

# You Must Be Born Again!

## *LIVING IN THE SPIRIT*

John 3:1-16

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Bethany Church

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It was a presidential campaign. A Southern Baptist named Jimmy Carter was running for President. He was an avid church-attender and a Sunday School teacher. The last Southern Baptist President, Harry Truman, didn't display such piety and used crude language. A political reporter asked candidate Carter whether he was born again. When he answered "yes," a firestorm arose. A wave of fear swept the country as columnists surmised that Jimmy Carter would take dictation from God in his decisions. Later, it became fashionable to be *born again*. There were born again cars, born again careers and born again diets. People would speak of *born again* religious experiences, and then live like the devil. Some folks categorized Christians into "born-again Christians" and "regular Christians."

It was Jesus, however, who said, "You must be born again." Jesus did not talk as if this second birth was optional. To Nicodemus, one of the most respected spiritual leaders in Jerusalem – in fact, Jesus called Nicodemus "Israel's teacher" (John 3:10) – Jesus said:

***I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.***  
(John 3:3, NIV)

This was not a put-off line. Nicodemus risked much to talk to Jesus, and Jesus knew it. He had begun to believe in Jesus; and Jesus was unfolding the truth of God's kingdom to him. Jesus was saying that no person can see the loving reign of God, no one can experience God's heaven unless they are born a second time. Those words confused Nicodemus.

***“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!”*** (John 3:4, NIV)

Nicodemus was thinking physically, materially. I know we can glaze over when we talk of spiritual truths. Jesus explained:

***I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.”*** (John 3:5-7, NIV)

Jesus was disappointed in Nicodemus. He thought Nicodemus should pick up on this spiritual truth. First, the term *born again* was not new to Jewish people of his time. We learn from ancient Jewish writers that pagans who converted to Judaism were baptized and the male believers were circumcised. Jews had called these people *born again*. Second, Nicodemus knew the Genesis account of God’s creation and humanity’s fall; and therefore, he should have understood why a second birth was required.

The Bible teaches that we human beings were created in the image of God. We were created in the *natural image* of God being spiritual and eternal beings. We were created in the *political image* of God being decision-makers and rulers of this earth. We were created in the *moral image* of God reflecting purely the love and righteousness of God. Nicodemus knew that. He knew that God had warned Adam:

***You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.*** (Genesis 2:17, NIV)

Adam’s body did not die for another 900 years. The death he experienced when he ate the fruit was not physical. However, from the moment of his disobedience, he was alienated from God and a servant to fear. He hid from God. Just as the body dies when it separated from the soul, so our soul dies when it separated from God. He was dead. He was dead to God and his love. He was dead to God and his activity. He was dead to God and his truth.

There's another principle that is seen in the Bible that Nicodemus certainly knew. Since we still have political and moral control of earth, God vacates or hands what we rule, including ourselves, over to the consequences of our decisions. Thus we see land, territory or aspects of life dominated by sin and its consequence. It is God-forsaken. It is obvious that his blessing is not there. God often warned Israel that they did not really want God to come to them, for he must come in judgment. However, where there was forgiveness, God would come, heal and bless. Forgiveness required repentance and an atonement. In one incident when Moses led Israel, the atonement was a bronze snake lifted on a pole. People dying of snake bite had to look to that pole. In doing so, they received God's forgiveness and then God's Spirit came and healed them. In the same way, Jesus was lifted up on a pole for us. When we are aware of our desperate dying condition and look to him, we are forgiven and healed. In the room of forgiveness, the Spirit gives us life. In the room of forgiveness, a second birth takes place.

Human beings need to be forgiven so that God can come, heal and make his home with us. After Adam's sin, with his spirit dead, his children were simply born of flesh. They began to sin under the domination of God's enemies that were frustrating and destroying them. They needed now to be born of God's Spirit. They needed to be born a second time so that they could see, hear and feel the life and love of God. Somehow, Nicodemus missed this.

Now, in physical birth we are given eyes, ears, nose and other sense receptors to experience the world outside the womb. They are not made for the womb. They are created for outside the womb. When we are born a second time, we are given an ability to experience a whole new life in this world through an array of senses that see, hear and feel the life and love of God. Even if our understanding is infantile at first, we are given a new heart that loves God. This new heart is the gateway to holiness. It is not maturity. It is not perfection. It is, however,

passion to be pure and stay pure for God. Only in this way does God rule people. Only in this way do we see the kingdom of God. Only in this way do we choose God's heaven.

Jesus told Nicodemus:

***The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*** (John 3:8, NIV)

He was not saying that those who are born again are shiftless or purposeless. He was saying that much like the wind you can observe the affects of the Spirit, but it is not something material that you can track. You can't walk up and down this aisle and say with credibility: "You're born again, you're not; you're born again, you're not; you will be born again here, you were born again there." Some of that may be true, but it is not observable like a physical birth.

If you come from a sacramental church like Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Anglican or Eastern Orthodoxy, you may have been taught that this second birth is automatic with baptism. These churches see that relationship in Jesus' expression found in John 3:5: "born of water and the Spirit." When they teach this, they normally are relating it to infant baptism where there may be less of a barrier to God's Spirit. However, it is obvious from the Scriptures that some adults were born of the Spirit before they received baptism such as Cornelius' household, and some were born of the Spirit after their baptism such as the Samaritans. People, growing up in these sacramental traditions, often struggle with the message: "***You must be born again.***" In the Evangelical churches, the new birth is often equated with reciting a sinner's prayer and accepting the doctrine of Christ's death on the cross. Individuals confess their sin, ask for forgiveness based on the cross of Christ, and invite Jesus to reside in them as Savior and Lord. The counselor will then reassure the person that God will deliver on both his promise to forgive us and to come into us. Jesus, however, said that the second birth is known by its sound, by the

way a person operates in this world. Jesus also said on a different occasion, “***You will know them by their fruits***” (Matthew 7:16, NKJV).

There are instances where people are dramatically converted as youth and adults and instances where there is a warm growing assurance of God’s love and forgiveness as children. God’s Spirit is a Spirit of *sonship*, of relationship. Where God’s Spirit resides, the heart cries Abba Father. A joy rises that no sin can imitate. Indeed, all sin brings misery. Long after I called upon Christ and devoted my life to him, I suffered fear of condemnation. No reassuring words could penetrate the stronghold the enemy had constructed to blunt my confidence and steal my joy as a child of God. I kept crying out to God; and finally the truth of God’s promises in the Bible broke the hold of condemnation. Others in my family grew in their love and joy without that struggle. They were born again, and it was obvious because you could hear the wind.

How do you respond to Jesus’ call, “You must be born again?” Do you point to your baptism? Do you point to a moment where you invited Christ in your life? If you were a temple for God then, have you since filled that temple with idols. Are you growing in Christ-likeness, or does your attitude and actions misrepresent Christ? If so, you suffer guilt beyond that of an unbeliever. You have rebelled against and defamed the one who came to you. Nevertheless, God’s love remains constant for you. Christ’s work on the cross is enough to release you from wrath and bondage. A new birth and life in the Spirit awaits you. Remember the wind can be known by its sound, and so is everyone born of the Spirit.

When Jesus said “You must be born again,” it was because we must and we can. How do you respond to his call?