

You Must Be Born Again!

John 3:1-12

The Life and Teaching of Christ

Many of us are familiar with this saying: “You must be born again!” It is a very well known verse of scripture that has been the clarion call for certain sectors of the Christian community, especially in the western world. Therefore, it is easy to associate the term “born again” to a particular sector of Christianity. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that it was Jesus who made this intriguing statement, and more importantly, the term “you must be born again”, was an answer that Jesus gave to the most vital question, or search that one could have. The question in a nutshell is this; “what do I do to gain eternal life?” Within this question, and the answer to it, we find the crux of the Gospel message. To be alive when Jesus was teaching and walking among us would have been amazing. Once He began His ministry, and people heard the stories about His teaching and His works of healing, Jesus continually drew crowds wherever He went. His stories and messages always posed a question to those listening, or called for a response. Many would walk away from Jesus after listening to him with a decision to make. His sermons were not what one could call “easy listening” type messages. I doubt whether some of His more radical statements, put into a contemporary context would be well received in most of our churches today. It is clear from the scriptures that people often had an unusual reaction to Jesus’ teaching. His words were not the same as the other religious leaders, the Scribes and Pharisees. People listening to Jesus could sense that there was something different about Him. He taught with an authority that rang true. Many common people sought Jesus’ company. They were safe to follow at a close proximity, as they had little to lose. Others, who were part of the religious order of the day, regarded Jesus with caution. Perhaps they were intrigued by His message, but kept their distance because of their station in life. They knew that to follow Jesus or to approve of His teaching would mean that they would risk their own reputation. They would risk being seen as someone who consorted with a heretic, a conjuror or even a religious fanatic, for that is how He was viewed by some in the established religious order of His day. He was a controversial figure and He still is.

²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law (Mark 1:22).

The question which must have been in everyone’s minds as they encountered this remarkable person, Jesus was, “Who is He?”, and, “Where does He get His authority?” If, after listening to His words, a person concluded in his heart that this man was indeed the Messiah, then the next logical question this truth evokes is, “What should my response be?”

Today I want to focus on two men from two different centuries with a single search. They were both men whose upbringing and religious background had landed them in a well respected group of colleagues; a group that would have been regarded as intelligent and zealous religious men of their day. They were both men who others sought after for spiritual direction and guidance. Both of these men, however, had questions of their own about their spiritual journey and their eternal destiny. One of these men was John Wesley and the other one was Nicodemus. Let’s look at how their stories are similar and what each one was searching for.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist denomination of churches, was born in 1703, the fifteenth child of his father, the rector of Epworth. At the tender age of five, John had a near death experience when the rectory caught fire while he was upstairs. He was rescued by a group of people who stood on one another, making a human ladder in order to reach him and pull him out. They managed to rescue him only just before the roof caved in. This escape made a deep impression in his mind, and John regarded himself as providentially set apart, as a “brand plucked from the burning.” He grew up with a deep inner awareness that he was saved for a purpose. At 18 years of age he went to Oxford College, England, and joined with his brother Charles in starting the Oxford Holy Club, a group of religious zealots who lived a very rigid, methodical lifestyle (the reason why they were called Methodists) of constant fasting, studying the scriptures, visiting prisoners and giving

alms to the poor. In fact, he was so intent on living a sacrificial life of duty to God and his fellow man that he neglected his own health and diet. His health deteriorated through his quest for spirituality, yet he still felt an inner emptiness. Even though he was doing a lot of good with his life, he was aware that inwardly, he was not experiencing the joy or peace with God that he had been searching for. He started to question the fruit of his hard efforts to win God's favor. He couldn't escape the feeling that there had to be more, like he was missing something somewhere. He decided he would take a trip to America, writing before he left: "My chief motive is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the Gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen." While on the trip across the Atlantic Ocean, his ship was caught in a storm that made him fear for his life and eternal destiny. God in His Providence had a number of Moravians, a group of Christians who were committed to prayer and evangelism, on their way to minister to the Indians of Georgia. In the midst of the storm John Wesley noticed that they were joyful and singing hymns, whereas he felt terrified by his belief that the ship would go down with the storm and that he would lose his life. Wesley saw his American mission trip as an utter failure. "I went to America to convert the Indians," he wrote later, "but, O! Who shall convert me?" He continued his relationships with the Moravians and they taught him that the righteousness of God was something that was imparted to a believer and not earned by religious duties and efforts. Salvation was given as a gift and not by works. His life was changed as, just a little while later, at a Moravian meeting in London; he felt his heart "strangely warmed." Something had changed within him. His life was renewed and he began to see the fruit of his works as he started to preach the doctrine of justification by faith and not by works.

Warm up Question: Share a time in your life when you were convinced of something intuitively, you somehow knew something that you had no outward evidence to prove.

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "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." ³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." ⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?"

Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (John 3:1-12)

We are told three things about Nicodemus in this passage of scripture that give us some indication of where he was coming from.

1. He was a Pharisee (Verse 1). The Pharisees were a deeply religious group of never more than 6000 individuals that were committed to observing every detail of the law as interpreted by the Scribes and teachers of the Law of Israel. To the Pharisees, it was not sufficient to keep the Commandments as laid down by Moses in the first five books of the Bible. They wanted each commandment specifically defined and made into a rule; for instance, they wanted to know just what it meant to not work on the Sabbath. Could one go for a walk on the Sabbath? Would that be considered work? How far could one go for a walk? What could a person carry on such a walk? The Scribes wrote a 63 volume document called the Talmud to explain and define such laws and rules for the Israelites to keep. A Sabbath day's journey as defined by the Scribes was 2000 cubits (one thousand yards), but if a rope was tied across the end of a street, the whole street became one house and a man could go another thousand yards beyond the end of the street. This is how detailed and rigid these rules became. There were 63 volumes of different little rules like that.
2. Not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, but he was also one of the 70 members which made up the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the ruling supreme court of the Jews, having ruling jurisdiction over every Jew in the world.
3. Jesus knew who he was. He says of him, "You are Israel's teacher" (Verse 10). This sentence referring

to Nicodemus has the definite article in the Greek language indicating that Nicodemus was the master teacher of the nation of Israel. More than likely he had many Scribes that looked to him for answers to many of the little rules that one had to keep to be righteous as a Pharisee.

Why would such a man of the rank of Nicodemus be coming to Jesus at night and what questions do you think he had on his mind that he didn't actually get to ask?

We can assume that this one on one meeting with Nicodemus happened in Jerusalem, for we are told in the previous passage that Jesus was attending the Passover Feast and many people there had seen the miraculous signs he was doing and put their trust in Him (John 2:23). Jesus Himself stated that He often taught in the Temple Courts of Jerusalem (John 18:20), so it is logical to also assume that Nicodemus had been watching these same signs and miracles mentioned. Why did he come at night? Perhaps it was because he saw how completely Jesus was attentive to the people during the day, and he wanted to get some quality time when Jesus was away from his normal ministry time. It is also possible that a man such as Nicodemus had many responsibilities during the day and little time to search for answers to the niggling questions of his own soul, and so when his work day was done, he sought out Jesus. The third possibility is that Nicodemus did not want opposition and derision to come upon him from the other ruling elders of the Jews. He came at night so that he would not be seen by the religious spies of the High Priest that were watching Jesus' every move during the day. Nicodemus knew of the jealousy and animosity of the High Priest and others in the Sanhedrin. Later on, when Nicodemus found himself included with other Pharisees as not being a believer, he tried to defend Jesus before the council of the Jews, but he was shouted down by the others in the council who scorned Jesus.

⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, ⁵¹ "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" ⁵² They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee" (John 7:50-52).

Have you ever experienced scorn or animosity from others due to having an interest in Christ? What was

said and how did you handle it?

The enemy of our souls, Satan, would like to intimidate us from speaking boldly about our belief in the Lord. There is a poverty of soul that binds us when we hide who we are and what we believe. The Bible says that the righteous are as bold as lions (Proverbs 28:1). Be bold when it comes to standing up for Christ in the midst of unbelievers!

For whatever reason Nicodemus came at night, it seems obvious that there was something that was stirring in his heart. He was convinced that Jesus had something that Nicodemus, for all his responsibilities and accomplishments, did not have. He didn't get to say exactly what brought him; all he got to say was that he saw God was with Jesus, and that he was sure that Jesus was sent by God (Verse 2). There seems to be an intuitive knowledge, an inner witness, or a growing awareness that Nicodemus had about Christ, and his own spiritual bankruptcy. To acknowledge that Jesus was sent by God was an important step for Nicodemus, for this would have been the topic of heated discussion amongst those in his closest social circle, and was a very unpopular opinion to hold in his situation. Certainly the miracles he had witnessed had helped him to see that there was more to Christ than first met the eye. Like John Wesley, the righteousness of keeping the law and doing good works was not enough. He had no inner witness that he was right with God and so Nicodemus came to find out what he was missing. Paul the Apostle, writing to the church at Rome, tells us that everyone that is a Christian has an inner witness within his life letting him know that he belongs to Christ:

¹⁵ ...but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ **The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.** ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (Romans 8:15-17. Emphasis mine).

At the end of your life, when you appear before Christ, if He were to say to you, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" How would you respond? Do you have an inner witness that you belong to Him and that He has forgiven your sin?

As a Ruler, a Teacher, and as a Pharisee, this man had

the kind of righteousness the whole nation envied, but there was something missing. He was not good enough! Jesus taught that something more was needed than just keeping to a system of good works:

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (of which Nicodemus was both), you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20. Note in parenthesis mine).

Jesus replied to a question Nicodemus did not actually get off his chest, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (Verse 3). The Greek word translated with the word born “again” is the word *anōthen*, a word that can mean two different things. It can mean again as in the sense of a second time, or it can mean from above as in the sense that God has to do His work in our soul. I feel sure that Jesus’ words came as quite a shock to Nicodemus, for Jews thought that because they were children of Abraham and kept the law, they would all enter the kingdom of God. The Jewish people had a belief that if one was rich it was a good sign that he was well on his way to enter the kingdom of heaven. When Jesus told the disciples that it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom, they were very shocked at such a statement. They saw riches as a sign of great blessing, so they held the belief that men such as Nicodemus would automatically “make it”. He was obviously very rich due to his position. The scriptures tell us that at the burial of Christ he brought a mixture of 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to apply to Jesus’ body (John 19:39), an amount that was quite expensive. Jesus made it clear that without a work of God taking place in one’s life it was impossible to enter the kingdom of God, no matter how rich you are:

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, **it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.**” ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, “**With man this is impossible**, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:23-26. Emphasis mine).

God is the only one who can make it possible, so it is wise for us to listen clearly. It is so critical for us to recognize this truth that three times in this passage

alone He states, “I tell you the truth” (Verses 3, 5, and 11), a statement designed to show the full import of His words. It is hard for a man who has never explored spiritual matters to get his mind around such talk as the need for a spiritual birth. Nicodemus responds in the same way many of us that are Christians would have responded at one time in our lives. He thinks in natural terms only. To him, there was no logical way to understand this statement and it puzzled him. If taken at face value, this meant that he would have to enter into his mother’s womb in order to be born again. He was thinking in literal terms and wondered how this could be so. Jesus tells him that the kingdom of God can not even be perceived without an impartation of spiritual life from God. Jesus is so emphatic about this that He spells it out clearly to Nicodemus and also to us for our benefit. He says; “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (Verses 5-6). He doesn’t say that **some people** can’t enter unless they are born again, but He uses the words **no one can enter** unless two things happen in a person’s life. These two things, he says, are to be born of water and the Spirit. The Bible teaches that man is a tri-partite being, meaning that he is composed of a body, soul and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The soul is the part of our nature made up of our mind, will and emotions, but our spirit connects us to God. Adam was warned in the Garden of Eden that if he ate the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil he would surely die (Genesis 2:17). Adam did not physically die until he was 930 years old (Genesis 5:5), but his ability to connect and commune with God was broken the day he chose to disobey God and eat the fruit. Jesus came to restore that connection. He said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10). Paul the apostle writes about the same thing in his letter to the church at Ephesus when he said, “As for you, **you were dead** in your transgressions and sins....” (Ephesians 2:1 and 5. Emphasis mine). When a person comes to Christ, repents of sin and receives Him into their life, he or she is born again (John 1:12). An infusion of life is imparted to the spirit, the veil is taken away in the temple of the heart, and man is able to commune with God, the sin issue being taken away that had separated man from God.

What could Jesus mean when He refers to being “born of water”?

There are at least four interpretations:

1. Water is a reference to physical birth. In the first nine months of our lives we live in water in our mother's womb. Those that adhere to this line of thinking believe that Jesus is saying that a person needs not only a physical birth, but a spiritual birth too.
2. Water is a symbol of the word of God. We are told in the scriptures that Christ cleanses the Church, "to make her holy, cleansing her by the **washing with water through the word...**" (Ephesians 5:26). Jesus also put it like this: "you are already **clean because of the word** I have spoken to you" (John 15:5). In this particular interpretation water is symbolic of the cleansing power of the word of God to cleanse our way—by living according to the word of God (Psalm 119:9).
3. Another interpretation is that water is symbolic of the cleansing and regeneration work of the Spirit in a person's life when he or she turns to Christ: "4But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through **the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit** (Titus 3:4-5).
4. The fourth interpretation is that water is typical of repentance. At the time of the encounter with Nicodemus, John the Baptist was still preaching a baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4; Acts 19:4). Being dipped under the water was a way of saying to the world that one had repented (repentance literally means to change one's mind) and died to his or her past life and was waiting for the coming of the Spirit with Messiah's (Christ's) arrival. Repentance is no longer a popular word in our day. We are told only that one must believe in Christ, but the message of Christ was that unless a man or woman repents and believes, they will perish (Luke 13:3-5). During a recent search I found the word "repent" 75 times in the bible using biblegateway.com, obviously showing that it is an important topic that should not be discounted or in any way under emphasized.

I know some of you are wondering which my personal interpretation is—I think there is validity to all four, so we should not be dogmatic on any of them. I would say we need to be careful that we have practiced true biblical repentance from all sin and to ask for the Spirit to cleanse us and renew us to have a hatred of the stains

that marred our character and soul. If we have truly repented of all known sin there will be no happiness in practicing anything displeasing to God. If a person is truly born again of the Spirit, living in abhorrence of all known sin, the Spirit will not give you peace to practice anything that displeases Him. Any way one looks at it, it is a spiritual awakening, or birth, which comes about because of an impartation of life which comes from God, through His Word and His Spirit, and not through merely our own works of righteousness.

How does a person know if they have been born of water and of the Spirit? What do you think? What evidence should be seen in the life of a person that has truly received the gift of salvation and been born again (or born from above)?

This is an important question because I cannot think of anything more tragic than a person being deceived into thinking he has eternal life, only to come to the end of his life and find out that he or she is cast out into eternal darkness. Let's take some time to go over some of the evidences of a person being born again:

1. Do you truly believe the gospel? This is not a mental assent to the truth of the message, but a heart belief that lives out godly values in your daily life. Your life will show if you believe or not. Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? (Matthew 7:16). There should be growing evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in your life (Galatians 5:16-25).
2. Is there a thankful and loving heart of appreciation toward the Lord Jesus for dying on the cross for you?
3. Do you have a hunger to know God's word? ⁵ But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him (1 John 2:5).
4. Is there anticipation in your heart for the Return of Christ? 2Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³ **Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure** (1 John 3:2-3. Emphasis mine).
5. Are you upset and disappointed with yourself when you sin? The Spirit will convict us when we sin, if you have invited Christ to sit on the throne of your

life and given Him control.

6. Do you love others that love God? Do you enjoy being around other Christians? ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death (1 John 3:14).
7. Do you have a conscious awareness of the Spirit at work in your life? ¹³ We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).

My Own Spiritual Dissatisfaction

I found Christ after a long search over a five year period visiting five different continents and many different countries. I had a near death experience that made me aware that death was not the end of life, but just the beginning doorway. As I hovered between death and life I cried out to a God I did not know or even believe in. I thought that when a person dies, that is it! I said to a God I didn't know, "I will give you my life and do whatever you want if you spare my life and let me live." From that point on I felt like I was being led by an invisible someone—who God was I didn't have a clue! Nobody had ever told me the Gospel of Christ so I tried religion in the form of Hinduism and Buddhism. That didn't satisfy so I went on to the study of philosophy and some weird stuff that bordered on occultism. When I had exhausted my search and found that they were all fruitless, I came across a book by Hal Lindsey, the Late Great Planet Earth. Reading that book opened my eyes to the fact that God was at work in the world and had not left us to our own devices. I read of His love for me personally and just a few weeks later boarded a plane on my own to search westwards in America to find out more about Christ. God made sure I sat alongside a believer on the plane. He invited me to ride in his hire car to a Christian summer camp in Virginia to study bible prophecy with him. Somehow we got separated going through Immigration when the officers took a look at my passport and the many countries I had visited. I took a Greyhound bus when I finally got through Immigration, convinced that this was the leading of this God that was pursuing me, and arrived in Richmond, Virginia. Two days later I went to the bus station and bought a ticket to place which I knew to be about 20 miles from Richmond. There in the bus queue was the only American I knew in the whole country, the man I had met on the plane. He had chosen that day and that Pastor Keith Thomas.

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exact time to take his car to the nearest city, so that he was no longer paying rental fees on the car. He caught the same bus as me and brought me to hear the gospel for the first time. I received Christ at that summer camp miles from anywhere and was filled with God's Spirit at the same time. I experienced a heavy weight being lifted off of me as I received the Lord Jesus into my life and was born again. For me, it was an experience I will never forget. I knew I was different! I was so happy! I felt loved of God and had love for others which I had not experienced before. There came in my heart at the time, a love for the word of God, a love for other Christians, and a desire to let those that are yet without Him know how much they too are loved. My soul was and is satisfied.

Share with one another your experience of Christ. If you are still seeking for Him tell someone in your group. Ask them to pray for you.

Nicodemus obviously became a believer due to his meeting with Christ. We find him together with Joseph of Arimathea at the tomb of Christ, "He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. ⁴⁰ Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. (John 19:39-40).

How about you? Do you have full assurance in your heart, that inner witness of the Spirit that you are born again and a child of God? Is it possible that like John Wesley and Nicodemus you feel like you are missing something? To be born again of God's Spirit and enjoy peace with God, you will need to repent of sin and ask Christ to come into your life, and have control from this time on. Here's a prayer you could pray:

Father, I come to you now, believing that you love me and have a plan for my life. Thank you that you so loved me that you sent your Son into the world to pay the penalty for my sin, which has kept me so long from enjoying your presence. I repent and turn away from sin, and ask Christ to come and live in me as I give Him control of my life. Thank you, Father, for the free gift of eternal life. Amen!