

Christianity 101: The Basics of the Christian Faith

#6 Rebirth...A Warm Heart and a New Life

John 3:1-8 and First John 4:7-8 (GNT)

By John Gill

Are you “Born Again?” Have you ever been asked that question by someone and wondered what they meant by it? When I am asked that question, I very quickly answer, “Yes” because I *AM* a “born-again Christian.” When *I* call myself a “born-again Christian,” I know what *I* mean by it. But, in the back of my mind I wonder what ***THEY*** meant by the phrase.

That’s because, over the past 40 or 50 years, the phrase “born again” has become sort-of a “fad” – a “buzz word” - used very loosely by people who mean very different things when they use it. Sometimes when people ask me if I am “born again,” I think that, what they are REALLY asking is, “Are you Pentecostal? ...or, Evangelical? ...or Charismatic? ...or a Fundamentalist? Or sometimes, even, “Are you politically conservative?”

No...you never quite know what people mean when they use the phrase, “born again.” I’ve heard preachers on TV say that people should choose THEIR (that preacher’s) particular church because theirs is the only denomination or congregation where “born again” people go.

And, in this age of political posturing, many candidates for office are proud to declare their “born-again” credentials, hoping to capture the “religious” vote.

But perhaps the most careless use of the phrase “born again” comes from the press of our country that is quick to arbitrarily divide the Christian Church between those who are “born again” and those who are not.

It’s no wonder that you and I don’t know what we mean by the phrase anymore. In our day and age, the phrase “born again” has been so loosely and casually used that it has lost much of its Biblical power and meaning.

But it doesn’t HAVE to be that way! It’s time that we, in America, stopped using the label of being “born again” (or even “evangelical”) carelessly...or as a litmus test for who IS a Christian, and who is NOT...because the scriptures are clear: the very definition of a Christian is... “One who is born-again.”

That’s what we are here to focus on this morning. As we continue looking at John Wesley’s “Path of Salvation” in our sermon series, we now turn our attention to the transformation that takes place in the life of the believer, a “change of heart,” that brings a new life.

This “transformation of the heart” has been called by many different names: Rebirth, New Birth, being Born Again, Regeneration, or Conversion... But they all describe the same experience: beginning a new life, in Jesus Christ.

But do we really NEED to be “born again?” According to Jesus, the answer is “Yes!” The story of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus that we read a few moments ago couldn’t be more clear. Did you catch what Jesus said to Nicodemus? *“I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again.”*

This is one of the most remarkable stories in the Gospels. Think back over your knowledge of the Bible... Try to recall those with whom Jesus came in contact during his ministry: the poor, the sick, the dying, sinners, outcasts, women, and children. Very seldom does Jesus come in contact with the wealthy, the powerful, or the religious elite... that is, except in moments of confrontation!

Nicodemus was an exception. He was a man of great importance in Israel. If they had had a “Who’s Who in Jerusalem,” his name would have been listed. He was a prominent and respected man. But what do we really know about Nicodemus?

Well, first of all, we know that he was a wealthy man. The Gospel of John tells us that, after the Crucifixion, it was Nicodemus who brought 100 lbs. of burial spices to be used to anoint Jesus’ body. Only a very wealthy person could have done that.

We also know that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the ruling council of the Jews, called the Sanhedrin. He and his peers were among those Jewish leaders with whom Jesus had many debates, and against whom Jesus reserved his harshest words of condemnation.

The word “Pharisee” literally meant “one who is separated,” because, as a religious purist, the Pharisee would set himself aside from the mundane matters of life to try to keep every minute point of Jewish law. In that way, they believed they would be found “righteous” before God – or “justified” (last Sunday’s message). And they tended to look down their noses on anyone who was not as “holy” as they were, and brand them a “sinner” and an outcast.

Jesus could see right through their hypocrisy and had many confrontations with the Pharisees. In fact, one time, you’ll remember, Jesus got so exasperated with them that He even called them, *“Blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel,”* and *“Whitewashed tombs full of dead men’s bones.”*

Yet, here is a prominent Pharisee seeking out Jesus (albeit under cover of darkness), risking his own reputation, in order to ask Jesus for spiritual advise. Pretty remarkable!

Nicodemus has devoted his life to studying and observing every law and regulation of the Jewish faith...and yet he knew something was missing. So he came to Jesus, hoping to fill the void in his heart. Yes, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, but he was searching for something more... something he was lacking in his spiritual life.

You know, in a lot of ways, Nicodemus is a lot like US: We struggle to keep all the “religious rules.” Yet no matter how hard we try to “be good,” there is this empty void in our lives. Like Nicodemus, deep down, we know something is missing in our faith, too.

The remarkable conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus that was just read exposes the shallowness of Nicodemus' faith. And it challenges our faith, as well.

As I mentioned, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish people, the same group that eventually were the ones who put Jesus on trial for blasphemy and called for his execution. But it seems that, perhaps at this early stage in Jesus' ministry, there were those within the Sanhedrin who, like Nicodemus, were sympathetic to Jesus' cause.

We can assume that to be the case, because when Nicodemus speaks to Jesus, he calls him "*Rabbi*," a title of respect and honor. It's remarkable that Nicodemus, despite being a highly educated Biblical scholar who had the final word on all religious matters in Israel, STILL believed that he could learn something from a wandering peasant preacher like Jesus... He calls him "*Rabbi!*" (teacher)

"Rabbi," he says, "we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him." Nicodemus begins the conversation by giving Jesus, what appears to be a complement, but REALLY is a question. What he really was asking was, *"I come from the Sanhedrin, and we want to know what authority you have to carry out your ministry."*

But Jesus knew Nicodemus' heart, so he responds to Nicodemus' friendly comment by coming directly to the point: *"I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again."*

Jesus has a way of doing that, doesn't he? Like Nicodemus, you and I approach Him with our own agendas, and Jesus looks deep into our souls and goes right to the heart of the matter. He looked at Nicodemus sensing the restlessness of his heart, and prescribed the remedy... Nicodemus must be "born again." But Nicodemus just doesn't understand what Jesus means.

Now, don't assume here that Nicodemus is "dim-witted." In the version we read, Jesus' words sound clear enough. So why doesn't Nicodemus get it?

If we were to all look in our favorite Bibles at this passage, we would find a number of different renderings of this verse: In the GNT, KJV and NIV = "born again." In the RSV = "born anew." And in the NRSV = "born from above."

The reason for the discrepancy is that the Greek word used here can have three different connotations: 1) It can mean "from the beginning;" 2) It can mean "again," in the sense of "for the second time;" and 3) It can mean "from above," implying "from God."

Now, WHY is this important? Because, this is *precisely* the source of the confusion Nicodemus seems to be having in understanding what Jesus means here. **Jesus is saying** that Nicodemus must be "born again," meaning "from above" (in the *spiritual* sense). But **Nicodemus keeps hearing** Jesus say that he must be "born anew" (in the *physical* sense).

You see, Nicodemus had spent his whole life trying to find justification before God by adhering to every law, seeking his salvation on his own, relying on **physical** obedience to God, rather than on **spiritual** obedience to God. Yet, he STILL felt his heart was weighed down by sin... he didn't know the joy of faith. He knew something was missing, and he hoped Jesus would be the answer.

But Jesus' answer was a hard one for someone like Nicodemus to accept. Jesus was saying, (my paraphrase) - *"Nicodemus, you can't save yourself by keeping the law. The only One who can save you... is God Himself. Only **He** can fill the emptiness you are feeling, only **He** can give you the joy of a warm heart and a new life."*

The Gospel writer leaves the story of Nicodemus open-ended... We don't really know if he took Jesus' advice or not. But, I like to believe that Nicodemus' life was changed by his encounter with Jesus.

John Wesley believed wholeheartedly that the Christian MUST be "born again." This was a vital part of his own faith-journey. As you might recall, like Nicodemus, Wesley had tried to earn his salvation by living a good and holy life. And like Nicodemus, Wesley's heart was restless... He longed to know the joy of the faith, but he didn't know how to find it.

...Until Aldersgate! On May 24, 1738, Wesley felt the power of God come upon him, and, as he later wrote in his Journal, he felt his heart "strangely warmed." No longer did he have an emptiness in his soul. No longer did he feel he had to try to win "brownie points" with God to earn his salvation. He had been "born again...from above," and his life was changed forever.

In his experience of new birth, Wesley discovered the powerful truth in Jesus' words to Nicodemus, *"I am telling you the truth...that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."* In this one sentence, Jesus was revealing TWO ETERNAL TRUTHS about the experience of the New Birth that can change our lives forever; and I'd like for us to focus our remaining few moments on these Truths:

First, He says we must be "born of **WATER**." What does He mean by that? Certainly, one level of meaning has to do with our physical birth. Being born in the flesh involves a passing from the water of the womb.

But I think Jesus is implying more here. In the Bible, water is a baptismal image, and speaks of the cleansing away of sin. So, the "new birth" in baptism that God offers us can cleanse our past, wash away our sins, and allow us to begin all over again with a clean slate.

In his commentary on Ephesians, entitled, *The Heavenlies*, Dr. H.A. Ironside tells the story of an attempted assassination of the first Queen Elizabeth of England, who reigned in the 16th century. The woman who sought to murder the Queen dressed as a male page and hid herself in the Queen's boudoir, awaiting a convenient moment to stab the Queen to death. She did not realize that the Queen's attendants would be very careful to search the rooms before Her

Majesty was permitted to retire. They found the woman hidden among the gowns and brought her into the presence of the Queen.

The would-be assassin realized that her case was hopeless. She threw herself down on her knees and pleaded and begged the Queen to show her mercy. Queen Elizabeth looked at her coldly, and quietly said, *“If I show you grace, what promise will YOU make for the future?”* The woman looked up and said, *“Grace that hath conditions...grace that is fettered by precautions...is not grace at all.”* (repeat)

The Queen was so impressed by her comment that she said, *“You are right. I pardon you by my grace.”* And they led her away...a free woman! The author tells us that, from that moment on, Queen Elizabeth had no more faithful, devoted servant than that woman who had intended to take her life.

This is exactly what Jesus was saying about “being born of water.” New birth is possible for us because God has shown us HIS unconditional, unfettered grace, forgiving us, pardoning us, cleansing our past, and allowing us to begin life anew. We must be “born of water.”

The second thing Jesus says about new birth is that we must also be “born of the **SPIRIT.**” Not only is new birth evidence of a **forgiven past**, symbolized by baptism, but of an **empowered future**, as well. It is the Spirit of God that gives us power for the future. We can live in joy because we are not alone: God’s Spirit is there to strengthen and guide us, whatever our future might hold for us.

A.J. Gordon, one of the founders of Gordon Conwell Divinity School, told of being out walking one day and noticed a house across a field some distance away. There beside the house was, what looked to Gordon like, a man pumping furiously at one of those old-fashioned hand-pumps. As Gordon watched, the man continued to pump at a tremendous rate. He seemed absolutely tireless, pumping on and on, up and down, without ever slowing down in the slightest, much less stopping to rest.

It was such a remarkable sight that Gordon started walking toward the house to get a better look. As he got closer, he could see that it was NOT a man at the pump at all... but a wooden figure, painted to look like a man. The arm that was pumping so rapidly was hinged at the elbow and the hand was wired to the pump handle. The water was gushing out. But NOT because the man was pumping it. You see, it was an artesian well... and the **water** was pumping the **man!**

When Jesus tells us we must be “born of the Spirit,” He is saying to us that, as a result of the new birth God offers us, we will have the gift of the Holy Spirit empowering US, so that we can live victoriously into the future, no matter what may come our way. His Spirit flows through us like living water, giving us spiritual power.

Yes, the Good News is that we can “born again...from above...by WATER cleansing our past, and by the SPIRIT, empowering our future.

My friends, what Jesus said to Nicodemus, He says also to you and me: *“I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again (from above)...no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit.”*

And so, the question we began with, we also end with: a question that confronted Nicodemus, and John Wesley, ...and now YOU:

“Are YOU born again?”