

What is a Christian?

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[0:00] We've asked for God's help. So let's come to this question, what is a Christian? I think this is an absolutely vital question to get right for every single one of us sitting! I dare say every single person has their own idea. It's not something like that you've never ever thought of, you have an idea. But is it a right idea? So some people will genuinely think that anybody who is European is Christian. Some people will genuinely think that perhaps if they've come from a country where ethnically, if you're a certain ethnicity, you're Muslim, they will think, okay, if you're a different ethnicity, you're Christian. That is wrong.

It's not correct. Some people will use the word Christian to mean a moral, respectable person. He is a Christian. He behaves himself in a Christian way.

It is true that Christian people will behave in a certain way. You can expect that of them and nearly always find that. Certainly people have blips. But it is not true to say that just because somebody is fair and honest, they are automatically a Christian. That is an incorrect answer.

If you go to some cultures, they will say the definition of a Christian is somebody who does not go to the cinema and does not smoke or drink alcohol. And they will genuinely think that that's what a Christian is and that's all a Christian is. It's to do with what we would say legalism, what laws and rules you keep.

And of course, who makes up the rules is another question. But to define a Christian in terms of what laws they do or do not keep is not a sufficient answer.

[1:57] For the purposes of the census, people will, for the census, in other words, counting who does what in any given country, in our country, certain years they go through this exercise, they will count up people who go to church regularly.

They will come up with a number that there are, oh, I can't remember now. It was, and so according to that definition, in Brighton, there are, oh, 25,000, I can't remember.

A lot of people who go to church regularly. I want to say that is not an adequate definition of a Christian. Going to a stable regularly does not make you a horse.

Going to church regularly, I mean, I hope Christians would do that, but just because they go to church regularly does not, in itself, mean that somebody is a Christian.

And we could also say, so some people will self-designate themselves Christians. They might do so, I think I remember that when Maria went to hospital to have our son, she had to write on the admission form, religion, and she put down Christian.

[3:22] And somebody, I think, ticked the box which said C of E, because C of E equals Christian. And if people self-designate Christian, I think it was probably for if everything went terribly wrong, which chaplain they would call for.

Do you see what I mean? Just saying you are a Christian is not an adequate answer. Just saying you are a Christian does not make you a Christian.

You could even, some people would say, oh, well, they're a Christian if they believe there is one God. I believe in God. Okay, you're a Christian. That, too, is an insufficient answer.

So having said all these answers are lacking, I would like to try quite carefully to answer from the Bible what is a Christian.

And to try to convince you and explain to you why the answers that I've mentioned are not adequate. They are unreliable or just plain wrong.

[4:30] So what can we say about this question, what is a Christian? Because when I put it down on the timetable, I thought, well, I can easily preach on that. That's easy. And, of course, the closer you get to the time and the more you think about it, you think this is actually a very big question.

And you think it has very big answers. In fact, the whole of the New Testament, you could say, the whole of this book is really one big answer to that question.

What is a Christian? The whole of the New Testament is concerned with this matter, spelling it out, the length and breadth and depth and implications and so on, of what it is to be a Christian.

And then you might say, well, hold on a minute. The New Testament is not all about us. Well, it isn't all about us, but it is all about what God, through Jesus Christ, has done for us.

And what God, through Jesus Christ, has done to us. And what God, through Jesus Christ, is doing in us. And what he will do in the future.

[5:41] And all of that is part of what it is to be a Christian. So, what can we say about this question? So, having thought about it, one answer is, I don't know.

I cannot. It's a difficult question. It's unanswerable. I'll try and explain that in a moment. But I can also say that from the Bible, there are some very definite answers.

Very definite and clear answers. And as we think about this, I think we will come up against things like this. That being a Christian is supernatural.

Because the trouble with all those answers I gave at the beginning, they're just things that human beings can do themselves. But being a Christian is more than that.

It is supernatural. A Christian, rightly understood, is a living miracle. Unless we get the hang of that, we won't have a proper idea of what a Christian is.

[6:46] And I put this, a transcendent being. By which I mean, that if you're sitting next to somebody who is a believer and you look at them, and you can see they haven't done their hair quite right.

Or, you know, perhaps in some cases they haven't got as much hair as they used to have on their heads. I don't know. But you look at them, it's somewhat imperfect. Very human.

But I want to say that rightly understood, if we were to see the truth of what a Christian is at this very moment, we would just be absolutely gobsmacked of the wonder of a person in whom the Spirit of God lives.

A person who has been changed, who is going from one degree of glory to another. We would just be amazed if we could see the transcendent nature.

In other words, it's more than just the human being you can see next to you. There's something from another dimension, if I can put it that way, another kingdom. We will certainly see in our thinking that it's to do with a person being in beautiful relation to God and to Jesus Christ.

[8:02] So those things I think will pop up. I hope they will pop up as we go through. So let me give you, let me expand on the first bit where I said, actually, I don't know what a Christian is.

And I've got some texts which say that. So look at 1 John 3, 2, or if you like, I'll look at it and read it to you. But if you're good at finding places in the Bible, you might like to do that.

This is what it says. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are.

The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God. And what we will be has not yet been made known.

So there you are, sitting next to a person who is a child of God. And what that person will be when Jesus Christ appears, we just have no conception of.

[9:09] In one place it says we will shine like stars in the firmament, I think. Something like that. And if you think you are sitting next to somebody who will shine like a star, we just don't know yet the fullness of the glory of what it is to be a Christian.

When Jesus appears, it will be clear because we'll be like him in his glory, in his resurrection glory.

We'll be like him. And we will be able to see him as he is. Similar sort of thinking in 1 Corinthians 15, I declare to you brothers that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed. The dead will be raised imperishable and we will all be changed. So the person that you are sitting next to is like a seed of a plant that will grow.

So if you say, I have got a chrysanthemum seed. Now I am sufficiently ignorant about flowers. I do not quite know what a chrysanthemum looks like. So I suppose I have that seed.

[10:27] I do not know what that is going to be. I plant the seed and then one day out it comes. I think, wow, that is chrysanthemum. That is amazing. And Paul is saying like we are in the seed state at the moment.

What we will be when that great day of change comes. We do not yet know, but it will be a glorious thing.

Is this making sense? We will be raised imperishable. We will all be changed. And I do not know what that will be, but that is what it says.

1 Peter says, here we are. Let me find the reference. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

[11:40] So this is again saying that the final answer to this question, what is it to be a Christian, is going to be revealed in the last time.

And we are just in the early stages. And what you can see now is, well, it is a living hope. It is the beginning of something that will one day burst out into something unimaginably brilliant.

That salvation kept in heaven, ready to be revealed in the last time. So, it would not be true that any preacher can tell us fully what it is to be a Christian because some of it we don't know, nobody's ever seen.

It awaits that great day and we look forward in hope. It will be brilliant. Nobody can tell us why it will be brilliant. We just believe the Lord. It will be more brilliant than you can ever imagine.

And therefore, we don't really know the destiny and the inheritance and the true identity of the person sitting next to us. But this does at least say that being a Christian is such a remarkable thing.

[13:00] Such a remarkable thing. And to my mind, this makes being a Christian amazingly desirable. Would anybody not want to know that in the world to come they're going to shine like a star in the kingdom of the Father?

Would anybody not want to have an assurance that just as Christ was raised from the dead in glory, that they too will share that glory? Would anybody not want that?

And the way to have that is to be a Christian. And to say being a Christian is very desirable is a bit of an understatement. And thus, the question, as I sit here now, am I a Christian, is crucially important.

Am I on the road to shining like a star? Am I on the road to resurrection? Or not? That makes that a very important question.

And of course, the follow-on from that, if I'm not, how can I be? I want to be. How can I be it? So that's where we're going to go with this.

[14:10] So I'd like please to turn to John chapter 3. And I'd like to look reasonably carefully at the sort of way Jesus tackles these issues when he's interviewed by a very intelligent and respected man, Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

He came to Jesus at night. And he's coming to talk to Jesus. And the conversation starts off with this impossibility.

Rabbi, we know you're a teacher who has come from God. No one could perform the miraculous signs you were doing if God were not with him. So he says, you know, I want to talk to you because it's impossible that you could be doing the stuff you're doing if God isn't with you.

So I want to talk to you. And Jesus replies in this way. In reply, Jesus declared, I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. So I think the way the conversation goes is Nicodemus has said, here's an impossibility.

[15:28] And Jesus goes straight to the point and says, well, here's the real impossibility. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

That's the fundamental impossibility. So I tried to see if I could draw this out to fix it in our minds a bit. There is a kingdom. That's implied in what Jesus says. No one can see the kingdom of God. So there is a kingdom of God. And from our studies in One Kings, you might think that to join the kingdom of God, you just have to have your house in the right place.

But Jesus says the reality of it is that joining the kingdom of God is much more radical than that. No one can see.

There's somebody in our kingdom, the kingdom where you have trees and sunshine and traffic congestion and bicycle maintenance and half a dozen eggs, all those sorts of things.

[16:32] That's the world that we live in. How can you see the kingdom? Well, you can't unless you're born again.

You can't. So there's a sort of barrier of impossibilities. You can't even see the kingdom unless you are born again. And then Nicodemus says, well, what's this born again thing then?

Verse 4. How can a man be born when he is old? And Nicodemus asks, surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born. That's ridiculous. So we're talking about being born. Jesus talks about being born again. And Nicodemus says, well, is this something, you know, you're talking about some sort of very peculiar medical procedure where a grown person is born again within the confines of this world.

You know, this world of half a dozen eggs and everything else that we have in this world. And Jesus says, no, you have not got the right end of the stick.

[17:42] So he says now, so looking at verse 4, how can a man be born when he is old, Nicodemus asks, surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born.

That's what he says. And Jesus says, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit.

So he's sort of repeating the same thing, but instead of saying seeing, he says enter. You can't enter the kingdom of God unless, okay, there is an unless.

It's not a total impossibility. It's impossible unless. Unless you're born again is what he said the first time round. And the second time round, he says is born of water and the spirit.

So not the green arrow showing born again in this world, but the red arrow, which shows something of the kingdom of God touching somebody in this world so that they are born again, as he says, he says of water and the spirit.

[19:04] And I'd like to suggest, I'm not going to stop and do all the homework on this, that he wants to put those two together. So it's not two separate things, born of water and born of the spirit, but one thing, born of the watery spirit.

My example of this is when we say, are you nice and warm? Are you nice and warm? We're not saying two things. Are you nice?

And are you warm? Are you nice and warm? It means one thing. Are you nicely warm? Born of water and the spirit. Born of the water-like spirit, of the watery spirit.

And Jesus is going to use the idea of water for the spirit a lot in John's gospel. So born again of the spirit, who in some ways is like water. And then Jesus goes on, verse six.

Now what was the problem with that green arrow in this world, of the things of this world? He says, if you're in that world, you're in the world of flesh. Ordinary stuff.

[20:09] And he says, flesh gives birth to flesh. That's what it does. The flesh is human capacities of all sorts without God.

So human capacities biologically. Human beings can give birth. Human capacities intellectually, the things that we can think up. Human capacities religiously, the religious observances we can do. Human capacities morally, the things that we can steel ourselves up to do. All of that is flesh. And it achieves flesh. Flesh gives birth to flesh.

But he says, you need more than that. You need the spirit. And spirit gives birth to, here's somebody born again. They are spirit.

Spirit gives birth to spirit. And that's, I think, the nearest we get in this text to the transcendent thing. What is a Christian? A Christian is spirit. I don't mean to say that we lose our, bodies, that we sort of become smoke wafting around.

[21:19] But there is something about a Christian of whom you can say, this person is a spiritual being. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit.

And Jesus says, you shouldn't be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. Let's give weight to that.

Don't be surprised at this, because it all fits. But this is what I'm saying. You must be born again. Get the weight of that.

He's saying that we live our lives in this side, over here. We need to be over here. We can't see it. We can't enter it. There's a certain necessity.

You must be born again. There has to be something that takes us across here. And that must be the case.

[22:21] So that, because there's a barrier, there's a must to it.

There is no alternative. There's no way round that. You must be born again. And Jesus adds one more thought, which I'm going to draw attention to, about the wind.

Verse 8, the wind blows where it pleases. You hear it sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from, or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

So Jesus, having given us the idea of water, now gives us the idea of wind. So the Spirit is like water. The Spirit is like the wind.

It's two powerful forces. Born again of the Spirit, who is poured out like water, who immerses us in himself. The Spirit is poured out on. So there's a water-likeness about the Spirit, and there's a wind-likeness.

[23:21] The Spirit, the breath, the wind, it's all the same word in Greek. The breath of God. Blowing.

And there's something mysterious about wind, isn't it? Because you can't see it. But it's so powerful, it can knock trees down. And he says, that is how it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

Something that's sort of unseen. Can't really track it down. But a powerful effect. Okay, you with me so far on these first few verses?

This is what he's saying in these verses. So let's hold that thought, and let's now go, let's summarize this. So number one, flesh is not enough.

You must be born again. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Flesh is not enough. So, ladies and gentlemen, friends, if we were thinking that we can enter the kingdom of God because we have tried hard enough, we can't.

[24:35] If we try to enter the kingdom of God because we've been good enough, we can't. If we think we can enter the kingdom of God because on my birth certificate it says Christian or C of E or whatever it says, that actually is not enough.

Can I make myself a Christian by going along to church? That is not enough. The flesh, the human powers without God is not enough.

Okay, I'll try and make that point nice and clearly. There needs to be a supernatural change to enter, to see, to belong, to be requires a supernatural change and Jesus in this case puts it in the terms of being born again by the Spirit.

So, being born is a big change. I think you'd agree with that. Being born again is a big change. A change of new life. And there is absolutely no substitute for this.

Because sometimes, you know, people say, oh, those Baptists or those Evangelicals, they're born again Christians. They call themselves born again Christians. As if there was any other sort of Christian.

[26:01] No, is Jesus saying, Baptists must be born again, but other people can enter the kingdom some other way. They don't have to be born again. No, he isn't.

If you want to be a Christian, whatever church you end up going to, you must be born again. Okay, let's hold that thought in our hearts.

Let's go to the next bit now. So, Nicodemus is saying, how can this be? And I think he said that already. How can this be? So, it's a difficult thing to take in. And maybe you're sitting there thinking, well, I never heard this before. He's making it so difficult. It's impossible. Which I say, absolutely right. And this is what Nicodemus is saying. How can this be? It's impossible. And then Jesus goes on to say some more about it. Verse 10. You're Israel's teacher, says Jesus. You don't understand these things. That's very surprising. [26:57] Because it's fundamental to Bible thinking. I tell you the truth, says Jesus. We speak of what we know. We testify to what we have seen. But still you people do not accept our testimony.

If I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe, then how will you speak, how will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

So Jesus is saying, you should believe me on this. I'm telling you stuff that you wouldn't know unless you are told. And I'm the one who knows about it. So you must believe me in this. Which brings in the whole subject of faith. Which is what we're going to be looking at now. Verse 14. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

So let's follow this bit of Jesus' argument. He refers back to Moses. And this is an incident in the Bible. I think you would be excused if you say, oh, I don't quite remember that one.

[28:10] But it is there in the Bible. It's in Numbers 21, verses 8 and 9. You can look at it, look back at it, or you could look it up.

Either of those sentences, but not both of those sentences at the same time. What happens in Numbers 21, 8 and 9? Back in the days of Moses, people were being bitten by snakes, and they needed healing.

And what happened was that Moses took a model snake, a brass snake, a brass version of a snake, put it up on a pole. So the snake was lifted up on the pole, and all the people who had been bitten by the snakes were able to look at, come on, that's it, to look at this snake, and if they looked, they were healed.

They were healed of snake bite. And there they are, looking at this enemy, as it were, in model form, held up on a stick, which is not the most noble thing to do.

It's a little bit like having a head of a tiger on the side of the, of your drawing room, you know, the one that Captain Carruthers, my uncle, used to bag that one in India.

[29:28] You know, it's over there. So this is the snake lifted up, and it's not lifted up to worship it, but to mock it, really. So look at you, that disgraced tyrant.

And if they looked, they were healed. They were healed from snake bite, that's all it healed you from, and it would only heal you temporarily. In other words, you'd die of something else in due course, but just not snake bite.

And Jesus says, this is a good model for what happened, what will happen to Jesus. So keep much the same picture there. But he says, as the snake, Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so the Son of Man is lifted up, and stuck in this disgraceful way on a cross.

And Jesus says, like this, people are to look and believe in him. There's differences, of course. The snake was a disgraced enemy. We mock him. Yeah, you thought you could bite us, but you can't. But when we look at Jesus, we don't see an enemy whom we mock.

[30:47] We see a friend in a terrible situation for us. We don't mock him, do we, on the cross? We look at the cross with tears in our eyes.

Did he have to do that for me? But he did it. And I look to him, a disgraced friend. A disgraced friend who isn't just stuck up there with nails, and that's it, but he's stuck up there and he bleeds.

He sheds his precious blood as he dies on the cross. And we're to look, as it were, to that. And as we look, we have eternal life.

Everyone who believes in him is a look of faith. It's a trusting look. I trust you doing this for me to be my salvation.

The look of faith. And it goes on to talk about this, verse 16, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

[32:02] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned. Whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

There's lots of things going on in this looking. The look of faith. It actually is to do with the forgiveness of sins although the word forgiveness isn't used there but the word condemned is used and not condemned.

Whoever looks is not condemned and whoever looks does not perish and whoever looks is saved. Those are the words that are used and has eternal life.

and this is fundamental to what it is to be a Christian. Let's just take that thought again. It says at the bottom this is the verdict verse 19 this is the verdict.

The word is crisis so it's a little bit of a preacher's trick this but if I were to turn that into the word crisis and say here is a critical you know a critical point what how do you look at the cross of Jesus Christ?

[33:24] What goes on in your heart and mind when you look as it were at Christ raised up dying on the cross?

What what this is the crisis point this is the crunch point and I think there's a big divide John is very good at making a two way division light and darkness condemned not condemned and I think there is a two way divide at the cross to come in faith to look in faith to believe or to retreat from the cross he goes on to talk about loving darkness rather than light to retreat from the cross and say I don't want that whatever the answer to the question as to how to become a Christian or how to live my life I don't want to do it that way people people say that so I think there's a division here between those who will look and believe and those who will not believe and this is what Jesus is talking about those who believe just read what he says whoever believes in me is not condemned whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed this is the the black and white of it isn't it to not believe is to remain guilty condemned dead lost in sin and misery to believe is to be not condemned to not perish to have eternal life so we've tried to do it reasonably carefully to look at these two things that Jesus says on the subject of what is a

Christian let me just remind you of what we've looked at the first thing was about being born again and this born again thing emphasizes the supernatural nature of being a Christian the impossibility flesh gives birth to flesh spirit gives birth to spirit you need to be born again by the spirit who is like water and who is like wind let's keep that as it were one side of the coin and that one tells us our impotence we can't manufacture becoming a Christian and we looked at this second paragraph which talks about the cross and looking in faith and I say these are both two ways of looking at the same thing first one is someone who is born again by the powerful and mysterious work of the spirit of

God and the second picture is someone who turns to Jesus Christ believing on what he did when he died on the cross and those two are the same it's almost impossible to explain that but those two things are the same let me try and spill this out a little bit then and what this is saying to us is number one we need to be truly aware of the impossibility of our situation if we're not a Christian it's a hole that I cannot dig myself out of it is a situation that my human powers cannot change helpless and hopeless is a correct diagnosis morally spiritually religiously we cannot see we cannot enter we cannot be alive and I want to press that point home because without pressing that point home you wouldn't pray very much about this and I want if you are in the position of not believing and standing condemned

I want you to pray for help I want you to say Lord I can't do this I don't understand it I can't do what you want me to do I can see this I know I must be born again but I can't born again myself that's impossible I need your help and I want to urge you to pray really meaning it because you do need God's help you can't do it any other way pray earnestly!

[38:12] pray earnestly for the work of the Holy Spirit to work miraculously in you so that you can do this so that you can precisely turn to Jesus Christ in his death on the cross and look with faith that's what you're to do you're not looking within yourself saying have I been born again have I been born again what is the Bible says look at Jesus Christ and as you pray say Lord help me to see what went on there how much I need him and what he offers to me and that gap should be closed help me

to see that he is exactly what I need his promises his love his power his redemption that's exactly what I need and what he did is exactly what I need

I need my sins paid for there's no other place where my sins paid for but there it is he did exactly what I need and if I have him that's all I need I don't need anyone else to save me he does it all I don't need to add to that oh and by the way I go to church quite a bit that's the whole answer there in Jesus Christ it's a radical radical thing which you can only see by the help of the spirit of God and you must you must do this it isn't optional Jesus isn't saying well you know some you know leave it to you really some people can some people can't some people need it some people don't Jesus is saying this is where I want you to focus your attention this is where your life begins and ends there at the cross you must that there is no other way and

I want to say I looked at it quite carefully don't know whether I shouted too much but what I want to say is this is so important please do not leave it please don't put it on one side please don't do with this what I do with my tax form to put it on one side for the whole of the year until I absolutely have to do it at the last minute please don't leave it make this the thing on your agenda I must get this sorted out with God I don't!

want to rest until God has shown me how to look with faith to Jesus Christ I need to be born again Lord make that true of me let's sing together