



DECEMBER 5, 2021 | REV. MINHO SONG

“What is the meaning of being born again?” (John 3:1-4)

1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.[a]”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Charles Colson, who was at the centre of the Watergate scandal in the 1970’s that saw President Richard Nixon to resign from his office, wrote about how he met Jesus Christ personally while serving his term in prison. He gave his account in his book *Born Again*. The phrase born again was quite popular in the 70’s and 80’s when people described their dramatic conversion experiences into Christianity. Over the years, the term slowly took on another meaning to cover those who hold religiously and politically conservative values.

What does it mean by ‘born again’? What did Jesus mean by that? Let us find out from Jesus’ conversation with a man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus

In vs. 1 of our passage, we come across a man named Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council known as the Sanhedrin. These two descriptions speak a lot of who Nicodemus was. He was powerful and religiously quite keen. If he wanted to, he could go around and investigate those who claimed to be religious. He came to Jesus, not to investigate, but to learn more about who Jesus was. After all, Jesus was a fascinating character, displaying miraculous signs.

Notice in vs. 2 that he came to see Jesus at night. Some commentators have mentioned in passing that perhaps Nicodemus was afraid to be seen with Jesus, so he chose night. Others think that he just wanted to speak to Jesus freely without the interference of the crowd. One thing is clear: his heart was open to new things. This is what he said to Jesus:

Rabbi (teacher), we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him. (vs. 2)



Nicodemus was certain that Jesus came from God and that God was with him. Otherwise, it would just be impossible for Jesus to perform all the miracles that Nicodemus has been observing. Nicodemus saw in Jesus something that most people in his day did not: Jesus was special. His spiritual eyes were opening.

While Nicodemus was interested in knowing more about Jesus, Jesus turns Nicodemus' attention from himself to the kingdom of God:

Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. (vs. 3)

Now here we have the famous phrase, 'born again.' Jesus was saying that for someone to fully appreciate what Jesus was doing, he needed to be born again. What was Jesus saying?

Nicodemus' question

By now Nicodemus has a burning question. 'What do you mean by born again?' 'How does one go through the process of birth all over? How is that even possible? Surely the person cannot go back to his or her mother's womb for the second time, to be born and come out into the world!' Now, this was the line of Nicodemus' thinking. Let us give some credit to Nicodemus for at least trying to make sense out of this conversation. He must have been very confused, and yet he was sincerely asking!

Here we have Nicodemus, a well-educated (Pharisee) and a religiously powerful man (member of the Sanhedrin), humbling himself before our Lord. He really wants to know how a person can be born again.

But note that the expression 'born again' in Greek means 'born from above.' Jesus says that unless the person is born from above (i.e., born from God), one cannot understand the spiritual things like the Kingdom of God.

There is a similar concept introduced in John 1:12-13:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Here the expression, 'born of God' is like 'born from above.' Jesus further clarifies in John 3:5,

Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. (vs. 5)



Here Jesus provides Nicodemus with two important clues, to be born above is born of water and the Spirit. In other words, born of water and the Spirit is what 'born from above' or 'born from God' is. Let us unpack these words as the combination of these words is first found in John 1.

- 'Born of water' refers to water baptism. John the Baptist gave water baptism (John 1:31) to prepare people for Jesus. Water baptism symbolizes repenting, cleansing, being forgiven, having a new resolve and a new start and so forth.
- 'Born of the Spirit' refers to the work of the Holy Spirit when we receive Christ (John 1:33). When we accept Christ's work on the cross and his forgiveness, the Spirit of Jesus enters our lives. We are born of the Spirit, and the Spirit leads us into truth each day.

Paul speaks of the importance of water and the Spirit in Titus 3:3-5,

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saves 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 ...

Washing of rebirth (by water) and renewal by the Holy Spirit --- that is how Paul understood the process of being born again. Yes, we must confess our sins clearly and ask God for forgiveness. That is how we receive the gift of the forgiveness. That is where the sinner's prayer comes in. (Jesus, I am a sinner. Please forgive my sins, make me the kind of person you want me to be.)

Let us make no mistake. We do not become born again automatically. As one preacher put it so well, just because you go to church, it does not mean you are a Christian, anymore than you become a hamburger just because you go to McDonald's.

We become born again by confessing our sins clearly and asking God for forgiveness. Our water baptism must have a genuine meaning. When we are ready to go through water baptism, it means we truly understand that we are sinners before God and that we are sincerely asking God for forgiveness and desiring to live a new life under God's management.

The problem with nominal Christianity (Christian by name only) is that true repentance is missing, and that the word sin has no meaning. We live in a culture where the word sin is hardly ever used. We have words like mistake, fault, or short-coming, but sin is too harsh, too religious, and too abstract to be of any use in our day-to-day life.



Augustine of Hippo wrote about his crazy, sinful heart, recalling the event when he was sixteen years old. Swept by peer pressure, he entered someone's property, saw pair trees, and started to shake the tree. He might have tasted two or three pairs, but the rest were thrown away to be given to pigs. Now, why did he do that? Augustine, now from the adult standpoint, looks back at his sinful teen years and wrote down the following:

Theft is punished by thy law, O Lord, and by the law written in men's hearts, which not even ingrained wickedness can erase. For what thief will tolerate another thief stealing from him? Even a rich thief will not tolerate a poor thief who is driven to theft by want. Yet I had a desire to commit robbery, and did so, compelled to it by neither hunger nor poverty, but through a contempt for well-doing and a strong impulse to iniquity. For I pilfered something which I already had in sufficient measure, and of much better quality. I did not desire to enjoy what I stole, but only the theft and the sin itself.

Those pears were truly pleasant to the sight, but it was not for them that my miserable soul lusted, for I had an abundance of better pears. I stole those simply that I might steal, for, having stolen them, I threw them away. My sole gratification in them was my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy; for, if any one of these pears entered my mouth, the only good flavor it had was my sin in eating it. (Augustine, the Confessions, Book 2, Paragraphs 9, 12)

But let us not fool ourselves. Christ died for our sins, not for our mistakes. Christ died for our sins, not for our faults or short-coming. Yes, Christ died for our sins and forgave our sins on the cross by his blood. When we have a deep comprehension of sin and forgiveness, then we are now ready to embrace God's grace and forgiveness in our lives.

When the slave trader John Newton (1725-1807) wrote *Amazing Grace*, he really meant every word he wrote, that he was a wretched sinner, once blind and could not see. He was the captain of several slave trading ships. He had no idea how sinful it was to capture and sell fellow human beings before God. But once he realized how wrong it was, he was overcome by the fear of sin. But when he confessed his sins, he was overcome by God's grace and forgiveness. He became the minister of the gospel and preached the gospel of God's love and forgiveness. He became an abolitionist and wrote a book on how wrong slave trading is. He wanted to persuade people to stop the trade. He led the anti-slavery movement in Britain. He called for the end to slavery for all. Just a few months before he died, he witnessed the British Empire abolishing the African slave trade (1807).

Where there is a genuine repentance of sins, there is the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who comes into our hearts and illuminates God's truth against our sinfulness. The Spirit comes into our lives and renews ourselves day by day. We used to walk in the ways of the Lord, but we learn each day how to walk in the Spirit and learn to obey his leading. We become sanctified as the power of (or the grip of) sin loses its power (or grip) in our lives.



We have a better understanding of what Jesus meant when Jesus answered Nicodemus, 'unless you are born from above, born of water and of the Spirit, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.'

Our response

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. He did not want people to see his encounter with Jesus. He wanted to ask questions freely and really learn from Jesus. He knew that Jesus was different, and that he must have come from God. There was no way that Jesus could perform all these miracles on his own. He had to come from God.

Now Jesus told Nicodemus that he, too, must come from God to appreciate the things of God (things belonging to the Kingdom of God). To come from God is to be born again from water and the Spirit, a genuine repentance, and a total reliance upon the Holy Spirit.

Let me ask you.

Are you born again?

Have you sincerely asked God for the forgiveness of your sins? Do you sincerely believe that you are a sinner? And have you experienced the forgiveness of your sins and the wonderful work of the Holy Spirit in your life?