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How to be Born Again

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This week's bible reading is from John chapter 3 verses 1 - 17.

Introduction

One of the big differences between John's Gospel and the other three Gospels is that John records a number of fairly long conversations that Jesus had with various individuals – conversations not recorded by either Matthew, Mark or Luke. One such conversation is that between Jesus and Nicodemus, which is found in chapter 3 of John's Gospel - our reading today. And it's this conversation I would like to focus on in today's address.

Now Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and a devout and virtuous man. He's well educated and a teacher of others. He also a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Ruling Council. So he was a man of some status in Jewish society, and he's clearly intrigued by Jesus, and comes at night, to question Him.

It's quite possible that Nicodemus was a secret disciple, perhaps persuaded by the signs and wonders that Jesus had performed. But the fact that he approached Jesus under cover of darkness is telling. Yes, he had some faith, but he's still unsure about Jesus. He's probably come seeking some kind of encouragement from Him; some kind of sign that's it's safe for him to step out further in his faith. He's wanting reassurance that, by following Jesus, he isn't making a big mistake.

A Seeker

So having finally caught up with him, Nicodemus opens the conversation with the statement:

“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

But reading between the lines here, Nicodemus' actual question is: *“Are you really the Messiah?”*

In response, Jesus offers Nicodemus some teaching, but it's teaching the like of which he's never heard before, and he simply doesn't understand it. But the conversation that follows gives us one of the more important passages in the NT. It also contains one of the most famous verses in the whole bible – John 3:16, which is in effect the Gospel in a nutshell.

“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.”

We'll come back to this later.

Terms of Entry

Now there isn't time to do a detailed, verse by verse exegesis of John chapter 3 this morning, so I want to concentrate on unpacking the main theme of this passage -this idea of being born again. What did Jesus mean by that? It certainly puzzled Nicodemus. Well, in essence, what Jesus is doing is teaching Nicodemus the "Terms of Entry", if you like, into the Kingdom of God. And so three times, effectively, Jesus states that, unless someone is born again, they cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Or, to put it another way, a person will not receive eternal life unless they are born again.

From Above

Now before we look at Nicodemus reaction to this teaching, it's worth pointing out that the phrase translated 'born again' can equally be translated 'born from above' and some versions of the Bible, use this translations. But clearly Jesus is talking about some kind of second birth. So I think the best translation is a mixture of the two. What Jesus is telling Nicodemus is that he must be, "reborn again, from above".

And when someone experiences this second birth, they are born of God, born of the Spirit. This second birth is a spiritual rebirth, a gift from God, that comes to us 'from above'. And it happens when we give our lives, in faith, to Christ. This rebirth, is not something we can do for ourselves; it's something only God can do for us, through the Spirit. But nevertheless, we have to want it, and we have to ask for it, but it can only come to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

I'll say more about that in a moment, because for now, I want to get back to Nicodemus. He is clearly confused by all this talk of being born again. Although he didn't really understand what Jesus meant by this, he understood enough to realise that Jesus was telling him that he was not yet able to enter the Kingdom of God, because he had yet not met the terms of entry, which is "rebirth from above".

So then, if he, Nicodemus, a devout God-fearing Jew of status and standing wasn't getting into heaven - then who was? Jesus' answer: those who are born again; and this realisation shocked him, and in astonishment he says to Jesus, "How can someone be born again?" (vv. 4, 9).

Water and Spirit

Now that might be a question you're asking yourself right now, or may have asked in the past. The phrase, 'born again' might have been new to Nicodemus, but not to us -I'm sure you've all heard this phrase before. But do you have any better understanding of what Jesus meant by this, than Nicodemus did? Some of you, maybe; others, perhaps not. Fortunately though, Jesus offers some clarification.

In v5 he says:

“I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

Jesus’ reference to water and the spirit is much debated, and there isn’t time to go into detail here, but clearly it is linked with the act of baptism and the idea of cleansing and purification. The new birth that comes from God, both cleanses and purifies; washes us clean. As for the Spirit, well the spirit restores and renews. God’s spirit regenerates -transforming a person from the inside out. Indeed a spiritual transformation is at the heart of this new birth. For, once we have been born again from above, we effectively start a new life with God, bringing our lives into line with His Word and living life God’s way. Jesus is surprised that Nicodemus, as a teacher of Israel, didn’t understand these things.

Confusion

Now it seems there’s just as much misunderstanding today surrounding this controversial phrase, ‘born again’, as there was in Nicodemus’ time, back then. Indeed, I’ve been asked many times over the years, *“What is a born again Christian anyway -and how is such a person different from an ordinary Christian?”*

This question itself highlights just how much confusion there is surrounding Jesus’ teaching about being, “born again”. So, I’d like to offer a couple of points of clarification, if I may.

Firstly, to be a Christian is to be born again. Because what we learn from John 3 is this: if you want to be a Christian, a true disciple and follower of Jesus, then you have to be born again from above; it’s a basic, fundamental requirement in order to enter the Kingdom of God, and there’s no way around this, no short-cut. To be a follower of Jesus, a disciple, then you have to be born again. That’s what Jesus was telling Nicodemus.

Secondly, there is no such thing as a non-born again Christian – it’s a contradiction in terms. There are not two types of Christian - those who are born again and those who aren’t. There are only “Christians” and “non-Christians”; those who belong to Christ and those who don’t; those whose faith is authentic and genuine; and those whose faith isn’t.

Now where you stand in all this, you’ll have to decide for yourself, because this teaching begs the very important question, “Am I born again or not?” Well, only you can answer that question, it’s not for me to say who is born again and who isn’t. But hopefully this passage from John will help you understand.

Discredited

Sadly though, the term 'born again Christian' has become discredited in certain parts of the church, because it has become so closely associated with a certain expression of the Christian faith, and also the media frequently links the phrase with religious fanaticism and often uses it in association with extremists groups on the fringes of the Church.

But we have to look past that, because it's important we take this teaching from Jesus seriously. We have to understand that being born again isn't something just for the enthusiastic few; it isn't a title reserved only for some kind of "super zealous Christian".

The bottom line is simple: to be a follower of Jesus requires a new birth, a spiritual rebirth, if you will - one that only God can give. Religious observance and church attendance on their own, cannot save you. Even receiving Holy Communion every week, cannot, of itself, save you. Neither can good works save you, or money, or education or family background or status— none of these things can save. You can do all of them and still be lost, if your faith in Christ is not genuine and authentic.

This is what Nicodemus learnt, and it shocked him. Only God can bring salvation. Only He can bestow eternal life. It cannot be earned or bought or inherited, it comes only through new birth; and new birth comes only through a genuine, active faith in Jesus Christ – a faith lived out in obedience, under His Lordship.

So there you have it then – that's my understanding of what being born again means. It doesn't mean you have to be dancing around church waving your arms in the air, singing alleluia all the time -unless of course you want to. And although there's nothing wrong with that, it's not a requirement of being born again. Indeed, being born again has nothing to do with the style of worship you prefer; that isn't what Jesus was talking about.

Available to All

Now maybe you're a little like Nicodemus this morning, seeking some confirmation, some assurance that you really have received salvation, that you have a place in God's kingdom. Maybe you look at other Christians and think that they seem to have found something more in their faith than you have. Perhaps you're asking yourself, "am I really a true disciple – am I really born again?" If you are seeking such assurance, then know this:

The new birth from above, that Jesus speaks of, is available to all - to anyone who truly wants it. No one who comes to Jesus in faith will be turned away (cf. Matt 11:26, John 6:37, Ps 51:17). As we heard in verse 16 - possibly the most famous verse in the Bible, Jesus said:

“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.”

This is a simple verse, with straightforward language, easy to understand – yet containing a deep and profound truth. Believe in Christ and He will show you the way into the Kingdom of God, if like Nicodemus, you are prepared to reach out to Him, with a genuine faith.

Indeed, Jesus doesn't just show us the way into the Kingdom of God, He is the way, and He will lead you there Himself, if you're willing to follow in obedience. Amen.