

“Born Again” (John 3:1–21)

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If you're like me, a Christian who is convinced that the greatest truth and humanity's only hope is found in Jesus Christ, you may wonder why everyone isn't a Christian. Why wouldn't everyone run to a God who becomes a man and dies for his people? Who wouldn't want to embrace a God who offers forgiveness and the promise of eternal life?

I suppose there are many reasons. Some people simply aren't convinced Christianity is true. Some people have been turned off by Christians they've met, whether those are real Christians who aren't following Jesus well or nominal Christians who actually aren't real Christians.

But the real reason, according to Jesus, is that in order to be a Christian, one must have a supernatural transformation. In order to become a Christian, one must realize that there is only one solution to our spiritual problem. And in order to become a Christian, one must realize that we do have a spiritual problem and one must be willing to have his or her sins exposed and be willing to be transformed.

Today, we'll see this in a famous passage in John's Gospel. We'll be reading John 3:1–21. And as we do, I want to make four points: One, not everyone realizes who Jesus is; two, in order to know Jesus, God must transform us; three, Jesus is our only hope; and, four, those who want a part of Jesus must come into the light.

So, here's that first point: Not everyone realizes who Jesus is. Let's read John 3:1–4:

¹ 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?”¹

In this passage, Jesus has a conversation with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a member of the Pharisees, one of the major sects of Judaism in the first century. Not only that, Nicodemus is also a member of the Sanhedrin, the council that governed the Jews. That's what John means when he

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

writes that Nicodemus is “a ruler of the Jews.” Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Perhaps that’s because he doesn’t want the other religious leaders to know that he came to see Jesus. It’s more likely, however, that this is John’s way of telling us that Nicodemus is in the dark. He doesn’t see things as they really are. He can’t see who Jesus is.

He does realize that Jesus is from God. He can’t deny the miracles, or the signs, that Jesus has performed. John has already told us that Jesus changed water into wine at a wedding (John 2:1–11). And, at the end of chapter 2, John writes these words:

²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man (John 2:23–25).

Many people seemed to believe in Jesus because he performed miracles. But John tells us that Jesus didn’t entrust himself to these people. We might say that Jesus didn’t believe in them. He didn’t trust that they had real faith. Why? Because he knew their hearts.

One of the important doctrines of Christianity is that human beings are born with hearts that are not naturally inclined towards God. We don’t seek out a relationship with God. We tend to rebel against him at worst, or ignore him at best. God spoke the following words through Jeremiah the prophet:

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)

A deceitful heart can see a miracle and still not truly believe. Deceitful hearts can seem to believe for a while, but that’s not real faith. Real faith endures throughout life, through ups and downs.

So, Nicodemus knows that Jesus is a man of God, but he doesn’t really know who Jesus is yet. He certainly doesn’t understand what Jesus says about being born again. What he says in verse 4 should make us laugh. He can’t imagine that Jesus isn’t talking about literally being born again. He doesn’t understand that Jesus is talking about a spiritual transformation. Even after Jesus explains what he’s talking about, we find this exchange in verses 9 and 10:

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

Nicodemus, one of the leading experts on the Hebrew Scriptures, didn't understand what Jesus was saying and he certainly didn't grasp Jesus' full identity.

This teaches us that it's not enough to know the Bible. People can read the whole of the Bible and not know God. I don't know how often that happens, but it's certainly possible. And I do know it's possible for people to read the Bible and miss the point of a passage or the whole book. To know God and to understand his word, one must be transformed by God.

And that's my second point: To know God truly, we must be transformed by him. That's what Jesus means when he talks about being "born again." The theological term is regeneration. Sometimes, the same reality is expressed in the Bible as receiving a new heart, or going from spiritual blindness to spiritual sightedness. The idea is that we are changed so that we can know God.

Let's read verses 5–8:

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."

The first time Jesus talked about being born again, Nicodemus didn't understand. So Jesus tries again. One cannot enter into the kingdom of God unless he or she is born "of water and the Spirit." That is something that Nicodemus should have known, because later, as we've already seen, Jesus will say, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (v. 10). Nicodemus should have understood what Jesus was saying because it was in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament.

There are a number of interpretations of what it means to be "born of water and the Spirit." Some people think it refers to being born the first time in the physical sense, and then being born a second time, spiritually, through the transformation that the Holy Spirit works in the life of a believer. But this doesn't work grammatically. Grammatically, there is only rebirth in view.² And since Nicodemus should have known what Jesus was talking about, it stands to reason that it's something found in the Old Testament.

² In Greek, the preposition translated here as "of" governs both "water" and "Spirit." In other words, Jesus doesn't say, "Unless one is born of water, and then born of Spirit." See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 194.

I think it's clear that Jesus is referring to something we read about in Ezekiel 36, when God promised he would restore his people. In Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, we find various passages that promise of a day when God would make a new covenant with his people, not like one he made at Mount Sinai when he gave Israel the law.³ At that time, Israel received the law written on tablets of stone. And immediately it was clear that they couldn't obey the law. So God promised a time when he would forgive sins, give his people new hearts, give them the Holy Spirit, and cause them to obey. We get a clear description of that in Ezekiel 36:25–27:

²⁵ 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. 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. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

The cleansing with water is a picture of forgiveness, of washing away moral impurities. But that's not enough. God's people need hearts that will love him and obey him. So God will give them new hearts by giving them the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit, the third person of God, comes into the lives of people, he changes them. He causes them to be born again.

What Jesus is telling Nicodemus is that he is fulfilling this promise. Jesus will offer cleansing and he will pour out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. But Jesus is saying more than that. He's telling this Jewish man that Jews aren't automatically part of God's kingdom. Not even very religious Jewish people—not even religious leaders—are automatically part of God's kingdom. No one by their first birth is a child of God or a citizen of heaven. The apostle Paul says that before becoming Christians, people are “dead in [their] trespasses and sins” and “children of wrath” (Eph.2:1, 3). In other words, we're born spiritually dead. In order to become part of God's people, you need to be spiritually reborn.

How does that happen, anyway? How does one become born again? Jesus gives us the answer in verse 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.” Jesus is making a bit of a word play. In Greek, the same word that is translated as “spirit” can be translated as “wind.” The Greek word is πνεῦμα (*pneuma*). A pneumatic drill is powered by air. If you have pneumonia, you have a problem breathing or a problem with your lungs. What Jesus

³ Isa. 55:3; Jer. 31:31–34; 32:36–41; Ezek. 36:22–32; 37.

is saying is that just as you can't control the wind, you can't control the Holy Spirit. God decides where the wind blows and God decides where the Holy Spirit goes. If God wants to cause someone to be born again, he will do it. And until we have that experience, we can't even see the kingdom of God, much less enter it. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:3, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit."

This would have been rather shocking to Nicodemus. He would have assumed that the Jewish people were automatically God's people. He would have assumed that Israel *was* the kingdom of God. Of course, there are many, many passages in the Old Testament that suggest that not all of Israel was Israel (cf. Rom. 9:6).⁴ And that's why he has such trouble understanding what Jesus is saying.

Then Jesus tells him something else that he should have understood. Jesus shows him that he is the way that people can receive forgiveness. The Holy Spirit can change a person, but that doesn't take care of our sin problem. We all have ignored God and rebelled against him, and he would be just to leave us to our own devices, to let us remain spiritually dead. He would be just to punish us for our sins. But he provided a way to have our sins dealt with. He destroyed sin without destroying us.

In the next few verses, Jesus shows Nicodemus a bit more of his identity. He shows him that Jesus is our only hope. Let's read verses 9–15:

⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?
¹¹Truly, 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. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?
¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

In verse 11, Jesus states that "we speak of what we know." He could be referring to the three Persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. But he's probably just responding to what Nicodemus said in verse 2: "we know that you are a teacher come from God." In a way, Jesus is saying, "I know you think you know something, but I know more." And the reason he knows

⁴ One only has to read the prophets or consider all the faithless Israelites of the Old Testament to understand this.

more is because he is from heaven. He can tell us about eternal matters, about what happens after death and who God is, things we can't really figure out on our own, because Jesus is God.

And one of the things we would never have figured out on our own, one of the things we never would have guessed, was that God would become a man and die like a criminal for our sins. In a sense, that's what Jesus tells Nicodemus will happen.

In verses 14 and 15, Jesus is reminding Nicodemus of something else from the Old Testament. In the book of Numbers, there's an odd story about how the people of Israel rebelled against God and how God punished the people. The story is found in Numbers 21:4–9:

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." ⁶Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

The people didn't trust God. They didn't trust that his plans were good. They didn't trust that he was good. They rejected his gift of manna. They rejected him. So God sent poisonous snakes, whose venom felt like fire. Some people died from the snake bites. And it was only when the people pleaded with Moses that Moses prayed for the people and God gave a solution. This is the really odd part: Moses made a serpent of bronze (or copper⁵), put it on a pole, and those who looked to the snake lived.

Why the snake? Did this bronze snake actually do anything? No. This bronze snake didn't do anything. It was God who healed anyone who looked at the snake. What mattered was their trust. If they trusted God's word and looked to the snake, they would live, but the snake in itself had no life. And, ironically, it was looking to the thing they feared, the thing that would kill them, that saved them. But the people of Israel didn't understand all this. Many years later, some

⁵ Gordon Wenham, *Numbers*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 176.

people started to worship the snake. The snake even got a name: Nehushtan. Because it became an idol, Hezekiah destroyed it (2 Kgs. 18:4).

This strange story in the Old Testament pointed forward to Jesus. He is the one who was lifted up on a “pole”—on the cross. And everyone who trusts God’s words and looks to Jesus will live. They will have eternal life. It’s strange to think that looking to a dying man might save us from death, but Jesus is no ordinary man. He is the God-man. And he didn’t just die in our place. He also rose from the grave. The snake on the pole had no power in itself; it didn’t do anything. But Jesus, when he died on the cross, took the penalty for our sins that we deserve. He was treated like sin, crushed so that we could live. Unlike the snake, he is alive; he rose from the grave in a body that cannot die again. Unlike the snake, he has life in himself and gives others life (John 5:25–26). And unlike the snake, he is a proper object of worship.

I doubt that Nicodemus understood exactly what Jesus was saying. But, particularly in hindsight, we can understand what Jesus meant. The reason we can be forgiven of our sins and appear righteous in God’s eyes is because of Jesus’ perfect life and atoning death. And the reason we can understand the meaning of his death is because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

We also know that those who will receive eternal life from Jesus must come into the light. That’s my fourth point. Let’s now read John 3:16–21.

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. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Whoever 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. ¹⁹And 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. ²⁰For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹But 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.”

This paragraph appears to be spoken by Jesus in the ESV. But the original Greek doesn’t have any quotation marks and the language seems to be John’s. Either way, it’s God word.

Of course, John 3:16 is probably the most famous verse of the Bible. But often people don’t think about the context. Jesus tells Nicodemus that God loves the world: not just Jews, but also Gentiles. And what’s stunning is that John can sometimes use “the world” to talk about how sinful fallen humanity is (1 John 2:15–17). I love what D. A. Carson writes about this passage:

Jews were familiar with the truth that God loved the children of Israel; here God's love is not restricted by race. Even so, God's love is to be admired not because the world is so big and includes so many people, but because the world is so bad: that is the customary connotation of *kosmos* ('world'; cf. notes on 1:9). The world is so wicked that John elsewhere forbids Christians to love it or anything in it (1 Jn. 2:15–17). There is no contradiction between this prohibition and the fact that God does love it. Christians are not to love the world with the selfish love of participation; God loves the world with the self-less, costly love of redemption.⁶

It's amazing that God would love sinful humanity so much that he would send Jesus, his beloved, one-of-a-kind son. And Jesus came the first time not to condemn, but to save.

Of course, that doesn't mean that everyone will be saved. John tells us that those who do not believe already stand condemned. Their failure to see who Jesus is and to trust him leaves them in the place where all humans were at one time or another: under condemnation, bearing their own sin. We were in the dark, where our evil wouldn't be exposed. And we tend to like to hide our secrets. But those who come to the light, who acknowledge their sin and trust Jesus, receive eternal life. Though they die, they will live forever with God.

Sadly, many people would rather be in the dark. They don't want to admit that they do evil things. No one really thinks of himself or herself as evil. That's not what we tend to do. We often rationalize things: "I did those things because of these circumstances." We tend to relativize things: "Everyone else is doing it!" Or we tend to think we're living good lives. But when we don't do life with God at the center, according to God's design, we are rejecting the ultimate good. We're rejecting God. We were made to love him, worship him, and obey him, but we don't tend to do those things.

Even people like Nicodemus, a Pharisee, didn't really do those things. They tried to obey the law given to Israel, but they didn't pursue it by faith (cf. Rom. 9:30–33). They didn't trust in God and his provision. Instead, they put their trust in their own moral efforts. They didn't realize that the law was made to point out their own inadequacy. They didn't realize that the law was made to point them to Jesus. Coming to the light means confessing that nothing we do can save us. It also means realizing that nothing we've done in the past can keep us from being saved.

Now that we've looked at this passage, I want us to think about how it applies to our lives. Let me share a few thoughts.

⁶ Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 205.

One, it's not enough to go to church. It's not enough to read the Bible. It's not enough to know the words of the Bible. We need to see how Jesus is the whole key to understanding the Bible. And it's not enough to have mere head knowledge of Jesus. We need to be transformed by God. Joining a church and attending worship services is important. Reading and studying the Bible is important. But if this doesn't lead us to a real, personal knowledge of Jesus, it's worthless.

Two, we must see that God is the one who causes us to be born again. He is the one who opens up our eyes to see Jesus. We can't do that ourselves. If you're a Christian, praise God that he has done that for you. Think of what Paul writes to Titus in Titus 3:4-7. After telling Titus that "we ourselves were foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another" (v. 3), Paul writes:

⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

God didn't save you because you were good. He didn't save you because you were smart, or worked hard, or knew the right people. God saved you "according to his own mercy," because he wanted to.

And this is a good thing. I know that some people think that if it's ultimately God's unconditional choice to save us, it's a bad thing. But they're wrong. If you're married, think about your marriage. Why do you love your spouse? Is it because he or she is good looking? What happens when looks fade? Is it because he or she has money? What happens if a bad investment or a crisis swallows up that money? Was it because you shared the same hobbies? What if you can't pursue those anymore, because of a lack of time or money, or because of bad health? My point is that if you really love your spouse, it may be hard to say why you love that person. The best answer may be, "I don't know, I just do."

Now, think about God's love. What if his love for you was based on your ability to make a good decision? What would happen when you make a bad decision? (We all know we will

make bad decisions.) Would you lose eternal life then? What if your status with him was based on your moral performance? What happens when you fail?⁷

If God's love for you was based on anything other than his own choice, it wouldn't work, it wouldn't be sustainable. And if it were based on certain abilities, like intelligence or money or who your parents are, many different kinds of people would be ruled out instantly. But God has set his love upon us. He chose us. And the wind of the Holy Spirit blew where he wished, shining light in our dark hearts (2 Cor. 4:5–6). And that's transformation produces a permanent change, something that cannot be taken away. Think of what the apostle Peter writes in the first chapter of his first letter:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet. 1:3–5).

This new birth cannot be taken away. The Holy Spirit will sustain you. He will guard and keep you. If you feel like you're drifting from God, he will guide you back. There are people who make false confessions of faith. There are people who appear to be Christians and are not, and the Bible discusses this in a few places.⁸ But if you truly have been born again, you will receive this inheritance. That is great and glorious news. If it depended on us, we would fail. If we could lose our salvation, we would.⁹

Three, if you're a Christian but you sense you're not living the way you should be, or you feel you're not following Jesus the way you should be, think about this: The God who has the power to cause you to be born again has more than enough power to get you back on the right path.

The same can be said of anything in your life. The God who spoke the universe into existence, the God who made a virgin pregnant, and the God who brought your spiritually dead heart to life can fix your marriage. He can heal wounds in your heart and in your mind. He can

⁷ I got this idea from a sermon that I heard Tim Keller preach at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on September 25, 2016.

⁸ Matt. 7:21–23; 13:1–9, 18–23; 1 John 2:19.

⁹ For those who believe you can lose salvation, I would encourage them to read John 6:38–40 and 44 very carefully, along with Romans 8:28–30.

bring your hard-hearted atheist friend to eternal life. This should cause us to pray with hope and anticipation.

Four, if you're not a Christian, or perhaps you're someone like Nicodemus, whose been religious but doesn't really know Jesus, you may wonder, "If I can't see God's kingdom without being born again, and I can't make that happen, what should I do?" You may think, "What's the point? God is going to do what he wants anyway." I think the question for you is: Do you want to come into the light? Do you want eternal life? Do you want to admit that you can't secure that life for yourself? Are you willing to let God change you, to expose your sins and steer you away from them? If so, you may already be on the way to being born again. Talk to God. Ask for his help. If you earnestly seek God and pray to him, he will answer.