



You Must Be Born-Again

John 3:1-8

Notes: The *MacArthur Study Bible* by John MacArthur was used as a reference in developing this Bible Study. The Scripture references in this Bible study are taken from the New King James Version.

3:1 – Who were the Pharisees?

The word "Pharisee" most likely comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to separate" and therefore probably means "separated ones." They were highly zealous for ritual and religious purity according to the Mosaic Law as well as their own traditions that they added to the OT legislation. They were generally from the Jewish middle class and mostly consisted of laity (business men) rather than priests or Levites. They represented the orthodox core of Judaism and very strongly influenced the common people of Israel. Jesus condemned them for their reducing God's Word to a religion of rules and regulations.

What does it mean that Nicodemus was "a ruler of the Jews"?

He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the main ruling body of the Jews in Palestine. It was the Jewish "supreme court" or ruling council of the time and arose most likely during the Persian period. In NT times, the Sanhedrin was composed of the High-Priest (president), chief priests, elders (family heads), and scribes for a total of 71 people. The method of appointment was both hereditary and political. It executed both civil and criminal jurisdiction according to Jewish law. However, capital punishment cases required the sanction of the Roman procurator (18:30–32).

3:2 – Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus by night?

As a ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus was probably afraid of the implications of associating openly in conversation with Jesus. He chose night in order to have a clandestine meeting with Jesus rather than risk disfavor with his fellow Pharisees among whom Jesus was pretty unpopular.

3:3 – What does Jesus say must happen to you to see the kingdom of God?

You must be born again. This phrase literally means "born from above."

What is the kingdom of God?

In context, this is primarily a reference to participation in the millennial kingdom at the end of the age which was fervently anticipated by the Pharisees and other Jews.

Why did Jesus answer a question that Nicodemus didn't even ask?

Jesus knew his heart and what he really need to know. The Pharisees thought that mere physical lineage and keeping of religious externals qualified them for entrance into the kingdom rather than the necessary spiritual transformation.

3:4 – What did Nicodemus think Jesus was talking about when He said you must be born-again?

Nicodemus' response regarding physical birth indicated that he had no idea what Jesus meant and was incredulous at what he was hearing.

How does Jesus describe what it means to be born-again?

Jesus describes this as being born of the water and the Spirit.

What being born-again doesn't mean...

1 – Why doesn't born of the water mean physical birth?

- People have said this is physical birth as in you can't be born again until you are first born physically. In this position people suppose the water is a reference to amniotic fluid but "water breaking" was not used as a description of physical birth for centuries later.
- This is what Nicodemus thought Jesus was talking about but He made it clear in verse 6 that He was talking about a spiritual birth.

2 – Why doesn't born of the water mean water baptism?

If it was water baptism, then Jesus would be making it a requirement to enter the kingdom of God here.

- This can not be water baptism because one of the thieves who died on the cross next to Jesus was saved without having to be baptized (see Luke 23:39-43).

So what then does the water in John 3:5 refer to?

The term water is another reference to the Holy Spirit, or the cleansing and life-giving activity of the Holy Spirit.

- This is reinforced by the Greek grammar which indicates that the two items are one concept.

It is appropriate that Jesus said we are born-again by the water and the Spirit because the cleansing effect of the Holy Spirit is often represented in Scripture by water.

John 7:37-39 - On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The Holy Spirit sanctifies us and gives us a new nature.

Titus 3:5 - according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit

Even the Old Testament uses water to represent the Holy Spirit...

Isa 44:3 - For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, and My blessing on your offspring;

The water could also be a reference to the cleansing power of God's Word since it was inspired by the Holy Spirit...

Eph 5:25-26 - Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,

God's Word is truth and apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit, men can not know the truth. The sanctifying role of the truth is found in the Lord's prayer for the church:

John 17:17 - Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.

3 – Is being born-again external reformation, or an action you take upon yourself?

Being born again is something which only comes from God...

What is the difference of being born of the flesh and born of the Spirit?

Humans can only produce more flesh. Only God, the divine Spirit can give spiritual life. At the same time God puts his Spirit in us, we are given a new regenerated human spirit. Our role is to listen to and obey the Holy Spirit whom we are now able to understand because we are a new creature in Christ.

4 – Is being born-again an action others take on your behalf such as confirmation?

Being born again is not something other people can do for you, it can only come from God...

John 1:12-13 - But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Only two people know if you have been born again: yourself and God.

5 – Is being born again the result of joining a church?

People confuse making a decision for Christ with making a decision to join a church. Joining a church is not what saves you, people join churches because they are saved. Joining a church is a good work and good works don't save you. But also note that those who are saved are saved to do good works and will join churches. There is a subtle but importance difference between working to be saved and being saved to work...

Eph 2:10 - For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

What born-again does mean...

3:8 – What does the comparison of the wind which blows were it wishes tell us about those who are born of the Spirit?

Jesus' point was that just as the wind cannot be controlled or understood by human beings but its effects can be witnessed, so also it is with the Holy Spirit. He cannot be controlled or understood, but the proof of His work is apparent. Where the Spirit works, there is undeniable and unmistakable evidence.

1 – How is being born-again a re-creation?

Those who are born again have a whole new life...

2 Corinthians 5:17 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

What has passed away for the believer?

For the believer, certain things have passed away such as old values that are focused on the material world which itself is passing away...

I Jn 2:17 - And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Our perspective changes to view all things in the context of eternity. Our values begin to be aligned with God's.

2 – How is being born-again a resurrection?

We usually think of resurrection in terms of our bodies but as God is three persons and we are made in the image of God, people have three components...

1Thes 5:23 - Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is the distinction between the body soul and spirit?

The body is that part of us that relates to our environment; the soul is our inner self, the seat of our emotions and personality, the spirit is that part of us which has the capacity to commune with God. Since God is Spirit, we need a spiritual component to know Him.

How may we distinguish between what comes from our soul and what comes from our spirit?

The Bible helps us to make this distinction...

Hebrews 4:12 - For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

How does the Bible help us to distinguish between what comes from our soul and what comes from our spirit?

If our human spirit is tuned into the Holy Spirit, our thoughts are going to be consistent with the Bible since it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Our soul may give us ideas that we may even think are from God but can not be if they contradict God's Word.

What was resurrected when we were born-again?

If God saved us, He has saved all of us... body soul and spirit. The saved don't have to wait for the resurrection of our human spirits as we do our souls and bodies...

Eph 2:1 - And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins,

People are born with dead spirits. While all people have a human spirit, only those God has saved have a regenerated human spirit. Before they are born spiritually, all people are dead to the things of God.

3 – How is being born-again a translation?

When we are born again we become part of the kingdom of God. We are saved out of this world which is perishing and become permanent citizens of God's eternal kingdom.

Col 1:13 - He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love,

4 – How is being born-again a transformation?

Having a regenerated human spirit which is able to respond to God's Holy Spirit gives us the capacity to see things from God's perspective.

Is this automatic, do we instantly start seeing things from God's perspective?

Seeing things from God's perspective is not automatic because we still have our old sin nature while we're in these mortal bodies. But being born again renews our mind so that we may choose God's way. Without a regenerated human spirit, we had no choice but to take the selfish path and do what is contrary to God. So as born-again believers, the Scriptures remind us...

Rom 12:2 - do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

5 – How is being born-again an impartation?

Being born-again is the work of God, it is He who imparts to us a new heart...

Ezek 36:26 - I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

God removes our dead human spirit and gives us a new human spirit that is alive to Him.

Does this mean that we should no longer have a sin nature?

No, our sin nature is resident in our soul:

Micah 6:7 - Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

The soul will not be resurrected until our body is.

Acts 2:31 - he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption.

Besides a new heart, what else does God impart to us?

Since we have no righteousness of our own, in order for us to have an eternal relationship with Him, God imparts to us His righteousness made possible by the Son of God who took our punishment and paid our penalty. Thus we are "*partakers of the divine nature*" (2 Peter 1:4).

John 6:29 - "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."

The necessity of being born-again...

Note that Jesus said that we must be born again...

Why must we be born again?

1. Why is being born-again necessary to be able to commune with God?

A person must be born-again for their human spirit to hear from God's Holy Spirit...

Romans 8:16 - The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God

What if you've been thinking you've been doing just fine without having to speak to or hear from the Holy Spirit?

But this thought comes out of not knowing who God is. God is the Almighty Creator, apart from knowing Him, you can not have eternal life...

John 17:3 - And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

2. Why is being born-again necessary to be holy?

The Holy Spirit prompts us with what we need to do to be holy...

2 Tim 2:20-21 - But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

This is another one where people are inclined to think, "Why do I need to be holy?"

God is holy and we can't know Him unless we are holy ourselves. It is God who gives us the new nature which enables us to be holy...

2 Pet 1:3-4 - His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

Being born again means that we have been given enough of God's nature to make us separate from the corruption that is in this world. We are in the world but *not of the world* (John 17:14-16).

3. Why is being born-again necessary to be righteous?

In order to have a relationship with God, it is necessary to be righteous. Without this, God will not even hear our prayers...

Proverbs 15:29 - The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.

Contrast this with the prayers of the righteous...

James 5:16 - The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

How does being born again enables us to be righteous?

Our new nature enables us to have God's perspective.

Before I was saved, I had come to the conclusion that everything a person does is motivated out of selfishness. I came to this conclusion because I knew my own motivations. I did good things but the reason I did them was either to avoid bad consequences or to be accepted as a good person by others.

Proverbs 21:27 - The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with wicked intent!

God loathes self-righteousness...

Isaiah 64:6 - all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; Now that I have a new nature which helps be to know the truth about myself and God, I have the capacity to do things out of a motivation to see God glorified. I'm not saying that everything I do now is out of such pure motives but I'm working on it hand in hand with the Holy Spirit to be more righteous all the time.

4. Why is being born-again necessary to be a part of the true church?

The true church is made up of those who truly trust in the work of Christ for the salvation and have accepted Jesus as the Lord of their lives.

A great falsehood in our time is where people think all people have salvation because of the "universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man." What is the problem with this idea?

This is not biblical but it sounds good because there is some truth to it (the best deception always has some truth to it)...

- God is the Father of us all in the sense that we are made in the image of God. But not everyone has a human spirit that is able to commune with God, only those who have been born again.
- We are all brothers and sisters of one another in the sense that we are all descendents of Adam and Eve and share in the same sin nature. But those who are born again are part of the heavenly family who's sins have been covered by the blood of Christ. Blood is thicker than water.

John 1:12-13 - But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

5. Why is being born-again necessary to benefit from the promises of God?

Without being born again, people can not even know the promises of God, much less benefit from them. Our new human spirit is sensitive to and can understand God's Holy Spirit who indwells us...

1 Corinthians 2:14 - But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

6. Why is being born-again necessary to enter into Heaven?

And of course the greatest necessity of being born-again is to be able to enjoy eternal life in heaven. Jesus made this very clear in our text...

John 3, 5 - Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

The kingdom of God is where God is, heaven. Jesus said that without being born-again a person can not even see heaven much less enter in.

The means of regeneration...

How did God make us born-again (verse 6)?

- When we are born-again, God's Holy Spirit breaths life into our human spirit. Jesus said, "*that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*" (John 3:6)
- If your human spirit is not alive to God, you are not really alive. Those who are not born-again have a **still-born spirit**. Most do not know it because they are among the walking dead.

Eph 2:1 - And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins

While it is the Holy Spirit who breaths life into our human spirit, what instrument does He use to help us come to the knowledge of the truth?

God's Word...

1 Peter 1:23 - having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever,

The Word of God is what the Holy Spirit uses to reveal the truth to us:

James 1:18 - Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth,

It is the Holy Spirit who authored the Word of God and He uses it to reveal Christ to us...

2 Peter 1:20-21 - no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Not only should we use Scripture as an instrument to help people know their condition and their need for Jesus, it also helps us who know Him to grow in our relationship with Him...

2 Tim 3:16 - All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,

The evidence of being born-again...

How do we know that we've been born again? Do we need some sort of supernatural experience to confirm this?

There may well be some sort of supernatural experience accompanying your being born again but I believe this is the exception rather than the rule.

- And consider this: the very fact that you have changed your attitude toward God is supernatural.

The greatest way we know we've been saved is that we now have faith in God's Word where we didn't before.

1 John 5:4 - For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith.

Our faith is very real to us because...

Romans 8:16 - The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

How do born-again believers know that they have a capacity to understand the truth?

They discover that they can now understand God's Word where before it was dry and worthless to them, now it is alive...

1 Corinthians 2:14 - But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

They find they have a hunger to know God's Word

1 Peter 2:2-3 - as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.

What kind of evidence of being born-again should there be to the world?

There will be changes in your life. This is why many people refuse Christ because they like their life of sin and don't really want to change.

Ps 34:8 - Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!

Jesus reinforced this when He said:

Matthew 11:29-30 - "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

So does it mean we are perfect when we are born-again?

When we are born-again and still in these mortal bodies, we still have our old sin nature so we will not be immune to sin, but there should be visible changes where habitual sins are no longer displayed over time...

I Jn 3:9 - Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.

God sees us in our eternal state which will not have a sin nature, that is why the Holy Spirit is able to dwell in us. However, as a near term practical matter in the world, we have to make choices to sin or not which while our eternal destiny is a settled matter, our sins have consequences both now and in eternity.

How else do we demonstrate to the world that we are children of God?

By the love of Jesus people see in us...

John 13:34-35 - "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Now this is certainly loving all people but especially loving fellow Christians. Indeed, this is one more reinforcement that helps us to know we are saved:

I John 3:14 - We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

This is why we come together to worship God. If you love someone, you want to be with them. This is why it is very true that, "not all who are in church are Christians, but all Christians are in church."

- If you are not an active member of a church somewhere, I'd encourage you to search your soul why you are not.

Conclusion

How does Jesus' description of how we enter the kingdom of God correct human hopes that we may somehow inherit goodness from our parents, or earn it by good behavior or church background?

At some point we must answer the question: Have I been born of the Spirit?

Are the words of Jesus, "you must be born again" a challenge or an invitation?

Both - it is a challenge because you can not enter into the Kingdom of God without being born again. It is also an invitation in that it is not something we can do on our own, Jesus is saying, "allow me to do this for you".