Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

When a lot of people become believers at the same time, it is called a revival. And one of the greatest revivals in modern times is known as the **Great Awakening**. It happened in Europe and America around 1740. And one of the sermons that played a role in the revival in America was preached by Jonathan Edwards. It is called *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. When it was preached in Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8th, Edwards was interrupted many times before finishing the sermon by people moaning and crying out, “What shall I do to be saved?” Now, the interesting thing was that the Awakening had already been going on in that area of America for some time, and other ‘awakening preachers’ had preached to that same congregation. But it was *that sermon* that began the Awakening in that place. Why? Well, you might be thinking that that sermon must have been a very special sermon. But it was actually the third time that Edwards had preached that sermon, including at his home congregation. But the first two times, its effect was the usual polite handshakes at the door and thank you, pastor, but nothing like what happened at Enfield. So again, why the great response on that occasion?

But earlier we read from **Acts 17**, where Paul preached to the philosophers at Athens. And the response to the sermon was that “some *mocked. But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this’ … but some men joined [Paul] and believed, among whom also were Dionysius, the Areopagite and a women named Damaris and others with them*.” So, why just Dionysius and Damaris and a few others? Did they listen better than everyone else? Or, was there some problem with Paul’s sermon, perhaps?

Well, the theological term that describe what we are considering today is regeneration. And I will explain what regeneration is shortly. But every believer is a person who has been regenerated. And **our chief questions** today are: Is regeneration something that a believer does *by himself or herself*, or is it something that the believer does *with God’s help*, or is it something that God does *by Himself*? And how does regeneration happen?

And what we will see today is that **Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit alone**. And we don’t have nicely alliterated sermon points; we are simply going to note some things from chapters 1 and 2, and then our text in chapter 3.

1. So, please turn back a page or two to **chapter 1**.
   1. In the magnificent and memorable opening to his Gospel, John tells us that Jesus is eternal God. And if you drop down to **verse 11**, John talks about Jesus “*[coming] to His own and His own people did not receive Him*.” So, Jesus came down and lived as a human, but He was rejected by almost all the Jews, who were His own countrymen. But then we get **verse 12**: “*But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God*.” So, not everyone rejected Him; some believed.
      1. And Jesus is talking here about what we call **conversion** **and** **adoption**.
         1. **Conversion** is to change.
            1. A couple of decades ago, to save money and the environment, people changed their cars from petrol to LPG or CNG. So, you had to install gas tanks and change the fuel system in your vehicle. And this was called getting your car converted to gas.
            2. And spiritually, conversion is the change from unbelief to belief. So, those Jews who did receive Jesus, who believed in His name, who put their faith in Him as the Promised Messiah, converted from unbelief to belief.
         2. And as a result of this they were **adopted**. And adoption is being received into the family of God; it is to become a son or daughter of your Father in heaven. And verse 12 says that converts or believers are given the right of adoption by the Lord Jesus.
   2. Now, as you look at verse 12, **the emphasis** is on the act of receiving and believing – “*to those who received Christ and believed in His name, He gave the right* …” So, we are active in receiving Christ and believing in His name. We hear the gospel and we respond by receiving and believing; we put our trust in Jesus. But now look at **verse 13**. And this is where Jesus says of these children of God that they “*were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God*.” And these are really important words. For what John makes clear here is that what he has just described has its ultimate origin not in the individual who does the receiving and believing but in the work of God *and God alone*.
      1. The word John uses is **born**. And in terms of physical birth, when a child is born, we don’t congratulate them on bringing themselves into existence, do we?! We know they exist because of their parents and, more ultimately, because of God.
      2. And in a similar way, to become a child of God is not about blood or biology, nor is it even about a decision of human parents, it is “*of God*.” Those who receive Jesus and who believe in His name, who are genuinely converted, and who have become adopted children of God, are those whom God spiritually ‘conceived’ and ‘gave birth to.’
      3. And the theological term we use to describe this spiritual birth is **regeneration**. The Greek word we translate as born is ‘*gennaoh*.’ It is where we get the English word Genesis – beginning, or generate – to bring into existence. So, re-generation means to be born *again*. And we will see more about this being born again or spiritual birth in chapter 3.
      4. But already we see that it is the activity of God that is to the fore in the salvation of sinners.
   3. Now, skip down to **1:35.** There, Jesus calls the first disciples. And to each of them, He says, “*Come and see*,” “*Follow me*,” or in Simon’s case, he changes his name! And look at **verse 47**: “*Jesus saw* ***Nathanael*** *coming toward Him and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael answered Him, ‘How do you know me?’ Jesus answered Him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’*” So, despite Nathanael and Jesus never having met before, never having spoken to each other, Jesus already knew what was in Nathanael’s heart. And so, for Nathanael, this could only mean one thing – Jesus must be the Son of God. But the key thing to see here is that Jesus called and the disciples followed. It began with Jesus. And this too is a picture of how salvation works – God calls and we respond. But it begins, always, with the call of God.
2. Well, **chapter 2** begins a series of episodes that bring about **different responses** to Jesus from various people.
   1. First off, it is the **changing of water into wine** at the wedding in Cana. It is an amazing story, isn’t it boys and girls. Jesus turned ordinary water into premium wine! And look at **verse 11**: “*This, the first of His signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galillee, and manifested (or revealed) His glory. And His disciples believed in Him*.” And that sounds promising, doesn’t it: “*His disciples believed in Him*.” But sadly, we will read this many times in John, but it will often not mean a true and saving faith. Sometimes it is what we call **temporary** faith – faith that lasts just a short while, or **miraculous** faith – being impressed by miracles. But temporary faith and miraculous faith are not saving or true faith.
   2. And we see an example of this at the end of chapter 2. There we read, in **verse 23**, “*Now when [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs that He was doing*.” And again, that sounds good, but what is prompting this ‘faith’? Miraculous signs. And throughout the Bible, while miracles always accomplish God’s amazing purposes, they were never sufficient for saving faith. Think of all those astonishing things that God did for Israel in the wilderness – Red Sea crossing, Pillar of fire, Manna from heaven, etc etc etc. But how quickly afterwards was Israel complaining or worshipping idols? Almost immediately. The miracles were quickly forgotten.
   3. So, look how John continues in **verse 23**, “*But Jesus on His part did not entrust Himself to them, because He knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for He Himself knew what was in a man*.” And this is what we saw with Nathanael. Jesus didn’t need someone to tell him about Nathanael, for Jesus could see right into Nathanael’s heart. And it was the same with all who ‘believed’ in Him because of the miracles. He knew that their faith was miraculous faith, not saving faith. He knew that they would eventually be those crying out for His crucifixion. And so, because they were not chosen of God, He kept His distance from them; He withheld His true identity. That is what John is saying here.
3. And that brings us to **chapter 3**.
   1. Chapter 2 closed with these words: “[*Jesus] knew what was in a* ***man****.*” And look how chapter 3 opens: “*Now there was a man*...” So, we are supposed to link verse 25 with 3:1; OK! Jesus knows what is in this man’s heart. So, Nicodemus is likely to be an example of someone who only has miraculous faith.
   2. And we learn that he is a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. And the Pharisees were very strict, very concerned with keeping the law. And did the pharisees like Jesus? No, they did not. So, we are told that Nicodemus “*came to Jesus* ***at night***.” And this isn’t just after work, in the evening; this is when it is really dark and people are in bed.
      1. So, what are we to make of this note? Well, people can visit me in my study any time they like. But if someone specifically chose to visit at night, it is probably because they want to keep their visit a secret! They don’t want others to know that they have visited me. And that is most likely how it was with Nicodemus; he didn’t want other Pharisees to know about his visit to Jesus. And that would be another indication that Nicodemus does not have true faith.
   3. And evidence of this keeps piling up. Look at his opening statement in **verse 2**, “*Rabbi*, ***we know***…” So, he is putting himself among a group and not getting too personal. “*We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one could perform these signs that you do unless God is with him*.” And while this is true, it isn’t exactly “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” is it. It is the response of a man who sees himself as a representative of the Jewish faith, who is pretty sure he has worked out a place where Jesus fits in with the Old Testament – as some sort of prophet perhaps; someone like Elijah, for example. But again, it is not the response of someone who has come to see that He is a sinner, and that Jesus is the Promised Messiah who has come to set His people free from their sins.
   4. Well, as we have noted, Jesus knew exactly what lived in Nicodemus’ heart. And so, He **recognizes** **Nicodemus’s question**. You see, even though Nicodemus had not explicitly asked a question, Jesus knew the question that was buried in Nicodemus’ heart. And it is the question that lives in the heart of anyone who think that they can earn heaven through their good works. Can you think what that question is? It is: **Have I done enough?** Is there more that I could do? It is the question asked by the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16: “*Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?*”
      1. And just in case there are any here today who think that they are good enough for heaven, this is the ‘stone in the shoe,’ isn’t it (having a stone in the shoe is no fun – you have to find it and get it out!): Am I really good enough? Could I do more? Have I missed something? And I want to tell you today to listen to that ‘stone in your shoe.’ The message of the Bible is that you are **not good enough** and you can never be good enough, in and of yourself. Your only hope is faith in Jesus. He took away our badness when He died on the cross. And the moment we put our faith in Him, His goodness is put into our spiritual bank account. So, heaven becomes ours because of the goodness of Jesus! And then you never have to doubt your salvation, ever again!
   5. But let’s continue on and look at **Jesus’** **answer** to Nicodemus’ unspoken question in **verse 3**: “Jesus answered Him, ‘*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*.’”
      1. And you might have a little reference number next to the words “*born again*” and a note that explains that the Greek words translated there can also mean “*born from above*.” And sometimes that is how the words are translated elsewhere in John’s Gospel. And the idea in view is born of God, or by heaven; the key point is that it is not by yourself or from earth.
      2. But there are also good reasons why “born *again*” is preferred. We were all born, physically. Nicodemus understood this. It is why he was so confused and thought Jesus was talking about being born, physically, again. But Jesus was not talking about physical birth; He meant that we must be born, again, meaning spiritually. And so, it is best to see both the idea of “born *again*” and “born *from* *above*” in what Jesus says here.
   6. Now, remember that Nicodemus was a **product of his times**. He thought that being a child of God was about physical birth. If you were born Jewish, you were a child of God. But here is Jesus saying that he, Nicodemus, had to be born again?!
      1. Well, have you ever tied to communicate with someone who cannot speak your language? It is virtually impossible, isn’t it. Well, that is basically what happens from verse 3 on, Jesus is speaking spiritual truths and Nicodemus simply cannot understand him.
      2. In **1 Corinthians 2**, Paul talks about preaching in Corinth. He said that he didn’t rely on logic or the style of public speaking that Greeks loved, but he preached the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul said, “*And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned*.” So, an unregenerate person does not have the ‘spiritual hearing aids’ that are needed to be able to respond to the gospel with repentance and faith.
      3. And that was **Nicodemus’ problem**. He was still a natural person. He *did* not and *could* not understand what Jesus was saying, because he did not have the Holy Spirit within him.
      4. And this, brothers and sisters, is **the absolute essence** of what we are considering today. In order for a person to be able to enter the kingdom of God, which means to be saved, to be converted, to be adopted, to inherit eternal life, they must first be regenerated – born again, spiritually reborn, given a new nature, made a new creation, transferred into the kingdom of the Son of God – these are all terms that the Bible uses to describe regeneration. And this is not something we can do to ourselves; it is something that God does within us by the power of the Holy Spirit.
   7. In **verse 8**, Jesus illustrates regeneration, being born again by the Spirit, by saying, “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*.”
      1. And the illustration is plain: **Can you see the wind, boys and girls**? You cannot. You can see what the wind does, you can see tree leaves rustle and dust fly about and you can feel the wind, but you cannot see the wind. And in the same way, we cannot see the hidden work of regeneration that the Spirit performs in a person, but we see its effects – the person is converted; they repent and believe and start to live a holy life.
      2. But again, because Nicodemus had not been regenerated, he could not understand what Jesus was saying. So, Jesus rebuked him for being an Old Testament scholar, and not at least knowing that these things are taught in the Old Testament!
      3. In **Ezekiel 11:19**, the Lord said, “*I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh*.” But Nicodemus didn’t get it.
      4. Last week I mentioned **Ezekiel 37**. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet sees a valley of dry bones. And he is told to preach to the bones. And as he does, the bones start coming together and sinews and skin starts forming and they become living, breathing human beings. It is a picture of regeneration! And it is right there, as plain as day, in the Old testament. But Nicodemus didn’t get it!

And so, by way of conclusion, the key to understanding our topic today is these words of Jesus: “**You must be born again**.” Regeneration is the work of God *and God alone*. He causes a person to be born again by the inward work of the Holy Spirit.

So, all that remains for us to do is to link this truth with what we have seen in the doctrines of grace. We have seen that God elects some to salvation. And all these He will present to Jesus as His bride on the last day. But as we saw last week, the starting or natural condition of these elect ones is that of bring spiritually dead. So, they must be born again. And how does this happen? It happens through the preaching of the Gospel. Think back to the illustration in **Ezekiel 37**. What made the bones turn into living, breathing human beings? The prophet preaching to the bones! What is the gospel sometimes called in Scripture? The Word of life! So, as the word of life is preached, the Spirit takes the word and plants into the heart that He has already prepared to receive it. And this results in conversion – repentance and faith. And this will happen, whether it be early in life or late in life, with every single one of God’s elect.

And that brings us all the way back to where we started:

* + 1. Why did the Awakening begin that Sunday, with that sermon, in the hearts of those people, in Enfield, Connecticut? Because the Holy Spirit was sent by God to regenerate those who then responded with repentance and faith.
    2. And that is also why only Dionysius and Damaris and some others were converted when Paul preached in Athens. It was only in them that the Holy Spirit had done the work of regeneration.
    3. And still today, one person can hear a sermon or your sharing of the gospel and respond with repentance and faith, while others do not. Or, it could be that it will be the next time that you share the gospel that the Holy Spirit might do the work of regeneration.

So, let us **pray for revival**! Let us pray that God will regenerate our unbelieving relative or neighbour or workmate or friend. And then let’s share the gospel with them because that is what the Holy Spirit uses to regenerate people.

And let those of us who have received Christ and believed in His name praise God for causing us to be born again! As Article 15 of the Canons says:

*This grace God owes to no one. For what could He owe to man? Who has given Him first that He might be repaid? What could God owe to one who has nothing of his own but sin and falsehood? He, therefore, who receives this grace owes and renders eternal thanks to God alone.*

To God be all glory and honour and praise. Amen.