



Text: John 3:1-21¹

Series: *Life in His Name* – The Message of John's Gospel

Title: Part 6 -- You Must Be Born Again

Date: October 23, 2010

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

What does it mean to be “born again”?

Before we read God's Word this morning I want to tell a story told by Stuart Briscoe a number of years ago that helps to illustrate the answer.

It's the story of

... a simple, illiterate man who was converted through the work of the Salvation Army. He went regularly to the Salvation Army citadel. One day he came home rather disconsolate.

His wife said, "What's the matter?"

He said, "I've just noticed that all the people in the Salvation Army wear red sweaters, and I don't have a red sweater."

She said, "I'll knit one." So she knitted him a red sweater.

The next Sunday after he went to the citadel, he still wasn't happy.

His wife said, "What's wrong this time?"

He said, "I just noticed all their red sweaters have yellow writing."

They were both illiterate, but she said, "Don't worry about it. I'll embroider some writing on it for you."

She had no idea what the yellow writing on the red sweater of a Salvation Army man said ... They have a yellow circle, and in it, BLOOD AND FIRE. That's their motto...

The man's wife had no idea what the letters said, and she couldn't read anyway. So copying a sign from a store window opposite their home, she embroidered the words of that store sign onto his red sweater.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission, All rights reserved.



*When he came back the next Sunday, she said, "Did they like your sweater?"
"They loved my sweater. Some of them said they liked my sweater better than
their sweater."*

*What neither of them knew was that the sign on the store window she had copied
read, THIS BUSINESS UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT.*

*That's what it means to get saved. That's what it means to get converted. That's
what it means for the Holy Ghost to come upon you: this business under new
management.²*

That's what "born again" means!

Now let's read God's Word on the question. I'm reading from John's Gospel,
beginning at chapter two, verse twenty-three and reading through to chapter
three, verse twenty-one. This is God's holy, inspired and authoritative Word; let's
hear it with reverence and respond to it with faith.

**²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in
his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his
part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and
needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in
man.**

**¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the
Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know
that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that
you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say
to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴
Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he
enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus
answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the
Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh
is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I
said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes,
and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where
it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."**

**⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered
him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these
things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear
witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I**

² Stuart Briscoe, "Christmas 365 Days a Year," Preaching Today, Tape 135. | posted 12/01/1997
Copyright © 2010 by the author or Christianity Today International/ PreachingToday.com.



have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Jesus said...

“You must be born again.” John 3:7

Nicodemus was a prominent religious leader in Jerusalem. John identifies him as a “Pharisee” (3:1), which means he took his religion very seriously. He was a member of the strictest sect of Judaism and was very careful about his obedience to the Old Testament law. John tells us that he was “a ruler of the Jews” (3:1) which means that he was a member of the ruling council of the Jewish faith. The ruling council, or Sanhedrin, was a group of seventy prominent men who oversaw the religious life of the Jewish people. But the most amazing thing that John tells us is that Jesus identified him as...

“the teacher of Israel” John 3:10

Most translations weaken Jesus’ words. Most translations call him “a teacher” or “a respected teacher,” but John’s language is very clear. Nicodemus was the most prominent teacher of God’s law in Jerusalem. He was the most prominent Jewish figure of the day.

“This man came to Jesus by night...” John 3:2

Why did he come at night? Perhaps because he didn’t want to be seen talking with Jesus. He had questions for Jesus, he’d been listening to what Jesus had been saying and he’d been amazed by the “signs” Jesus was performing but he didn’t want to be seen spending time with Jesus. Or perhaps because Jesus’ days were so full of people and activity, Nicodemus chose the night time so that



he could spend uninterrupted with him. Those are all possible reasons for why John tells us that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night but I'd like to suggest another reason.

When you look at the way in which "darkness" and "light" are used in John's Gospel,³ they usually point to the spiritual situation that is in view, not just to the time of day. John begins his Gospel with the declaration about Jesus that...

"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." John 1:4-5

John concludes this story of Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus with the statement that...

"the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." John 3:19

The most poignant example of John's use of light and darkness to picture our spiritual condition is found in his story about Jesus and Judas, the one who betrayed him. As they ate together at the Last Supper, Judas resolved in his heart to betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities. Jesus knew Judas' heart. He handed Judas a piece of bread and said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." (John 13:27). And John tells us...

"So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night." John 13:30

I think that John saw something spiritually symbolic in the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. I believe that John is recording an historical event; Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, but as one Bible scholar noted, "his own 'night' was blacker than he knew."⁴

This man had a profound religious pedigree, but he was in spiritual darkness. He came to Jesus with a question about the "signs" that Jesus was performing. But Jesus didn't want to talk with him about "signs" ... he wanted to talk with him about light and life! Nicodemus was looking for something that would deepen his religious life but Jesus wanted to talk with him about a whole new life! Nicodemus had achieved the height of religious accomplishment but Jesus wanted him to sweep it all away and begin again like a newborn baby! "How can that be?" Nicodemus asked. "It's impossible to start again! I'm old! I can't go back!"

³ See also John 9:4; 11:10

⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 186.



And Jesus said to him...

“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” John 3:7

“Nicodemus,” Jesus said, “you can’t just fix up your old life if you want my life. You need a whole new life. You must be born again.”

By the way, when Jesus addressed Nicodemus, he was talking to you and me, too. Why do I say that? It’s because although there were only two people in this room, Jesus used the plural. “You” is plural. Jesus’ field of vision included the whole world at this moment; it included all of human history. It included you and me. “You must be born again” is a declaration to every human being who has ever lived. This is Jesus standing at the pinnacle of history and declaring to the entire human race, “You, every one of you, must be born again!”

You might be in the same boat as Nicodemus today. You might say: “I’ve worked hard to be a good person. Do you mean that it counts for nothing with God?” Right. If you want eternal life, if you want to know God, “you must be born again.”

On the other hand, you might say: “I can’t begin again! I can’t start over! You don’t know the mistakes I’ve made; they’ve put me in a box and I’ll never get out of it!” Right. You never will get out of that box. Jesus says, “Let me get rid of that box you’ve made and let me give you a whole new life.” “You must be born again.”

Why do we need to be “born again”?

First of all,

Until we are “born again” we will never understand God’s truth

Nicodemus thought “he got it.” He said to Jesus...

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” John 3:2

The word translated as “we know” is literally “we see.” We use the word “see” in that same way in English. We say, “Oh, I see...” when we really mean, “Oh, we understand.” Nicodemus thought he understood Jesus. But Jesus told him, “No, you don’t get it. No, you don’t see.” Jesus said to him...

“unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:3

Even though Nicodemus had profound knowledge of the Bible, even though he was a deeply religious man, he was blind to spiritual reality. He was in darkness.



Down through the centuries it's been the universal experience of those who are "born again" that, for the first time, they see! John Newton wrote in *Amazing Grace*, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see." Tim Hughes, who wrote *Here I Am To Worship*, wrote, "Light of the world you stepped down into darkness, Opened my eyes, let me see."

Roy Comrie, a missionary friend of mine, was raised in Zimbabwe. He told me of his days at university in what was then called Rhodesia and of a university professor who was nemesis of the Christian students on campus. What made things very awkward was that this professor was a member of the religious studies department. In fact, he was a professor of Old Testament literature. He knew the Bible well, but he wasn't "born again."

This professor fell in love with a student who was a believer in Christ and she told him that their relationship could not progress because he didn't know Christ. "I don't know Christ! What do you mean? I'm a professor of Biblical studies. Of course I know Christ!" No, she said, you don't understand. You're not "born again."

The professor left on sabbatical leave and during his time of study in England he encountered the work of John Stott, a English evangelical writer and for the first time he heard the Gospel and he believed and was born again. He returned to Rhodesia and to his position at the university, but he returned "born again" and became a leader in the Christian movement on campus.

We can be saturated with religion, but until we are "born again" we will never understand spiritual truth.

Second,

Until we are "born again," we will never possess God's life!

Jesus said...

"unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." John 3:3

In John's Gospel the phrase, "the kingdom of God," is very rare. In fact, it only occurs here in John chapter 3 and at Jesus trial, recorded in chapter 18 (v.36). Throughout John's Gospel, instead of "kingdom" language, which we often find in other Gospels, we find John talking about "life" and "eternal life." At the end of the very next story that he records, John tells us...

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." John 3:36



When John talks about “seeing” the kingdom of God and “seeing” life, he’s talking about the same thing. When we are “born again” we receive God’s life in us. Those who are born again begin living eternal life the moment they believe in Jesus. God comes to rule in us the moment we believe in Jesus. At that moment we begin a life with God that will never end.

This week we said “goodbye” to our sister, Dorothy Minor. But Dorothy is not dead; she is alive with her Lord. Her body is dead, but she is experiencing her eternal life in a new way. The moment she believed in Jesus many years ago, she began a life with God that has no ending and on Tuesday we celebrated a transition in her eternal life, not the beginning of it. Today she is “seeing” God’s kingdom and eternal life in a whole new way.

Until we are born again, instead of life, we experience death because “the wrath of God remains” on us. Until we are born again we’re living a kind of living death. We’re under sentence of death and only the new birth can lift it. John wrote...

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” John 3:18

I love the story of Rusty Woomer. Woomer was an inmate in South Carolina living under the sentence of death. Pastor Bob McAlister visited him on death row and saw Woomer sitting in the filthiest cell he had ever seen. There was filth of all kinds covering the walls, the floor and Rusty himself. Woomer was sitting covered in cockroaches and the pastor called out to him to call on Jesus and Rusty did.

He prayed, "I've hurt a lot of people. Ain't no way that I deserve You to hear me. But I'm tired and I'm sick and I'm lonely. Please forgive me Jesus, for everything I've done. I don't know much about You, but I'm willin' to learn, and I thank You for listenin' to me."

That was Friday. When Bob McAlister returned on Monday he couldn’t believe his eyes.

"The walls were clean," McAlister wrote, "bare and glistening from the scrubbing they had received. The smell of disinfectant still hung in the air. The garbage was gone, the bed was made, and the roaches were history. Rusty stood smiling and erect, enjoying his surprise. 'How do you like it?' he asked. 'I spent all weekend cleaning out my cell 'cause I figured that's what Jesus wanted me to do.'"

Did you catch that? “I figured that’s what Jesus wanted me to do.” Those are words of a man who has been “born again.”



"Rusty," said Bob, "it may have taken you all weekend to clean your cell, but it took Jesus only an instant to clean your life."⁵

Thirdly, why do we need to be “born again”?

Until we are “born again,” we will never know God!

There were many people who heard Jesus teach and who saw him perform miraculous signs that pointed to his identity as the Saviour of the world but John tells us that...

“Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them” John 2:23

He held himself back from them. He didn’t enter into a relationship with them. Nicodemus is a kind of representative of all those people. Nicodemus represents all kinds of religious people, who know all kinds of things about Jesus, but who don’t know Jesus because Jesus hasn’t “entrusted” himself to them. And people, please understand that knowing Jesus is everything! As Jesus prepares for the cross he prays...

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” John 17:1-3

It’s only when we’ve been “born again” that Jesus entrusts himself to us. It’s only when we’ve been born again that we truly come to know Jesus and enter into relationship with him.

If being “born again” is so important, how does it happen?

How are we born again?

First of all,

We are “born again” because of God’s gracious love for us

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

When we read “For God so loved the world...” we usually think of the immense scope of God’s love. God’s love is so great that it embraces the whole world. But that’s not the main point here. John began his Gospel with a word about the

⁵ Charles Colson, The Body, p. 393-395



“world” and his understanding of the “world” needs to shape our grasp of what he is saying here. Jesus came into the world, John tells us, to be light and life of the world. John wrote...

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.” John 1:9

The world turned its back on him; the world rejected him; the world did not know him (cf John 17:25) ... but God still loves “the world.” John’s point is not just the world-embracing immensity of God’s love; John wants us to catch a glimpse of the staggering immensity of God’s grace to a world that does not know him and does not want to know him. We are “born again” and brought into relationship God because of his great, gracious love for us!

In my opinion, Joanie Yoder used to write some of the best devotionals in the “Daily Bread” series of booklets. Joanie is now with the Lord but I will always remember her story of a young man she helped to get grounded in the faith. She wrote...

“A few years ago, an unkempt, poorly adjusted youth named Tim (not his real name) was converted to Christ in an evangelistic crusade. A few days later, still unkempt but bathed in the love of Christ, he was sent to my home so that I could help him find a good church. And so it was that he began attending mine.

Though Tim needed and received much loving help in personal grooming and basic social graces, one characteristic has remained unchanged – his untamed love for his Saviour.

One Sunday after church Tim rushed to my side, looking somewhat perplexed. He lamented, “Why me? I keep asking myself, why me?” “Oh, no, I thought,” wrote Yoder, “he’s become another complaining Christian.” Then with arms outstretched, he went on to say, “Out of all the people in the world who are greater and smarter than I am, why did God choose me?” With that he joyfully clapped his hands.”⁶

Why am I hear today proclaiming God’s redeeming love to you? Why was I made to see, to hear, to tasted, to believe? Why are you here today worshipping your Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ? Because of His gracious love for us!

Second,

We are “born again” by God’s supernatural intervention in us

“You must be born again.” John 3:7

⁶Joanie Yoder, “Why Me?” *Our Daily Bread*, September 20, 2005 <http://odb.org/2005/09/20/why-me-2/>



If you have a modern translation of the Bible you will probably have a footnote attached to the word “again” in verse 3 & verse 7 that tells you that it can be translated as “from above.” In other words, it’s perfectly acceptable to translate Jesus’ declaration as...

“You must be born from above.”⁷

John began the Gospel by telling us that we can become God’s children by believing in Jesus, the One who came from above. John wrote...

“to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” John 1:12-13

To be “born again” is to be born of God; it’s to be born “from above.” Jesus said to Nicodemus...

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” John 3:5

Nicodemus was confused by Jesus’ language. Born again? Born from above? Born of water and the Spirit? Born of the Spirit? (v.8)

“How can these things be?” John 3:9

Jesus said to him...

“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” John 3:10

“Nic,” Jesus said, “think about your Bible! What does the Bible say about God’s new birth?” Last week I asked you to remember the passage that Dallas Block read for us from Ezekiel chapter 36. Nicodemus should have known this! Through the prophet Ezekiel God had said to his people that there was coming a day when...

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” Ezekiel 36:25-27

⁷ See 3:31 where John uses the same word to say that Jesus is “from above.”



"I will sprinkle you; I will cleanse you; I will give you; I will put within you; I will remove from you; I will change from the inside out!" God declared that this will be his work in us!

And through the prophet Isaiah God had said to his people that there was coming a day when...

"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants." Isaiah 44:3

"Nic, you should have known this!" But he didn't see it. He was blind. We are born again when God moves in us by His Spirit to enable us to see. And what do we need to see?

Third,

We are "born again" through Jesus death for us

Jesus reminded Nicodemus of a story from the Old Testament. Jesus said to him...

"as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." John 3:14

At one point during their journey through the dessert to the Land of Promise, the people of Israel rebelled against God and God sent "fiery" snakes among them. The people acknowledged their sin and asked Moses to intercede for them with God. And God said to Moses...

"Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."
Numbers 21:8-9

Jesus saw in this story two pictures. First, he saw a picture of his own cross. (cf John 12:32-34) He saw himself lifted up to die. And secondly, he saw that anyone who looked at him would live! He saw dying men and women looking with the desperation of the dying at a raised pole that offered them life if they would only look and believe!

And that's the final step in our new birth...

I am "born again" when I believe that Jesus died for me



What do we need to see? What do we need to see to enter eternal life? What do we need to see to be saved from the condemnation of God's wrath against our sin? What do we need to see to be born from above? We need to see Jesus!

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

I entered the kingdom, I was born from above, my eternal life started, the moment my eyes were opened to see Jesus dying for me and I believed in him. When I realized that my sin was killing me, that it was pulling me down to an everlasting death apart from God, and when I looked to Jesus and cried out to him to save me, God removed my heart of stone and gave me a heart beating with his eternal life and a spirit that was made alive by His Spirit! I was born again!

Nicodemus didn't see Jesus that way on this night. But in the course of the months and years to come, at some point, Nicodemus was born again. On the day that Jesus died, Nicodemus came to the cross together with Joseph of Arimathea. They took Jesus body down from the cross, they carried to a tomb that was nearby, and “they laid Jesus there.” (John 19:42)

Nicodemus looked and lived! He believed and was born again.

At this point in our evangelical tradition I'm supposed to ask you to pray “the sinner's prayer with me.” But this morning I'm just going to ask you the question that John asks us again and again throughout this Gospel: Do you believe this?

It's the important question; it's the question that Jesus asked his friend, Martha. He declared to her: **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”** (John 11:25-26)

Do you?

Have you been born again?

Have you believed in Jesus?

“Father, we thank for your immense love for us. Even though we love our darkness rather than Your light, we ask you, by your Spirit, to do a supernatural work of intervention in our lives. Enable us to see Jesus so that we might believe and be saved. We ask it in Jesus name, Amen.”

- ❖ **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- ❖ **Final Song:** Only Trust Him (#480)
- ❖ **Benediction**

