

# Gospel and Born Again

## Outline (Read John 3:1-16)

1. Why do we need to be born again
2. What does born again mean
3. What are the results of being born again
4. How can a person be born again

**Read John 3:1-16** *Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." <sup>3</sup> Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."<sup>4</sup> "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. <sup>10</sup> "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

**1. Why do we need to be born-again:** Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council (John 3:1), and Jesus calls him Israel's teacher (3:10). People called Billy Graham America's Pastor because of his character and preaching. Nicodemus was of equal stature — Israel's Teacher.

*John 3:1-2:* Nicodemus approaches Jesus respectfully, calling Jesus "Rabbi", which shows his humility because Jesus had no credentials compared to him. Nicodemus assesses that Jesus is a teacher mightily blessed with God's power, and he is curious about Him. But he doesn't openly ask Jesus a question as to who He is. Jesus senses a problem with this approach because Nicodemus thinks he can see something of who Jesus is in the miracles.

*John 3:3:* Jesus insists no one can 'see' (perceive) the Kingdom of God unless he(or she) is born again. [Remember Peter confessed that Jesus is the Son of God, and Jesus said God revealed this to Peter and not man — Matt 16:15-17].

Nicodemus is a respectable, upright, religious person who knows his Bible well. Yet, Jesus tells him, "**You *must* be born again to see the Kingdom of God** (John 3:3). So, good behaviour and biblical knowledge are not required to be born again. And yet being born again is vital because if you can't see the kingdom of God, you can't enter it (John 3:5). Jesus told the Jewish leaders, of which Nicodemus was a part, that even people like tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God. (Matt 21:31). Tim Keller nicely summarises what Jesus meant:

- *You must be born again, no matter how religious and upright you are (like Nicodemus).*

- *You can be born again, no matter how despised you are* (like tax collectors and prostitutes). [Note: Jews considered tax collectors to be traitors who collected tax for the Roman conquerors]

It is very offensive to respectable people to tell them that we are all on the same level — respectable and unrespectable in God's eyes. The gospel is offensive to many, even if you try and present it as kindly as possible. And if you're not prepared to receive a backlash, you're not preaching the gospel. So, everyone must be born-again to see and enter the Kingdom of God. So, what does the term "born again" mean?

**2. What does "born again" mean?:** Other passages (1 Pet 1:3, 23) refer to born-again as '**new birth**'. Certainly, Nicodemus understood it as a second birth (John 3:4). Jesus defines it as *born of water and the spirit*" (John 3:5). What does "*born of water and the spirit*" mean? There are many explanations, but it must satisfy all four following points:

- It must be from the Old Testament that Nicodemus knows because Jesus says that as Israel's teacher, he should understand (John 3:10)
- It must be from the Spirit above (John 3:8)
- It must involve the water and spirit together (John 3:5)
- It must be a single new birth, not two or more (John 3:3-5, John 1:12-13).

Let us examine some explanations for "born of water and the spirit":

- Water may refer to Christian baptism — but that's a New Testament practice and would make no sense to Nicodemus. Not an acceptable explanation
- Water may refer to baptism by John the Baptist — but believers discontinued this practice after the resurrection. Not an acceptable explanation
- Water may refer to natural birth, while spirit refers to spiritual birth — Jesus referred to only one "new birth" — not two. And this wasn't clear from the Old Testament. Not an acceptable explanation
- Water-spirit may refer to God's word, which a person believes and is born again (John 1:12-13, 1 Pet 1:23). While the new birth is by receiving Jesus, the Word made flesh (John 1:14) — yet it wasn't from the Old Testament. It is hard for Nicodemus to connect it simultaneously to water and the spirit. That is not an acceptable explanation.

**The most acceptable explanation** that satisfies points (i) to (iv) above is in Ezekiel 36:25–27, where water and spirit complement each other. The water cleanses the heart from defilement. And the spirit transforms the heart to follow God whole heartedly. The Old Testament prophets foretold this would happen when God made a New Covenant with Israel (Jer 31:31-34, Ezk 11:18-20) and for which King David prayed to God (Ps 51:2, 5, 7, 10).

*Ezk 36:25-27 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (also in 2 Cor 3:3)*

This explanation is appropriate and essential—because a "new spirit and a new heart" means a **transformation** in your life.

**3. What are the results of being born again:** The main result (or sign) of being born again is "**transformation**" to a new life that comes from the Holy Spirit above—giving you

- a new vision for your life (John 3:3 you can see the Kingdom of God)

ii. a new sensitivity to the Holy Spirit (Ezk 36:27) and a new identity (John 1:12-13, Rom 8:15-16).

i. **New Vision for your Life.** It is not repairing our existing life or habits because the whole of our current life is defective. But it is the renewal of our whole nature. God cleanses our hearts from defilement. **He gives us a new heart and puts a new spirit in us** that changes the desires of our hearts to make relating with God our highest priority (Ezk 36:25-26). God promised He would do this in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ (Jer 31:31-34, Ezk 11:18-20).

God told Moses (Deut 18:15) that later, He would send another prophet like him. Moses gave the Law of God on a stone outside man's heart. Who was the other prophet? It was Jesus (Acts 3:22), but He wrote the law of God inside our hearts. Only Jesus was without sin and perfectly kept God's law. When you receive Him, His spirit comes inside your heart, and you're careful to follow Him with inner motivation.

As an illustration: Consider watching a movie. The background music is there when you see a movie, but your focus is on the movie.

- Before you are born again, the background music is like the kingdom of God (you may know about it), but what grips your vision is the movie (which represents the world).
- After you're born again, the movie becomes the Kingdom of God, which grips you, whereas the background music is your life in the world.

Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and not by works so that no one can boast (Eph 2:9). But the transformation must accompany your faith. Otherwise, it is not true faith and not the new birth. Martin Luther said it well — "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone." Transformation accompanies it.

ii. **New Sensitivity and a New Identity.** In our natural birth, when we come out from our mother's womb and are sensitive to the world, we cry loudly! This sensitivity carries on in life. We are affected by "What will people say?". Worldly values shape our lives — pride, boasting of what we possess and accomplish. The world also defines our identity based on our family name, social class or caste, race, career, how we look, etc. But the moment we are born again, we are sensitive to the Holy Spirit and "What will God say?" becomes more important. We have a new identity as children of God and cry, "Abba Father" (John 1:12-13, Rom 8:15-16).

**4. How can a person be born again:** To begin with, it's only by the revelation from God that a person can be born again. Nevertheless, God expects a **faith** response from us. In John 3:14-15, Jesus tells us how to be born again. He uses the example of Moses lifting the bronze snake in the desert. The background story is that when the Israelites travelled through the desert from Egypt to the promised land, they were ungrateful and grumbled against God and Moses. God sent poisonous snakes among them that bit and caused many Israelites to die. They repented and cried, and God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. When poisonous snakes bit the Israelites, all they had to do was only look at the bronze snake, and they lived (Num 21:4-9). The bronze snake represented sin that God judged, and God paid

Jesus meant He took our sins upon Himself, and God judged Him guilty. Jesus paid for our sins by dying on the cross. All we have to do is **look at Him** with faith — and we are saved and born again. Jesus tells this to Nicodemus as a hint that Jesus would die for humanity's sin on the cross out of love for us. Those that believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). **This is the gospel.**

But is grace so cheap that all we have to do is look at Jesus and believe in Him that He took all our sins? No! Grace is not cheap, it is very costly, and Jesus paid the price for that grace. In John 16:21, Jesus uses the example of a mother in labour as she gives birth to a child. The child does nothing to be born. All the painful effort is made by the mother alone. And when the birth of her baby is over, she cuddles her baby with joy.

Similarly, the new birth costs us nothing. Jesus bears all the pain alone on the cross. He meets us after He rose again and joyfully imparts His resurrected life to us that believe in Him.

## End Notes:

**Testimony of Charles Spurgeon** (Prince of Preachers). <https://bit.ly/3MINECg>

Charles' father and grandfather were gospel preachers. Still, Charles always tried to earn his salvation by working hard to live a sinless life and failed — he felt condemned. One day, at age sixteen, he visited a village church when it was snowing heavily. A layman was preaching on Isa 45:22, *"Look unto Me and be saved"*.

The preacher began: "This is a straightforward text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now looking doesn't take much pain. It's not lifting your foot or finger but **'Look.'** Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't earn much money to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look.

"But then the text says, 'Look unto Me.' Yes!" he said, "many of you are looking to yourselves, but it's no use looking there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves. Some say look to God the Father. No, look to Him later. Jesus Christ says, 'Look unto Me.' Someone may say, 'We must wait for the Spirit's working'. You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, **'Look unto Me.'**"

Then he said: *"Look unto Me; I am sweating great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hanging on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sitting at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!"*

He fixed his eyes on me as if he knew all my heart and 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. Still, if you obey now, you will be saved." Then lifting 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. When I heard that word, "Look!"

Oh, that somebody had told me this before, "Trust Christ and you shall be saved."

**Testimony of Cardinal Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris:** <https://bit.ly/39N9jAO>

*"Jesus, I know you died for me, but I don't give a damn!"*

It was the summer holidays in the City of Orleans, France, in 1939. and a small group of naughty boys ran through the streets, having fun. They decided to have fun with a parish priest in a nearby Catholic Church. One of those boys was a Jew named Aaron Lustiger, who decided to confess some wild imaginary sins to the priest for fun. But the priest was no fool and realised this young boy was up to mischief. As part of the Catholic ritual of confession, he gave the young boy a penance to say three times to a large crucifix, *"Jesus, you died upon the cross for me, and I don't give a damn."*

Now, being a Jew, Aaron had no problem and gladly walked up to the large crucifix, looked upon the face of the dead man hanging there, and shouted, *"Jesus, you died upon the cross for me, and I don't give a damn!"* He laughed at how easy it was and said again, a little softer, *"Jesus, you died upon the cross for me, and I don't give a damn!"* But as he spoke the words a third time, something happened. He said, "Jesus, you died upon the cross for me, and I—" He stopped. He fell to his knees and looked up at the man who had died for him upon the cross and looked at him. And he saw the nails that pierced the deadman's hands and feet, the wound that bared his pierced side, the thorns that scarred his forehead. He saw a brave, good man, an innocent man who bled innocent blood. He saw God in that man. A loving God. A faithful God who would do anything to bring his lost children home. And Aaron wept at the sight of such perfect, unadulterated love.

A year later, Aaron was baptised into the Catholic Church. As an adult, he became a Catholic priest; and in 1983, after thirty years of faithfully serving God's people, he was made the Cardinal Archbishop of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. He died in 2007.