

The Gospel that Gives Life and Brings Revival (John 3:11–21)

Awakening: The Revival Only God Can Bring
Zionsville Fellowship | August 30, 2026 | Drew Hunter

We're in the middle of a series on Awakening. This is about the true revival only God can give.

Last week we focused on the topic of the new birth, or regeneration. Jesus said “unless you are born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” This is spiritual death to life. It is receiving a new heart and new desires. It's being transformed at the core of our personality.

It's something only God can do. Jesus said it is like the wind, which blows where it wants. God gives the new birth by his Spirit; and he does it when he wants, to whom he wants. You can't do it to yourself. We cannot schedule conversion. We cannot manufacture revival.

But God does use means. He causes us to be born again through his word—through a message. And a central part of this message is what we call *justification by faith alone*. This means God counts us as righteous through faith alone, not according to our own goodness. God accepts us by his grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone.

Justification by faith is not itself the fullness of the gospel. But it is central to it.

And when God spreads awakening and revival—he uses this message to do it.

Last week I shared about how God brought revival through George Whitefield's ministry. This morning I want to share about how God was doing the same thing through Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was a pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was concerned that people were growing confused about the foundation of our salvation. Many were starting to think that our virtue or goodness plays a role in our acceptance before God.

So at the end of 1734, he delivered lectures on the topic of justification by faith alone. He summarized the message like this: “*We are justified only by faith in Christ, and not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own.*” There is nothing we can do that can earn our acceptance before God. We have to humbly trust in Christ alone for our acceptance.

Listen to what he said happened from those lectures. He said many were deeply concerned about their salvation, and this settled it for them. They received justification through faith in Christ alone.ⁱ And they were born again. Here's how he described the revival that these two lectures sparked.

- “And then it was, in the latter part of December, that the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us.”ⁱⁱ
- “God's work wonderfully broke forth among us, and souls began to flock to Christ, as the Savior in whose righteousness alone they hoped to be justified. So that this was the

doctrine on which this work, in its beginning, was founded, as it evidently was in the whole progress of it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

- He said five or six people were suddenly converted. Some of them were people who didn’t have any interest in Christ before. But it was clear that—through the messages on justification by faith alone—they were given the new birth. Then the revival spread quickly.
- “A great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world, became *universal* in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees, and all ages. The noise amongst the dry bones waxed louder and louder; all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things, was soon thrown by; all the conversation, all companies and upon all occasions, was upon these things only, unless so much as was necessary for people carrying on their ordinary secular business...”^{iv}
- “The only thing in their view was to get the kingdom of heaven, and every one appeared pressing into it.”^v
- “There was scarcely a single person in the town, young or old, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world.... The work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ.”^{vi}
- “There were remarkable tokens of God’s presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in *families* on account of salvation being brought unto them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands...”^{vii}
- “Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was alive in God’s service, everyone earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth: the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.”^{viii}

He looked back and said God used the messages on justification by faith alone to do this.

God spreads revival and causes people to be born again through a message—and at the heart of the message is the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

The doctrines of the New Birth and Justification by faith sparked and spread these revivals. And these are the two doctrines that Jesus emphasizes to Nicodemus in John 3. Jesus didn’t use the phrase, “justification by faith alone,” but the substance is clearly there.

John 3:11–21

11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Here's the message of this text:

God causes people to be born again through a message—and at the heart of the message is the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Jesus answers four questions about this message of our acceptance before God by faith:
Where does it come from? What is it? Why does it exist? And why does it matter?

1. Where Does this Message Come From? (vv. 11–13)

First question: where does this message come from? Answer: from Jesus himself.

We often hear today statements like, “that’s true for you,” or “this is my truth.” But if something is just my truth or your truth, then it’s not really true truth. What we mean when we say this is that this is something I like, or that works for me for now.

But is there such a thing as *true* truth? Solid truth that transcends my own feelings and preferences? Jesus says there is. This is why he often starts his sentences by saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you.” He is announcing *true* truth.

Why is Jesus able to do this? According to him, it’s because of where he came from.

In John 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus he alone has the truth because he came from heaven.

In verses 11 and 12 he says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

What are the earthly things? These seem to be the things Jesus has been telling Nicodemus to this point—and at the heart of it is that we must be born again to enter the kingdom.^{ix} Because of Adam’s fall into sin, we are all born in spiritual darkness. We are spiritually dead and we need to be given spiritual life. We need God to give us regeneration.

What are the heavenly things? These are probably more advanced realities about heaven, eternal life, and the new creation to come. Jesus is saying that since Nicodemus rejected salvation 101; he is not ready for salvation 201 realities.

And now Jesus clarifies that his message is not an opinion; it is from heaven.

He says in verse 13, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” No one has gone into heaven and returned with revelation.

There is only one man who can give a direct, clear, true accounting of the truth—and it is the one who came *from* heaven. Jesus alone has the revelation we need. Jesus alone has authority to reveal the truth from heaven—because that’s where he came from.

Jesus is claiming something radical for himself. He is saying he is the only one to show the true way to eternal life. All religions are not the same. They do not all give the same truth and lead to the same place. Jesus says he alone shows the true way.

Some people may recoil that that sounds exclusive. But it is a matter of Jesus simply speaking what is true. And it is actually gracious—because he came to *show us* the way. Anyone can get in on this. You don’t need advanced degrees to figure out the path. You just listen to Jesus.

So, here’s the answer to our first question:

Where does the life-giving, revival-spreading message come from? It comes from Jesus, and he came from heaven; so we can trust him.

So, for all of us, have you listened carefully to Jesus? Are you getting your truth from him?

Many people claim to speak for him. Many people give sermons and write books and speak on podcasts claiming to represent him. But are you testing everything with what he said?

Maybe you’re exploring Christianity. The best thing you can do is learn from Jesus. Read through the gospel of John. Test everything you hear from other people with the words of Jesus himself. Nobody else has come down from heaven to give us the truth.

2. What Is the Message? (vv. 14–15)

Second question: What is the message?

At the core of the message is justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Jesus doesn't use all these words, but—as many scholars note—the substance is right here.^x

Jesus gives us a visual image of salvation, drawn from a story in the Old Testament. It's in verses 14–15: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

This story is from the book of Numbers, in chapter 21.

God had rescued Israel out of slavery in Egypt. After bringing them out, they spent several decades wandering in the wilderness. During this time, they repeatedly rebelled against Moses and God. And they accused Moses of leading them to die in the wilderness without food and water. This revealed their own sinful hearts—like ours.

In response to this, God judged them by sending serpents among them. They were called “fiery serpents,” probably because they were poisonous. Maybe they were red in color; maybe after they bit people, the skin felt like it burned and turned red.^{xi}

After many people died, the people confessed their sin. And they asked Moses to plead with the Lord to take the serpents away.

And here's what God did: He told Moses to make a model of a serpent, put it on a pole, and hold it up for the people to see. Whenever someone was bit by a serpent, they could look to this metal serpent, and they would live.

Jesus chose this because it's a brilliant picture of salvation.

The people sinned against God and were rightly condemned to death. But God graciously provided a means of forgiveness and life. It came through faith in God's provision. They were to trust him by looking at his provision. And the result was life rather than death.

Notice how Jesus made the connection: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (vv. 14–15). Jesus uses this term “lifted up” in a couple different places in the Gospel of John. In each case, he is referring to his own death and resurrection.^{xii}

Jesus is saying:

“Israel sinned. They were condemned to death. And they received life through looking in simple faith to God's provision.”

“That’s a picture of what I came to do and how I’m going to save you. You are condemned to death because of sin, but I will be lifted up. And when I am—just look to me with simple faith, and your condemnation will be removed. You will receive eternal life in place of eternal death.”

We simply look to Christ for life. What a picture of salvation. This image of “looking to Christ” with faith shows the simplicity of faith. It is not complicated. He doesn’t ask for a checklist of good works. He just says, “look to me and live.”

Maybe for some of you, that image will help you trust Christ—maybe for the first time, or maybe to renew your faith.

So, what is Jesus’s message?

It is that we have all sinned, stand condemned, and deserve death. But that we can have that condemnation removed through Jesus—he will die in our place on the cross. And we receive acceptance and eternal life by trusting him. By looking to him with simple faith.

Have you received this message? Have you looked to Christ to live?

This is how the 1800s British pastor Charles Spurgeon came to faith.

He had known the truth—he read the Bible, he read the puritans, he went to church. But the truth of the gospel didn’t sink into his heart yet. He was miserable.

He was about 15 years old. He set out on Sunday morning to go to a church service. But a blizzard outside kept him from getting to the church he planned on going to. So he stepped into a church closer to home and sat in the back.

Only about a dozen people were there—it was a small church, and there was a blizzard outside. The pastor who was supposed to preach couldn’t make it. So one man from the church stepped in and started to preach. And at one point, this man—during the sermon—started speaking directly to this 15-year-old Spurgeon.

Here’s how Spurgeon describes what happened: “Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, ‘Young man, you look very miserable... And you will always be miserable—miserable in life and miserable in death—if you don’t obey my text... But if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.’

“Then lifting up his hands, he shouted... ‘Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live’

“I saw at once the way of salvation... There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung

with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to him.”^{xiii}

This is the message: Jesus is lifted up on the cross for you. Look and live.

3. Why Is this Message Here? (vv. 16–17)

Now, the third question: Why is this message here? Why did Jesus come from heaven to give us this message of salvation through faith?

The answer is in verses 16–17. Verse 16 is probably the most well-known verse in the whole Bible. It restates the gospel message we just saw, but it adds something new. It tells us the *why* Jesus came to give us this message.

Now, some Bibles put these letters in red, as if Jesus is still speaking here. But I think it’s most likely that John—the writer of the gospel—is now explaining Jesus’s message.^{xiv} John is pausing to emphasize God’s motive in giving us this way of salvation.

What is the hidden motive behind what Jesus is doing here? It is love.

Verse 16 says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

John is saying: Did you hear what Jesus just said? Do you know why he came to be lifted up that we might be saved? It’s because God loves you. He came to save the world because God loves the world—this sinful, condemned world.

Some people think that the Father is the one who is angry; and Jesus is the nice Son who persuades him to save us. But John says no—the Father and Son are united in this. When you see the cross, you are to see the gift of the Father, motivated by love.

Anyone can get in on this. It is an open invitation. John says, “that *whoever believes in him* should not perish but have eternal life.” That word “whoever” means it’s available to you. No one is excluded from this invitation.

What do you need to do to receive this? You look to Christ lifted up on the cross like Israel looked to the lifted-up serpent. You believe in him. Entrust yourself to him personally. He gave himself for you; now you give yourself to him. And the promise for all who do is eternal life.

What is the alternative?

It’s summarized with two words: perishing and condemnation. Jesus implies that those who do not trust him will perish eternally.

And he clarifies why in verse 17: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Jesus will return to judge—some inherit his kingdom; others go to everlasting punishment.

Why? Because we all stand condemned in sin. We all deserve everlasting punishment.

But he came to rescue us from that death. He came to take our condemnation on the cross so we won’t perish.

4. Why Does This Message Matter? (vv. 18–21)

This leads us to the final question: Why does this message matter?

Jesus’s answer begins in verse 18: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

Jesus says, “whoever believes in him is not condemned.”

The opposite of condemnation is justification. The positive way to put what Jesus says is this: “whoever believes in him is justified.” Whoever believes in him is declared righteous. This is the substance of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

The gospel that Jesus brought matters because it’s the only way to be justified. The only way to be saved from perishing eternally.

He’s saying: *Do you know how much I love you? Enough to take your condemnation in your place. Enough to perish so you don’t have to. Enough to endure God’s wrath so you can experience his love forever.*

This is what makes the gospel good news. It’s what makes John 3:16 so powerful. If you don’t understand what you deserve, you will sentimentalize John 3:16. But when you know you deserve wrath, and Jesus took it for you, then you understand it.

John now clarifies why some people don’t come to Christ, and why others do.

And the reason is not merely intellectual. It’s moral and spiritual. In verse 19 he says the reason why people don’t come to him is because they will be exposed. Because if you come to Jesus, you have to admit you’re as inner who has done evil. John says “the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” And then he says we don’t come because we love our sin and we don’t want our works exposed.

This is why it's actually hard to believe. In order to receive Jesus's grace, we have to admit we need it. In order to trust that he took God's wrath of us; we have to admit we deserve that. We have to admit that some of the things we love are wrong.

I've known many people who rejected Jesus not because they didn't think it was all true. They rejected it because of what it meant for their lives. They didn't want to forsake their sins. And so they don't come to the light; because they don't want to be exposed.

But some people do come to the light. Some people do come to Christ. John describes them in verse 21. And he's not talking about people who come to Christ for the first time—he's talking about people who are born again. People who are trusting Christ and have been transformed.

Notice how he describes them: "But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." These come to the light not to show how good they are; not to show how virtuous they are; not to be rewarded for their goodness. No, they come to show that their "works have been carried out in God." God produced them by his grace. They have experienced the new birth; and they are coming to make it clear.

So this is the answer to our last question: Why does the gospel message matter?

Because our eternal destiny is at stake. We love darkness more than light; and we are already condemned, heading for wrath and eternal perishing.

But Jesus was raised up that we might look to him and live. He was condemned so that we don't have to be. And we receive this salvation by faith alone.

Implications

So, how should we respond to all of this?

First, every one of us is invited to look to him. To look to him and live.

Have you done this? Are you doing this?
Are you trusting him for eternal life?
Have you been justified by faith alone?
Do you see that the foundation of salvation is Christ alone?
Do you see that this comes to you by grace alone?

Second, have you considered where this message came from?

Do you see that if we are going to have *true* truth, it has to come down from heaven?

Jesus is the divine Son, who came from heaven, to reveal this to us.

If you are not yet confident that this message is true—I encourage you to get to know Jesus. Read the gospel of John through from beginning to end. Look into the historical credibility of this message. Talk to a Christian friend about it.

Third, are you clear on this gospel as you share it with others?

We have nothing to offer people but Jesus. We received our message from him; and we share the message from him.

So we make sure to share the whole message.

We don't remove parts we don't like, or that we don't think other people will like.

We include the bad news in order to make the good news clear.

We help people see we are condemned; but that Jesus came to take that condemnation.

And Jesus loves us enough to do this for us, and to warn us and urge us to trust him.

And finally, do you expect God to work through this message?

This is what he loves to do. As we share this message with others, God causes people to be born again. He opens their heart to receive it. He draws people to Christ.

You don't need super-skills for this. You just love people, and make this clear. And God will do the work when he wants, and how he wants.

And sometimes he brings about astonishing and widespread revival. He's done it before.

When Edwards preached on justification by faith alone, he didn't know what would happen. He didn't manufacture the revival.

That's why when he wrote about it, he titled his work *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*. It was surprising to him. God did it. Only God can do it. And he does it in a way that it's unmistakably his work.

So, if we long for awakening and revival in our day, this is how it comes.

It comes through the message of the gospel:

The lifting up of Jesus so that all who look to him will live.

Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

And so we pray that God will give us a narrative of surprising conversions in our own day.

ⁱ works, vol 4, p116–117

ⁱⁱ Works, vol 4, 148-149

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1.xiii.i.html?>

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- ^{iv} Jonathan Edwards, *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 12–13.
- ^v Jonathan Edwards, *Narrative*, 13.
- ^{vi} Jonathan Edwards, *Narrative*, 13.
- ^{vii} Jonathan Edwards, *Narrative*, 14.
- ^{viii} Jonathan Edwards, *Narrative*, 14.
- ^{ix} See Don Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 199; Edward Klink III, *John*, 202.
- ^x Don Carson notes, “although John does not explicitly appeal to Paul’s ‘justification by faith’ doctrine, the substance of the matter is found here” (Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 207). And Frederick Bruner, reflecting on vv14–15 and the picture of the bronze serpent pointing to Jesus, “‘Trusting’ is *all* that is requested on the human side.... *He*, not our believing, is the means of salvation; human believing simply holds on to *this* strong means and this thrilling salvation” (Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 193). He went on to show the connection between this and salvation by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone. Additionally, C. K. Barrett, on verse 18, wrote “The present verse may be regarded as a statement of the negative aspect of the doctrine of justification by faith” (Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 217).
- ^{xi} Gordan Wenham, *Numbers*, 176.
- ^{xii} See John 8:28; 12:32, 34.
- ^{xiii} From Spurgeon’s autobiography, quoted in Alex DiPrima, *Spurgeon: A Life*, 46.
- ^{xiv} See Edward Klink III, *John*, 204–205.