**Sermon Series**: What Does It Mean to Be Saved
**Sermon Title**: Born Again

**Text**: **John 3:1-8 -- 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 are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered 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? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter 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 marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 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."**

**Introduction**: **London businessman Lindsay Clegg was walking a prospective buyer through a warehouse property he was selling**. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs. Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed the windows, and strewn trash around the interior. As he showed the man the property, Clegg took pains to say that he would replace the broken windows, bring in a crew to correct any structural damage, and clean out the garbage. "**Forget about the repairs**," the buyer said. "**When I buy this place, I'm going to build something completely different. I don't want the building; I want the site**." This morning in our fourth message in the series, "***So Great a Salvation***," we're going to look at the spiritual equivalent of this story by studying together what the Bible says about REGENERATION. **Just as it would be foolish to sweep a warehouse slated for the wrecking ball, so God comes not to remodel our old self, but to make us into something brand new**. In fact, that's what the word "***regenerate***" means…**to create anew**. When it comes to the Christian life, this process is called NEW BIRTH OR REGENERATION. It is defined as **the secret act of God in which He imparts new spiritual life to us** (**those He has chosen and called**). **Evangelist Leighton Ford** comments on the necessity of it when he says, "***God loves us the way we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way.***" And so, He transforms us.

Today I invite you to join me as we to tackle the meaning of Jesus' words in **John 3** when He said to Nicodemus, "**I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again** (**John 3:3**)." Now we all know the phrase, "***born again***" gets tossed around a lot today and has even taken on a negative connotation based on what many people associate with it, that is, Christian fanaticism. These kinds of people see "**born agains**" as those who, in the words of **William Cowper**, "**burn with a false fire that comes from an overheated mind**." They might be surprised to learn, however, that most Christians share an equal distaste for RELIGIOUS FANATICISM marked by emotional fervor that takes precedence over Biblical instruction. In an effort to correct this false view of regeneration and those who hold to it, let's go to the Word of God together and see what it says. BEFORE WE DO, HOWEVER, LET'S BEGIN WITH A DEFINITION OF REGENERATION. **IT IS A SECRET ACT OF GOD IN WHICH HE IMPARTS NEW SPIRITUAL LIFE TO US**. **Let me break this down a bit, so we can better understand it.**

**Regeneration is an act of God**. **Last week, we talked about God's effective call and our response to the Gospel call in repentance and faith**. ***We said that God's effective call is a summons from God that***

***has such force behind it that it will bring about the response that it asks for in people's hearts.*** **It's important to know, however, that *before* we can decide for Christ and respond to the gospel call, we must be born again**. Why? BECAUSE THERE IS SIMPLY NO POSSIBLE WAY THAT A PERSON WHO IS SPIRITUALLY DEAD (**See Ephesians 2:1**), AND INCAPABLE OF UNDERSTANDING THE THINGS OF GOD (**See 1 Corinthians 2:14**), CAN REPENT AND BELIEVE IN CHRIST. **I know this sounds a little backward (to experience regeneration before our conversion), but listen to what the Bible says in Ephesians 2:4-5 -- But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved**). **What is Paul saying? When it comes to being BORN AGAIN, we play no active role (i.e., repenting and believing) at all according to the Scriptures. It is God who has made us alive together with Christ. This is what is being said in John 1:12-13 -- But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood (being born into a family), nor of the will of the flesh (the product of sexual desire), nor of the will of man (a husband's desire), but of God**. If you think about it, that last phrase, "**being born of God**," is really helpful in communicating just how passive we are when it comes to regeneration. **Just as we did not choose to be made physically alive** (**we were not and could not have been consulted in the matter**), **so we play no part in being made spiritually alive (James 1:18 -- Of God's own will he brought us forth by the word of truth)**. It is completely His doing.

L**et me try to explain this to you in a different way**. Christian apologists—defenders of the Christian faith—have used a number of arguments in order to demonstrate THE RATIONALITY OF BELIEF IN GOD. One of the most popular of these is the **cosmological argument**, which defends the existence of God on the basis of **cause and effect**. **By definition, every effect must have a cause. There must, therefore, be one cause that started everything**. **One eternally existing cause set everything in motion, creating effects that then caused other effects that then caused other effects and so on**. Christians argue that this eternally existing cause is God (**Hebrews 11:3 -- By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible)**. Before there was anything else, there was God. That's the cosmological argument for the proof of God! What does this have to do with regeneration? Well, when a **person is born again, Scripture teaches that this is the effect of something that happened previously**. According to the Bible, God is the cause of our salvation in that He acts first by regenerating us in order that we can come to know Him personally. (**Review: Regeneration is an act of God**.)

**Regeneration is a mystery to us**. Just how a person is born again is at least in some ways unclear in the Bible. We know what happens, and even see the changes that occur as a result of someone being born again, **but as to how it takes place, that remains a mystery**. Consider Jesus' words in **John 3:8**: "**The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit**." **In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus explained that Nicodemus had neither the power to control the wind nor understand how it came to be, but could only see its effect**. So, it is with us when it comes to the work of the Spirit of God (**born of water – the washing away of our sin by the blood of Christ -- and the Spirit**). We do not see or control the Holy Spirit or have a complete understanding of how He accomplishes His work, yet when He regenerates someone, the effects are unmistakable and undeniable, being ***clearly visible*** in His new

creation (**2 Corinthians 5:17 -- Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come**). AS TO HOW HE DOES IT, WELL, THAT'S STILL A MYSTERY.

In a book written by **Greg Boyd and Al Larson** called, "**Escaping the Matrix: Setting Your Mind Free to Experience Real Life in Christ**", the authors share some scientific data about our brains. It turns out that the human brain is about the size of a head of cauliflower. It looks and feels like a three-and-a-half-pound lump of firm tofu. It comprises about two percent of your body's mass, but it uses twenty-five per percent of the body's energy. Scientists estimate that the brain receives 100 million bits of information per second and contains 100 billion cells, many of which are *neurons*. These cells have a thin, complicated shape like the branch of a tree. They can be as short as a millimeter or as long as a meter. At one end is the **axon** and at the other end are **dendrites**, the twigs on the branch. **Neurons** communicate with each other by sending chemical and electrical signals racing down the branch **at 200 miles an hour**. When the charge reaches the end of the cell, it leaps the **synapse**—the space between the dendrite and the next twiggy branch. Each cell is surrounded by ten to 100,000 dendrites, creating the possibility of **one million billion synaptic connections**—that's 10 followed by a million zeros! **Compare that to the number of particles in the known universe—10 followed by 80 zeros**. **You can see that the brain is complex, if not unfathomable. Truly, we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." Just ask your brain**.

Listen. In the same way that we do not fully understand how our brains function, and yet they do, so how God the Holy Spirit causes us to be born again is a mystery as well. **We don't understand exactly how it all works, but, mystery or not, we can and should be thankful because He is the One who makes it possible**! (**Review: Regeneration is an act of God; it is a mystery to us.**)

**Regeneration is the key to new life**. **Without being born again, it is not possible to live a holy life in Christ**. Now, let's conclude our message by identifying FOUR OF THE TRANSFORMING EFFECTS of the Holy Spirit on the lives of those who are born again.

- **Those who are born again do what is right** (**1 John 2:29 -- If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him**). Because we have new life in Christ, Christians no longer continually rebel against His authority. **Instead, once we've repented of sin and exercised faith in His atoning sacrifice, we are released from slavery to sin, and become slaves of a different sort** (**Romans 6:18 -- having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness**). This does not mean that we will never sin again, but only that our lives will not be characterized by a continual desire to sin.
- **Those who are born again love one another** (**1 John 4:7 -- Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God**). The word used in these verses for love is "***agapao***." It is the same word used of God when it comes to expressing His love for **His Son** (**John 17:26 -- I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them**), **the human race** (**John 3:16 – For God so loved the world**), and **believers** (**John 14:21 -- Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him**). While it is a simple thing to say, "I love you," this kind of love can only be known from the actions it prompts in those who possess it. It is most clearly identified in self-sacrifice (**1 John 4:10 -- In this is love, not that we have loved God**

**but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins**). **This reminds me of an old Portuguese story of a young Christian boy who was forced to beg on the streets of his village**. One day, he was scorned and tested by a wealthy atheist's son. "***If God really loves you, why doesn't He take better care of you***?" he asked. "***Why doesn't He tell someone to send you a pair of shoes***?" Sadly, the boy replied, "***I think God does tell people, but they don't listen***." While this may be true of some in the world, it must not be true of Christians. **We are known by our love**.

- **Those who are born again believe that Jesus is the Christ** (**1 John 5:1 -- Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God**). When born again, the new creation will readily confess that Jesus is the Messiah promised by God in places like **Genesis 3:15, 12:1, 2 Samuel 17:16 and Isaiah 53**. **As a matter of fact, the Bible says that no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Spirit of God** (**See 1 Corinthians 12:3**). He came to reverse the effects of the fall brought about by Satan's deception and temptation in the Garden of Eden (**Hebrews 2:14 -- Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil**).
- **Those who are born again overcome the world** (**1 John 5:4 -- For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world— our faith**). Regeneration provides the ability to overcome the pressures and temptations of the world that would otherwise overwhelm us. We have no less an example than Christ Himself when it comes to overcoming the world (**John 16:33 – I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world**). The Apostle John tells us that this is accomplished as we learn to increasingly trust Christ with everything.

**Let's review. REGENERATION IS AN ACT OF GOD, A MYSTERY TO US AND THE KEY TO NEW LIFE.**

**Conclusion**: **This kind of change does not occur unless God brings it about. We do not have the capacity as fallen human beings to do what is right, love one another, exercise faith in Christ or overcome the world**. **Without God's supernatural resources we are powerless to change**. In his book ***The Moral Intelligence of Children***, **Harvard professor and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Coles** writes: **Ralph Waldo Emerson** once said, "***Character is higher than intellect***." (Then to illustrate his point, he continued…) **Marian**, a student of mine several years ago, much admired Emerson. She had arrived at Harvard from the Midwest and was trying hard to work her way through college by cleaning the rooms of her fellow students. Again and again, she met classmates who had forgotten the meaning of **please** AND **thank you**, no matter their high SAT scores. They did not hesitate to be rude, even crude, toward her. One day, she was not so subtly propositioned by a young man she knew to be very bright. She quit her job and was preparing to quit going to school. Full of anxiety and anger, she came to see me. "***I've been taking all these philosophy courses***," she said to me at one point, "***and we talk about what's true, what's important, what's good. Well, how do you teach people to be good***?" **The answer to Marian's question is found in the Bible. It is not education that will change a life, it is regeneration**. How about you? Have you experienced a new birth in Christ and the new life that results?