

Born Again

John 3:1-8

One of the most misunderstood and misused phrases in our common language today is the phrase “born again.” Born again Christian is a description that is often used in an attempt to label a person’s religious commitment. And often, the use of that phrase “born again Christian” gives the idea that there is such a thing as a non-born-again-Christian. As if there were two separate categories, like evangelicals and liberals. So among Christians, there are those classified as “born-again.” And among many people with limited interest in Christianity, the title of “born again Christian” is used to describe those who have particularly outspoken or apparently radical religious views.

At other times, “born again” is used to describe something that we do in order to be saved. And the words of the Philippian jailer, “What must I do to be saved,?” imply to many people that they must, themselves, do something to accomplish their salvation. They must do something in order to be born again, and even such a renowned evangelist as Billy Graham would title a book, “How to Be Born Again.” As if being born again was something that we could do by following the prescribed steps, contained in a how-to book.

But the Bible uses the phrase “born again” in a much different way. “Born again” is not a description of religious fanatics or extremists. It is not a qualifying label for certain types of Christians. It is not a phrase used to distinguish between denominations or theological persuasions. And it is not something that any of us can do. It is simply a description of what has to happen, what must take place, for a man to enter the kingdom of God. For a man to have the gift of salvation, for a man to be saved, for a man to be given the promise of eternal life,

for a man to go to heaven when he dies, he must have this experience which the Bible calls being “born again.” And in the words of Jesus, those who do not have the experience of being born again will not see the kingdom of God. Instead, they will be condemned to the eternal punishment of hell as the just consequences of their sin.

So let’s study what Jesus says about being born again in John chapter 3. And I’ll start with Nicodemus, whose lack of understanding of the meaning of salvation brought about this whole conversation. Nicodemus came to Jesus, having seen the signs and miracles he performed. And,

I. NICODEMUS DEMONSTRATES AN INADEQUATE UNDERSTANDING OF SALVATION.

Who was Nicodemus?

v.1

He was a Pharisee, and a leader among the Jews. A ruler of the Jews, implying that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Ruling Council of the Jews. The Pharisees were the religious fanatics of their day, though they obtained a well-earned reputation for hypocrisy and self-righteousness. At their best, they attempted to maintain a high level of religious fervor. Their zeal was unsurpassed.

The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee before his conversion, and this is what he had to say about that experience,

Phil.3:4 “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.”

Blameless, as to the righteousness which is in the law. At their best, the Pharisees really attempted to be obedient. Faithful to God. But Nicodemus demonstrates the great fault of Phariseeism, their failure to understand that,

A. Religious zeal is inadequate as a means of salvation.

Even though he was a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Jewish ruling council, zealous in his religion, still he comes to Jesus without salvation. There was in Nicodemus, the typical error of the Pharisees, the idea that an external form of religion was enough. The idea that external, outward religious zeal, consisting of law-keeping, could earn salvation. It was a commitment to works-salvation. It was a commitment to self-righteousness legalism. Just do enough, just obey fully enough, and you will be saved.

But Nicodemus would find out that he was wrong. It wasn't enough. He couldn't possibly do enough to earn his own salvation, and no amount of religious zeal would rescue him from the guilt of his sins. That's what he had to learn.

Think about those today who live as though religious zeal is an adequate means of salvation--people such as the Mormons, where young men take two years of their lives to serve as missionaries, all in a hopeless attempt to do good works in order to obtain an entrance into heaven.

Phariseeism is a system of works-salvation. Yet, Nicodemus seems to come sincerely, and Jesus seems to answer him kindly. But Nicodemus' approach is typical of his training as a Pharisee. He states his convictions. He declares what might appear to be real faith. He believes that Jesus is a teacher from God. He realizes that no one can do what Jesus has done unless God is with him.

And that's good. And that's correct. But it's not enough. Not nearly. His zeal was not enough, not as a means of salvation. And even,

B. Observing and understanding the works of God are inadequate as a means of salvation.

Just acknowledging that Jesus is from God was not enough. Just observing and recognizing the power of God in the miracles of Jesus was not enough. Not as a means of salvation. Even the demons acknowledge that.

Jas 2:19 "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe--and tremble!"

Nor was Nicodemus' approach to Jesus entirely adequate, for he comes at night. He comes secretly, therefore, beyond the awareness and observation of his fellow Pharisees. After all, he was risking a lot just to come and say what he did. He didn't want his visit to Jesus to become known among his fellow Pharisees. And surely,

C. That secrecy in the pursuit of God is inadequate as a means of salvation.

Calvin writes that "there is no doubt he was puffed up with a foolish opinion of his learning." "His eyes were dazzled as it were by his own distinction." "Perhaps, too, he was hindered by shame, for ambitious men think that their reputation is ruined if they once descend from the elevation of master to the rank of [student]."

He did not want to lose his own reputation, and so he came at night. Such secrecy, in the context of his external legalism, was inadequate as a means of salvation.

Jesus says this in,

Luke 12:8 "Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. 9 "But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God."

And Paul speaks of the danger of living as men-pleasers, seeking the approval of man rather than God.

But Jesus receives him graciously, and does not rebuke him, but speaks to him words of life, words of salvation. And yet, they are words with veiled meaning, as we saw last week in Jesus speaking to those who demanded additional signs. And actually, in John 3, we're not given any indication of how Nicodemus responded to the words he heard from Jesus. Only that he was confused about what Jesus meant.

But the message of Jesus to Nicodemus is the message of salvation. And,

II. JESUS PROCLAIMS A POWERFUL UNDERSTANDING OF SALVATION.

The words Jesus uses for salvation are the words, "See the kingdom of God," from verse 3.

To see the kingdom of God is to "enter the kingdom of God," as we read in verse 5. And to enter the kingdom of God is to be saved. For John, the possession of eternal life is the same thing as entering the kingdom of God.

And to do that, to enter that kingdom, to be counted among the citizens of the Kingdom of God, Jesus said that a man must be born again. Now for us, it's not hard to figure out what he means, and that is what I intend to explain this morning.

What does it mean to be born again?

As a first response to Nicodemus, the Pharisee, Jesus is obviously saying that entry into the kingdom is not by way of human striving. As John already wrote in,

John 1:12 "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

The children of God are those who are born of God, not those who are born of their own will. And so Jesus uses a very graphic expression, "born again." And Nicodemus, in his confusion, gives a very understandable answer,

v.4

Nicodemus is thinking only in terms of the flesh, outward terms, and he realizes the impossible foolishness of a man somehow entering again, a second time, into his mother's womb.

But why is that image used by Jesus for salvation? Simple explanation, the first step into the Kingdom of God is to become a new man. The beginning of the Christian life is a renewal, a reformation of the whole man and of each and every part. The sinfulness of man requires a radical change. Not an increased effort. Not more zeal. Not a simple increase in outward works and deeds. But new life.

For an unbeliever, one who is outside the kingdom of God, is described as one who is dead. Paul writes of Christians in,

Eph. 2:1 "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the

course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

You were dead in trespasses and sins. You were by nature children of wrath. And you couldn’t save yourself, any more than a dead man can make himself come back to life. You cannot make yourself born again any more than a baby can make himself born. It is the mother who gives birth. It is the mother’s body who causes a baby to be born. So it is when you are born again. It is God the father who causes you to be born again. In the words I just read from Ephesians 1, God made you alive and raised you up from the dead with him. That’s how you enter the kingdom of heaven!

And so,

A. To be born again means to be given new life.

And the result of the new life is described for us in,

2 Cor.5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

And with a bit more description, we read about this new creation in,

Rom.6:5 “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with

Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.”

As a result of regeneration, as a result of being born again, our old man is dead, crucified with Christ. And our new man is put on. We are a new creation!

We are made alive! So we read,

Eph.2:5 “Even when we were dead in trespasses, [he] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”

And,

Col. 2:13 “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.”

There is a glorious picture of this new life given to those who were dead in Ezekiel 37, the valley of dry bones.

Ezek.37:4 “Again He said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! 5 ‘Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: "Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. 6 "I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD."'" 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. 9 Also He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live."'" 10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great

army.”

That’s what salvation is all about. God takes a bunch of dead bones, and he breathes life into them. But it’s not quite the same as our physical birth, because then it was physical life he breathed into us. In salvation, it is spiritual life. And,

B. To be born again means to be given spiritual life.

Spiritual death means to be separated from God, to be, by nature, children of his wrath. It means to live without God, in the expectation only of eternal death, eternal judgment.

And to enter the kingdom of heaven, a man needs to be made alive. Alive in the spirit.

After all,
v.6

Physical life can only beget physical life, and everyone, every man and every woman, since Adam and Eve, every one who has physical life was born in sin. And born dead.

Ps.51:5 “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. 6 Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

And so we were born dead, dead in our sins. Spiritually dead, separated from God. And we need to be given life. Spiritual life. And that’s the result of being born again. Peter writes,

1 Pet 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us

again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

God has “begotten us again.” God has caused us to be born again! By the power of his word! Peter goes on to write in,

1 Peter 1:23 “...having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.”

We have been born again through the living word of God! By the power of God, who raised us from the dead and gave us new life. That must happen, for a man to enter the kingdom of God. A man must be born again, by the power of God, for his own efforts will fail. His own attempts to enter the kingdom by his own works is doomed to failure. He will come short, for none of us can atone for our past sins, even if we were to live without sin from here on out! None of us can bring about that which is necessary, namely cleansing.

To put it clearly, none of you can cleanse yourself of the stain and guilt of your sins. That must be done by God. And it is. And the work of being born again, the work of being given new life, is the work of cleansing.

C. To be born again means to be cleansed from the filthiness of sin.

And that cleansing is why Jesus refers to water.
v.5

You must be born of water, obviously not merely referring to the external rite of baptism, for that hadn’t even been instituted

yet. And Jesus makes sure to emphasize that external water baptism is, in itself, not sufficient for salvation, by saying that you must be born of water and the spirit.

The water is the appropriate symbol of the work of the spirit, the work of cleansing and washing. Calvin goes so far as to say that, “By water therefore is meant simply the inward cleansing and quickening of the Holy Spirit.”

And so we read of Christ’s love for his church in,

Eph.5:26 “...that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.”

To be born again means to be cleansed from the filthiness of sin. Again in the language of the Old Testament,

Ezek.36:25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”

That’s what it means to be born again. God says, “I will sprinkle clean water on you.” He says, “I will cleanse you from all your filthiness.” And he says, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

And so God saves us by the washing of regeneration, the washing of being born again.

Titus 3:3 “For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

In verse 5, Paul uses the more technical word “regeneration.” “He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.” “The washing of regeneration.” The washing of being born again.

To be regenerated is to be born again. To be born again is to be regenerated. To be born again is to be washed. To be forgiven, that your sins might be removed from your account, as far as the east is from the west.

And that work of regeneration is a work of God, for our good works are the result, not the cause, of being born again.

So the question is not, “What must you do to be born again?”, for there is nothing that you can do to be born again. God must do it!

But don’t miss this point. God does his work, God causes us to be born again, God regenerates us by using very specific means, the preaching of the word. And so the preaching of the word to unbelievers is very simple, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.”

And as Paul writes in,

Rom.6:14 “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!" 16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" 17 So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

So we must preach the word of God, for faith comes by hearing. And we must pray for the word of God to convince men of their sin and misery, to enlighten their eyes in the knowledge of Christ, and to renew their wills. As we preach the gospel, we must pray for God to persuade and ENABLE men to embrace Jesus Christ, as he is freely offered to us in the gospel.

And I seek to do just that. I will preach to you that you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. You must receive him, and surrender to him as the Lord of your life. You must turn from your sins in repentance and turn toward God in faith. And you will be saved.

But not by your own works. By the power of God. For “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

At this point, Nicodemus is quite confused. We discover later in Jesus’ life that Nicodemus may have come to understand and believe, for in John 7, Nicodemus actually defends Jesus before the chief priests. And after Jesus’ death, we read this,

John 19:39 “And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a

hundred pounds.”

But at this point, he is still confused, and so,

III. JESUS EXPLAINS THE WORK OF GOD IN SALVATION.

Jesus says to him,

v.7

Do not marvel. Do not be amazed. Do not be surprised, for,

Nicodemus was amazed. He couldn’t yet understand, for he was so steeped in his own pursuit of works-righteousness and works-salvation. This was his great stumbling block, as it is today. So many people fail to understand that,

A. The work of being born again is a work of God.

Illus: I spent the first 13-1/2 years of my life thinking that because I went to church, because I lived a decent life, that I would go to heaven. And that was a huge stumbling block, because actually I was dead in my sins. And the power of the gospel came to me when I was told that I was a sinner. And that I needed a savior.

I couldn’t save myself, and my works were not good enough. The external collection of self-righteous and proud works just wouldn’t atone for my sins. And whatever those good works might have been, and I should say that they were nearly so good as I thought them to be, no matter what they were, they couldn’t cleanse the filthiness that I discovered resided in my own heart.

I had to be born again, by the power of God! And that’s why Titus 3:5 is such an important verse for me, for it is so personal. God saved me, “not by works of righteousness which [I had] done, but according to His mercy He saved [me], through the

washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”

It was a work of God. And it was accomplished by his own sovereign power. God saved me. God loved me. God came to me. God changed my heart. And the result of all of that was that I came to God.

As Jesus so clearly emphasizes in talking to Nicodemus,

B. The work of being born again is accomplished by God’s sovereign purpose.

v.8

None of us can harness the wind. Oh, at times, we try. Or thing that we’re trying. But we can’t control it. We don’t determine where the wind blows. With all of our technology, we can’t even predict where it will blow. Just ask the folks who get hit with a disastrous hurricane or tornado. “The wind blows where it wishes.” The wind does what it wants to do, and no amount of human ingenuity has been able to change that.

The wind is sovereign! Such a perfect illustration of the work of the spirit. I should add that the Greek and Hebrew languages actually use the same word for both wind and spirit. The spirit is sovereign. That is, the Holy Spirit blows where he chooses to blow. You cannot manipulate it. You cannot manipulate the work of being born again. You cannot, by your own effort or wisdom, cause a man to be born again. The power of logic won’t cause a man to be saved. Nor the intensity of emotion. Or the clarity of a particular message or sermon. The wind blows where it pleases. And you and I cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes.

When I preach, I cannot tell, nor can I predict, let alone determine, where and how the Holy Spirit will work. When I tell

someone of the truths of the gospel, either in the pulpit or in personal conversation, I cannot determine the effectiveness of that evangelism.

v.8

We can hear the sound of the wind, when it passes by. And when the Holy Spirit brings about a new life by causing a man to be born again, you will know that God has been present. You can see the results and the evidence of God’s work. But you can’t determine ahead of time WHERE he will work.

The work of being born again is accomplished by God’s sovereign purpose.

So where does that leave us?

Let me start by saying this to everyone of you in my hearing. You must be born again. External religion is not enough. Going to church is not enough. God must change your heart, and make you alive. And if he has not done that, then ask him to!

Repent of your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

And to you in whom the evidence of the Holy Spirit is seen, to you who have been regenerated, born again, by the sovereign power of God, let your testimony be same as that of the Apostle Paul,

Phil. 3:7 “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having

my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”