53] And we must not make the gospel something that man can pick and choose. I believe in the free offer of the gospel with all my heart, but not at the expense of the glory of my God.

God does not have to save you. And I hope that this will get through to you. So that you will feel empty.

That you will have that complacency taken from you. That thought that's so dangerous that says later.

Humility. Thank you. Thank you.