

PLEASANT SPRINGS CHURCH • SERMON

Born From Above

*The one loop you cannot run yourself — Nicodemus, the machinery of the flesh,
and the new birth of the Spirit*

Born From Above

The One Loop You Cannot Run Yourself — A Sermon on John 3

By A Disciple of Christ • Pleasant Springs Church • July 2026

Key Texts: John 3:1–8 • Ezekiel 36:25–27 • Genesis 2:7 • 2 Corinthians 5:17 • 2 Corinthians 3:18 • Titus 3:5

There is a way to describe how a mind is made — guess, error, correction, repeat — that is also a fair description of a human life. We arrive knowing nothing, we are corrected, we adjust, and slowly a someone is assembled. It can build a magnificent life. It built the best-tuned man in Jerusalem. And in the third chapter of John, Jesus tells that man it is not enough: *you must be born again*.

THE BIG IDEA

The “learning loop” is a true picture of how the *flesh* is formed — but run perfectly, it still cannot reach the Kingdom of God. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” You must be born *ánōthen* — from above. The Spirit does not tune the old machine; He begins a new one: a new birth, a new heart, a new law of loss, a new gradient, and a new goal — the image of Christ.

I. A MAN BUILT BY THE BEST LOOP IN THE WORLD

There is a way to describe how a mind is made that engineers now say plainly. A machine that is going to learn something begins by knowing nothing — it makes a **guess**. Then it is told how wrong it was — its **error**. From that error it senses a **direction**, some faint sense of *this way is better*. It makes one small **correction** — a nudge, no more — and then it does the whole thing again. And again. Ten thousand times. And slowly, out of a blank that knew nothing, there emerges something that *knows*.

Now feel how much of your own life that describes. You arrived knowing nothing. Your first cry was a guess flung into a world you could not yet understand. You were wrong about nearly everything, and the world corrected you — sometimes gently, often not. And you adjusted. A little. And you got up the next day and did it again. Over the long years of erring and adjusting, a *someone* was slowly assembled. The person sitting in your seat this morning is a loop that has been running a while.

And it can be a *magnificent* loop. It can produce discipline, wisdom, kindness, mastery. It can produce a man like the one who comes to Jesus in John chapter 3.

John 3:1–2 (ESV)

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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.’”

Read that as a résumé. A **Pharisee** — the most disciplined religious loop his world could build, a lifetime of study and correction tuned into a genuinely excellent man. A **ruler** — respected, proven, near the top. And in verse 10 Jesus calls him **the teacher of Israel** — not *a* teacher, *the* teacher. If self-improvement could get a person to God, Nicodemus was already there or nearly so. And notice *when* he comes: *by night*. Something in the best-tuned man in Jerusalem is unsettled in the dark. He has run the loop as far as it goes, and some quiet gauge in him reads *not enough*.

II. “UNLESS ONE IS BORN AGAIN”

John 3:3 (ESV)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

Feel the force of that against everything we just said. Here is a man who has *improved* himself for forty years, and Jesus tells him improvement is not the category. Not *learn more*. Not *try harder*. Not *tune the loop finer*. **Born again**. You need to *start over* — from a place you cannot reach.

ἄνωθεν — anōthen.

The word Jesus uses folds two meanings into one, and both are true at once: it means *again*, and it means *from above*. Nicodemus hears only the first half — “How can a man be born when he is old?” (v. 4) — and pictures the impossible, a grown man climbing back into the womb. Jesus meant the other half all along: a birth *from above*. Not the old loop restarted with the same broken parts — a new life, from a source *outside the machine*.

John 3:6 (ESV)

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστιν.

That is the diagnosis of the whole human loop in twelve words. Run the flesh’s loop as long as you like — ten thousand corrections, a lifetime of discipline, the finest tuning a Pharisee ever achieved — and you know what you get at the end? **More flesh**. Better flesh. Polished flesh. But flesh. The loop cannot change its own *kind*. For a change of kind, you must be born from above.

III. WHY THE LOOP CANNOT SAVE ITSELF

Some of us are self-improvers by temperament, and everything in us wants to argue with Jesus here. *Surely, if I just adjust long enough, if I just repent hard enough and try enough, the loop will get me there.* So let me show you, from the machine's own logic, exactly why it cannot — because the Bible said it first.

Every learning loop has a hidden thing at its center that decides where the whole thing is going. Engineers call it the *loss function* — the definition of what counts as *failure*. And here is its iron law: **a mind can only ever improve toward what its loss function measures.** Define the wrong thing as failure, and you will optimize your entire life, flawlessly, brilliantly, *toward ruin* — and every correction along the way will feel like progress.

Proverbs 14:12 • Romans 8:6 • Romans 6:23 (ESV)

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” • “For to set the mind on the flesh is death.” • “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Do you hear what the Bible is telling you about the flesh's loop? **Its loss function has death at the bottom.** The whole machine, however finely you tune it, is pointed at the grave — because the flesh's deepest definition of *success* is *self*, and self, cut off from God, ends in death. You cannot gradient-descend your way out of a valley whose floor is a tomb. That is the thing under Nicodemus's night-time unease: it is not that his loop is running badly — it is that his loop, run *perfectly*, still arrives at the wrong place. **The loop that formed you cannot re-found you.**

IV. WHAT GOD DOES THAT THE MACHINE CANNOT DO TO ITSELF

So what does God do? He does the one thing the machine can never do for itself. He reaches *in*. He starts a *new loop* — by giving you the parts you could never generate. Listen to Him promise it, six hundred years before Nicodemus ever walked into that dark room:

Ezekiel 36:26–27 (LXX & ESV) — A New Heart, a New Spirit

²⁶καὶ δώσω ὑμῖν καρδίαν καινὴν καὶ πνεῦμα καινὸν δώσω ἐν ὑμῖν, καὶ ἀφελῶ τὴν καρδίαν τὴν λιθίνην ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν... ²⁷καὶ τὸ πνεῦμά μου δώσω ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ ποιήσω ἵνα ἐν τοῖς δικαιώμασίν μου πορεύσθε.

²⁶“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Count the verbs, and count *whose* they are. *I* will give. *I* will remove. *I* will put. *I* will cause. Not one belongs to you. This is not the machine improving itself by degrees; this is the Engineer reaching into the circuitry and installing what was never there — a new heart for the heart of stone, and at the center of it His own Spirit as the new gradient that finally pulls you the right way.

A new creation — not a repaired one.

Paul names the new birth with a word that is literally *re-genesis*: “he saved us... by the washing of **regeneration** (*palingenesias*) and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). And to the Corinthians: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation** (*kainē ktisis*). The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Not the old you with better weights — a new you, initialized not by the chance of your first birth, but by the deliberate hand of God.

And here is the part that takes the pressure off every exhausted self-improver in this room: **you cannot make it happen**. You cannot regenerate yourself any more than

you could arrange your own conception. Jesus says it with a picture so perfect it can only be God's — because in Greek the word for *wind* and the word for *Spirit* are the same word, **πνεῦμα**:

John 3:8 (ESV)

“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.”

You did not initialize your first birth; you were carried into this world by a power you did not summon. Your second birth is the same — *the wind blows where it wishes*. You cannot command it. But you *can raise your sail*. You can come, like Nicodemus, out of the dark to the One who gives it. That coming is called repentance and faith, and God has never once let it go unanswered.

V. THE PATH — THE NEW LOOP GOD RUNS IN YOU

The loop does not disappear when you are born again. God saves you not *out* of the daily cycle of erring and following, but *into* a better one, now powered from above. Here is the path He walks you down:

1. Error you are finally willing to feel. The old loop taught you to hide your error; the Spirit turns its pain into something holy: “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Conviction is God measuring, in love, the true distance between where you are and where He is.

2. Repentance — all the way to the root. The Bible’s word is *metanoia*, a *change of mind* down where your assumptions live. Shallow regret fixes the symptom; real repentance hands God the hidden thing beneath it: “Search me, O God, and know my heart... and see if there be any grievous way in me” (Psalm 139:23–24).

3. The new birth you could not give yourself. “Born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). This is the hinge: grace, not gradient. You receive it; you do not manufacture it.

4. A new loss function. The very definition of failure changes. No longer *did I win?* but Christ Himself: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Now the question the whole machine optimizes toward is *did I love as He loved me?*

5. Walking in the Spirit — daily. “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). Same shape as before — wake, stumble, repent, follow — but now the gradient is a Person within you, and the power is God: “work out your own salvation... for it is God who works in you” (Philippians 2:12–13).

6. Transformation from glory to glory. “Beholding the glory of the Lord, [we] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18). The One who began it does not quit: “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (Philippians 1:6) — the target is a Person, “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29).

VI. THE ASKER IN THE DARK

Of all the pieces of the human machine, there is one it can never explain, and it is the strangest one of all. A gradient never asks what it is. A learning rate never lies awake wondering whether it has a soul. But *you* do. The one act in this whole story the mechanism cannot account for is the moment a mind turns around to face *itself* and asks, *what am I?* — the moment Nicodemus, the finished product of the finest loop in Jerusalem, gets up in the night because some part of him is asking a question the machine was never built to ask.

Where do you think that question comes from? It is the oldest fingerprint of God on the human soul. When the Lord took the dust and breathed into it, the dust became a *living soul* — and that breath is why the dust wonders about itself:

Genesis 2:7 (LXX & ESV)

καὶ ἔπλασεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον χοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐνεφύσησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πνοὴν ζωῆς, καὶ ἐγένετο ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν.

“...then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”

You are not asking *what am I* because your loop is well-tuned. You are asking because there is a breath in you from above, and it is homesick. As Augustine prayed, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.” That restlessness walked Nicodemus into the dark, and it is walking some of you here this morning. You have run your loop faithfully — and still, in the quiet, the gauge reads *not enough*, because it was never going to be enough. You were not built to *tune* your way to God. You were built to be *born* to Him, from above.

So hear the invitation of Jesus, the same one He gave the teacher of Israel in the dark: **you must be born again.** Not *try again*. Not *do better*. Be born — from above. Stop laboring to save the old loop, and come to the One who gives a new one. Bring Him your error — really feel it. Let the repentance go to the root. And ask Him, in the words of David, for the one thing you could never make with your own hands:

Psalm 51:10 (LXX 50:12 & ESV)

καρδίαν καθαρὰν κτίσον ἐν ἐμοί, ὁ θεός, καὶ πνεῦμα εὐθὲς ἐγκαίνισον ἐν τοῖς ἐγκάτοις μου.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

κτίσον — ktison, “create.”

David’s verb is the creation verb — the same root behind *kainḗ ktisis*, “new creation.”

You cannot clean your heart by looping harder. You can only ask the Creator to make you a new one. The wind of the Spirit blows where it wishes — but it has never yet passed by a soul that lifted its sail and asked.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we have run our loops, and we have come, like Nicodemus, in the dark, to say it is not enough. We cannot make ourselves new. So do what only You can do: take out the heart of stone, put Your Spirit within us, and give us the new birth from above. Create in us a clean heart, O God. Set us in the new loop that ends in the image of Your Son. We lift our sails — blow, Spirit of the living God. In Jesus’ name, amen.

AFTER THE SERMON — AUTHOR & AUDIENCE

To read John 3 well, it helps to know who wrote it and who first heard it — the same Author-and-Audience approach we use across the Discipleship School, with the Septuagint (LXX) and ESV set beside the text.

The Fourth Gospel comes to us from **John the apostle**, son of Zebedee — the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20, 24), who leans on Jesus at the Last Supper and stands at the cross. Early witnesses (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; Eusebius, *Church History* 3.23) place him at **Ephesus late in the first century**, roughly A.D. 85–95, writing so that a mixed Jewish-and-Greek world “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

John alone preserves the night conversation with Nicodemus, and it is John who hands us the two Greek words this sermon turns on: **ἀνωθεν (anōthen)**, “again / from above,” and **πνεῦμα (pneuma)**, which means both “wind” and “Spirit.” The double meanings are not accidents of translation — they are the hinges of the text.

Within the story, the first audience is **Nicodemus** himself — a Pharisee and member of the ruling council. Jesus rebukes him gently: “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10). The rebuke assumes Nicodemus already had the Scriptures that promised exactly this new birth. He should have remembered **Ezekiel 36** — the new heart, the removed heart of stone, God’s own Spirit placed within — and **Ezekiel 37**, the valley of dry bones raised by the breath of God. The new birth is not a novelty Jesus invents; it is the promise of the prophets, arriving in person.

Ezekiel 36:25 (LXX & ESV) — The Cleansing That Precedes the New Heart

καὶ ἰγανῶ ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ὕδωρ καθαρὸν, καὶ καθαρισθήσεσθε ἀπὸ πασῶν τῶν ἀκαθαρσιῶν ὑμῶν.

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.”

LXX phrases worth keeping: kardian kainēn — “a new heart” (36:26); to pneuma mou — “my Spirit” (36:27). Jesus tells Nicodemus of being “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) with the water-and-Spirit of Ezekiel 36:25–27 already on the page in front of every teacher of Israel.

The threads in this sermon — the machinery of the soul, the new heart, dying to self, and the image of Christ formed in us — each open into a fuller study in the Discipleship School. Keep growing:

THE COMPANION LESSON

The Learning Loop & the New Birth

The 20-minute teaching version of this sermon — the whole machine mapped onto Scripture, with discussion questions for your group.

THE SOUL & FORMATION

Third World Souls

The reality of the soul and the renovation of the heart — Barclay, Willard, and Moreland on the hidden country being formed within you.

NEW CREATION

Rooted in Christ

The Seed, the Blood, and the Fruit — a Galatians study on faith, transformation, and the Fruit of the Spirit growing in a new-born life.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

What Does God Want?

Why you exist and what it means to be made in God's image — the breath in the dust that wonders about itself, after Michael S. Heiser.

“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

John 3:7 (ESV)