

What Does It Mean to be “Born Again”?

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For many people, hearing the call to be “born again” conjures up images of old-time tent revivals, or TV preachers waving big Bibles around, or maybe just faint memories of Sunday School classes from days gone by. But the reality is that this idea isn’t some quaint relic of old-fashioned religion, but was introduced by Jesus Christ himself and is just as powerful and relevant to our world today as when he spoke it 2,000 years ago.

This phrase comes out of a conversation that Jesus had with a Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus in John 3. As Nicodemus questioned Jesus about spiritual truth, their discussion went like this:

John 3:3-7 Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’”

At first, because this was a completely new concept to Nicodemus, he’s confused and thinks that Jesus is referring to some sort of physical rebirth which didn’t make any sense. Thankfully, Jesus makes it clear that he’s not talking about anything physical, but rather a spiritual birth. He says that we need the Holy Spirit to give birth to a new spiritual life within us. In fact, the phrase “born again” more literally means “born from above.” Just as your mother gave physical birth to you, if you want to have eternal life, you need the Holy Spirit to give you a spiritual birth. This is the moment of conversion when you go from being spiritually dead to spiritually alive through Christ.

As you read the rest of the New Testament, you discover why Jesus taught this important concept. The Bible makes it clear that while we may be physically alive, our sin makes us spiritually dead. So when our physical life ends, if we are spiritually dead as well, then we have no hope for eternal life. But because God loves us, he provided a way for us to be spiritually born again so that we can have eternal life. The Apostle Paul said it like this:

Ephesians 2:4-5 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Our sin made us dead, but when we connect to Jesus through faith, just as he is alive today, we are made alive with him. So our new life is not a product of our own effort or religion, but the result of God’s grace who makes us spiritually alive when we put our trust in him.

So how can a person be “born again?” Well Jesus answers this question just a few verses later in John 3.

John 3:16 “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

It’s amazingly simple, if we believe in Jesus, we can have eternal life. But it’s important to know that belief is not simply just recognizing some facts about God. It starts with an acknowledgement of your sin that has separated you from God and a desire to turn from that sin. The Bible calls this “repentance.” Then, you put your trust in the truth that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty you deserve for your sin. The Bible says that when you trust in the right truth about who Jesus is and what he did for you and you have an attitude that desires to stop going your way and start going his way, you have faith – and this faith brings new spiritual life.

If this is a new concept for you, or you would just like to understand it in greater depth, be sure to check out our Foundations Series.

[Related Topic: Foundations (Series)]

Discussion Questions:

1. *Watch the video together or invite someone to summarize the topic.*
2. *What is your initial reaction to this video? Do you disagree with any of it? What jumped out at you?*
3. *Before this conversation, when you heard the phrase “born-again,” what came to your mind?*
4. *Why do you think that Jesus chose to introduce this new idea to Nicodemus rather than using religious language he would have already understood?*
5. *What are some of the ways that a spiritual birth is similar to a physical birth? Why would Jesus use this analogy?*
6. *Read Ephesians 2:1-5. What does it mean that before Christ, we were “dead” in our sins?*
7. *Read John 3:16. Describe what you think Jesus means when he says that we need to “believe” in order to have eternal life. What is involved in this belief? Where do your thoughts on this matter come from?*
8. *If you’re already a Christian, why is this concept important to understand?*
9. *If you’re not yet a Christian, if what Jesus said was true, what are the implications of this for your life?*
10. *Write a personal action step based on this conversation.*