

Question: What did Jesus mean when he said, “You must be born again”?

Jesus discussed the new birth with a man named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, who came to see him at night. Nicodemus acknowledged that no one could perform the signs that Jesus did unless God was with him (John 3:2). Without commenting on what Nicodemus said, Jesus went straight to the topic that he knew Nicodemus was really concerned about, the kingdom of God. He said: “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3). Nicodemus was confused by this and asked: “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?” (John 3:4). Jesus explained: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’” (John 3:5-7).

Nicodemus would have assumed that he was in the kingdom of God because of his physical birth as a Jew, but Jesus made a clear distinction between his fleshly birth as a natural-born Jew and birth into the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is not just another kingdom of this world (John 18:36); it is an eternal spiritual kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:50; Romans 14:17). But just as we enter our fleshly kingdom of this world by a fleshly birth, we must be “born again” by a spiritual birth into the spiritual Kingdom of God. Just as any physical birth brings a newness of life, so the new birth into the kingdom of God brings a person into a new spiritual life and relationship with God. Later in the New Testament letters, we are told that “if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature, the old things have passed away” (2 Corinthians 5:17; cf. Eph. 4:22-24 & 1 Peter 1:3, 23).

Jesus further explained that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Some people have mistakenly interpreted this as two separate births: one of water and another of the Spirit. But Jesus spoke of one birth with two elements: water and Spirit. This is indicated by the grammar of the original language of the Bible. The one thing in the Bible that water and Spirit have in common is baptism. Paul's letter to the Romans describes baptism as a burial of the old, sinful person followed by a

resurrection from that burial in baptism to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). The common practice of baptism in the New Testament involved water (Acts 8:36-39 & 10:47). We are also taught that “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). When a person’s faith in Jesus Christ leads him to express that faith by being baptized in water, Jesus baptizes him in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). Baptism in water is an outward and visible act that symbolizes the inward invisible baptism of the Spirit. As the water washes over the outward body, the Holy Spirit washes over our spirits. Thus, we are born of water and Spirit.

When by faith one is born of water and Spirit, he begins a new life in the kingdom of God. In this new beginning in life all are “like newborn babes,” who should “long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). If baptism in water and the Spirit is the result of genuine faith, that person will receive the “gift of the Holy Spirit” to live in him (Acts 2:38; Romans 8:9-11). With this help he can grow and be transformed day by day from the sinner he once was into a new person now made in the likeness of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul said: “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is what it means to be “born again.”

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