

ASH WEDNESDAY 2026

Speaker: Rev. Dr. Cecil Clements

Date: 18-02-2026

Scripture: John 3: 1-21

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"³ Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."³ Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

Heavenly Father, would You speak to us, Lord, in these moments? Would You touch us in ways we need to be touched, challenged, in ways we need to be challenged, inspired even, by ways that we need to be inspired by Your word. We yield to You this evening. Lord Jesus, in Your name we pray. Amen.

Tonight is what we call Ash Wednesday, and Ash Wednesday has to do with ashes. In the bible, ashes always had to do with repentance, penitence, feeling sorry, bad for the things that we have done. Ashes reminds us that we are dust, that we are fragile. Life itself is fragile. They remind us that whatever we build, whatever we achieve, whatever we may accumulate through our lives will not last forever.

I suppose there is no better night to hear Jesus say than tonight: "You must be born again." That can sound heavy. It can sound in many ways, intimidating as well, to make us question and say, "Am I

not?” It can even sound religious, in a way that may push us away. But I want to ask you: What if it is just another invitation from Him, just a reason for us to draw nearer to Him, to respond to Him?

So, tonight, instead of beginning with statements, I’d like us to begin with questions. Because, when we look at it, that’s how this passage kind of unfolds, through a conversation that Jesus is having with Nicodemus. He came to Jesus with questions. He did not come pretending that he understood everything. He came searching.

So maybe tonight we can do the same. Let’s put down everything that we know, everything that we think we know, and just let Scripture kind of move through us and ask us pertinent questions that have to do with our lives. Let’s just sit with this conversation in John 3 and ask Jesus: What did You mean by that? How do I understand that? Let’s look at the passage from different angles, and let’s allow it to examine us rather than us merely analyzing the passage.

Here are some of the questions I’d like for us to look at in the text tonight.

- Is being religious the same as being spiritually alive? Can a person know scripture, attend worship, and still be missing something essential?
- What did You mean, Jesus, when you said: you must be born again?
- What is this new birth? Why is it necessary? How does it happen? What does it change in a person?
- Why did you connect the new birth to being lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness in Exodus?
- What does the cross have to do with new life? What must we do to receive new life?
- What does it mean to believe?
- If someone has been born of the Spirit, how would that be visible? How would I know?
- Does new birth change behavior, change direction, change desires?
- Am I living in the light, or am I still comfortable in the dark?

These are not questions that are meant to accuse us. They are questions that are meant to invite us. Because when Jesus says you must be born again, He’s not closing a door; He’s opening one. So tonight, let’s walk through this passage slowly – asking, listening, and allowing Him to speak to us.

Nicodemus was a good man. He was serious about scripture. He was disciplined. He was respected. He was morally upright. If anyone looked spiritually secure, it was Nicodemus. And yet, Jesus says to him, “You must be born again.”

Which raises the first question for us: **Is it possible to be religious and still not be spiritual? Is it possible to know prayers, attend church, serve faithfully, and still feel like something is missing deep inside?**

We understand that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Maybe he came at night because he had questions he could not ask in the daytime. Maybe he came at night because something in him knew that information was not enough. I wonder: have you ever felt that what you know about something isn’t enough? You know the language of faith, but you’re not sure you feel the life of it. You have faith, but does that faith bring new life into you? Do you feel uplifted by that faith, given direction by that faith? Are you doubting that faith, and saying: Do I really, really know what I’m doing in this space?

Jesus did not criticize Nicodemus. He only invited him to get deeper. So when Jesus says: You must be born again, Nicodemus is confused. “How can that happen?” he asks. And it’s a fair question. You tell

somebody, “You need to be born again,” especially somebody who has no antecedents about the Bible, they’re going to look at you like you’re crazy.

What does Jesus mean when he says, “You must be born again”? He goes on to explain. He says, “Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” In other words, this new birth is not about trying harder. It’s not about improving your religious resume. It’s about something that God does in you. And Jesus points back to Ezekiel’s promise in the Old Testament. “I will sprinkle clean water on you. I will give you a new heart. I will put My Spirit within you.”

What is this new birth? It is God cleansing what we cannot cleanse? It is God softening what has become hard. It is God awakening in us what has gone to sleep within us. It’s not about self-improvement. It’s about spiritual renewal in our lives. Have you ever had the moment when something inside shifted? Something you strongly believed suddenly was gone? When faith stopped being external and became very personal? When prayer stopped being formal and became real? When conviction came not from pressure but from within? You’re praying for something, not expecting anything to happen? And something happened! And all of a sudden, you’re saying: Hey, this thing works. Prayer works.

Or you had faith about something, that something would happen, and it did because you trusted that God could bring it to pass? And suddenly the kind of nebulous faith that you had till then gets a little solidified. You think to yourself: Wait a minute. I go through the motions most times, but this really works. This is a wonder-working God, a promise-keeping God.

So the obvious question then is: **How does this new birth happen?** Jesus uses the image of the wind. The wind blows where it wishes. You hear its sound; you see its effect. You cannot manufacture the wind, but you can see when it has passed through. You can see leaves that are moving because the wind has gone past.

In the same way, you cannot force spiritual life into existence, but you can notice when you begin to hunger for truth, when you become sensitive to sin, when you find yourself drawn towards Christ and begin wanting to live in the light rather than hide in the dark.

There are many times when we choose darkness instead of the light. We may look for a time when we can be alone, when there are no eyes watching over us, when we think that we’re away even from God and I can do something. And yet, when the Spirit of God begins to work in our lives, suddenly there’s a new awareness of sin. There’s a new posture of wanting to be in the light. We want to move away from darkness. That’s the Spirit at work. It’s not dramatic for everyone. Sometimes, it’s really quiet. For many it’s gradual. But the fact is that it is real.

Here’s the comforting thought that new birth begins with God and not with us. And Lent is not about proving something to God. It’s about opening ourselves to God, what God longs to do in us.

Why did Jesus connect the new birth to being lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness in Exodus?

Then Jesus shifts the conversation. He says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” In the wilderness, the people were dying. They could not cure themselves. They could not reverse the poison that was flowing into them. And God provided a remedy. All they had to do was to look up to this bronze serpent, and trust. And they were healed.

What does the cross have to do with new life?

And Jesus says, "That story points to Me." We're not dying from snake venom, but from sin, from brokenness, from separation. We can't fix ourselves in this life. So the Son of Man is lifted up on a cross.

Why? For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him will not perish. God sent His Son, beloved, not because He was angry with us. His anger was towards the sin that had begun to encapsulate His creation. And He knew that the only way that He could free us was to have someone take the penalty of sin. His word says that the wages of sin is death. And He needed somebody sinless to take that place so that His creation could go free.

The only thing asked of you and me was to look up and believe in the finished work of Calvary, to believe that He who hung on that cross, hung for you and hung for me. The only thing. And in so doing, we were counted blameless, righteous before God. For God so loved the world. That's how much He loved the world. So, the cross is not condemnation for any of us. the cross is provision in God's love. The new birth is possible because Christ was lifted up.

What does it mean to believe?

This is where the passage becomes wonderfully simple. "Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." Believe, not perform, not achieve, not impress. Just believe that the finished work of Calvary was for you and for me. And to believe is to trust, to look to Him, to say: I cannot generate this new life on my own, and I receive what You have done for me. Faith is not very complicated, beloved. We make it complicated. Faith is nothing but honest dependence on God.

What does the new birth change?

At the end of the passage, Jesus speaks about light and darkness. "Light has come into the world," He says. Those who prefer darkness avoid the light. Those who desire truth move toward it. The new birth does not make us perfect overnight, but it does change our direction. We begin to move towards the things of light. Instead of hiding, we come into the light. Instead of defending our sins, we confess them. Instead of managing our appearances and trying to look spiritual, we act authentically. Not perfection, but openness. That's what the new life looks like.

And Ash Wednesday invites reflection. Remember that you are dust. That reminder is not meant to depress us; it's meant to awaken us, to kindle us into thinking.

So here's the question for us tonight: Is faith merely religious, or is it spiritually alive? Have I relied on knowledge and effort thus far or have I trusted in the Son? Have I experienced renewal from the inside out? And if not, this is a moment of invitation to do so.

That's what this whole period of Lent is going to be, beloved. It's an opportunity for us to receive the invitations that we are going to receive over and over again through these 40 days, excluding Sundays, that invites us to give up things that have held on to us, or we have held on to. To trust God in ways that we didn't trust Him before. To believe that He can come through for us when we never thought He could. To give up on addictive behaviors. To believe that He can break the power of the evil one over us.

All of these things, this period of self-introspection brings to the fore. So that when we finally get to Resurrection Sunday, we can look at it through a new resurrected self and say: The Lord has done great things in me, and I celebrate it this morning.

So, the invitation for us would be to start at the basics. Ask ourselves the first question:

Are we born again?

I remember having a conversation with somebody who said, "I hate this kind of talk about being born again. I was born in a Christian home. I have no problems." Sometimes we think going to church is enough. It's not. if you haven't come to a point in your life where you're saying: I recognize that I'm a sinner. I recognize that I need a Savior. And I know that Jesus is my Savior, that He paid the penalty for my sin on the cross. And I want to appropriate that finished work in my life" if we haven't said that or gone through that, we're not born again.

So today might be a good day to say: "Lord, I want to get to that place. I'm there. I always thought I was born again. I always thought I was a Christian. But Lord, today I recognize that I've just been going through the motions. Today, I want to have an active engagement with You." And I can think of no more beautiful place to do that than at the table when we come here to seal it.

And then in the quiet moments that we have before we come here, to just say, "Lord Jesus, I want You to come into my heart. I want You to take control." And the moment you speak those words, beloved, the Bible tells us that God sends His Holy Spirit immediately into your heart. and His Holy Spirit then becomes a down payment that says, "My Spirit will rest in you until the day when you and I meet in heaven." It's a beautiful transaction.

And so, as we prepare our hearts to come to the table of our Lord, would you just open your heart to the Lord and say, "Lord, search me. have I missed it Lord, till today? Am I really Your son/daughter? I don't want to find, at the end of my life that I wasn't. Lord, would You meet me today?"

Beloved, just speak with Him. See what the Holy Spirit is speaking to you. If you need to invite Him into your heart, do that. Maybe you're saying, "I've invited Jesus into my heart, but I did it a long time ago, and I've drifted." Well, you just need to ask forgiveness then and come back to Him.

Maybe there's something that weighs heavily on you, some addictive behavior, some habit that you think is part of your life now. And it shouldn't be. or maybe just being a Christian has been one of convenience. You do it or act like one when it's convenient for you. Never inconvenienced. Maybe that can be a shift today.

Heavenly Father, You know our thoughts. You know the prayers that have gone up to You've heard them. and Lord, You've answered in the way that You know how, in the best possible way. And I pray, Lord, that all decisions that have been made today will be sealed by You, the power of Your Spirit. And I pray that as we come to this altar to partake of Your supper, that we would come, Lord, with great joy, because we come as sons and daughters of the Most High God. And we would go with purpose and peace and exhilaration, knowing that we are in the center of Your will, walking in light and no longer in darkness.

Lord Jesus, in Your name we pray. Amen.
