

You Must be Born Again

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[0 : 00] I was brought up in a home where reading was prized. My mother was a teacher. My sister has become a teacher in school.

I've become a teacher at college. And reading for me is so fundamental. And I hope that you are a people who enjoy reading. And I hope that you're a people that enjoy reading old books. Now the Bible is an old book. And every Christian should want to read this old book. Because in this old book are truths that are ever new. But I want to tell you a story about an old book that God used quite dramatically.

There were two brothers. Now these brothers were religious. They were very sincere about their faith. They were very active in their service.

They would preach and they would visit. And they would help the poor. They would go to hospitals. They would go to prisons. But the only problem with these two brothers was that they actually were not converted.

[1 : 03] They did many of the religious things. But they recognized that something profoundly was missing in their hearts. Strangely, these two brothers were converted within three days of each other.

And not long after, a younger friend of theirs came to them for advice. Because he noticed that something was different in these men's lives.

He knew what they once were like. He knew what they now had become. And he put two and two together. And he said, what they have, I want. So this younger man called George asked them, what is it that you have?

And one of the brothers gave an old book to this young man. It was a book that was written many years ago from now. But even at that time, it was written many years before that encounter.

And just for, if you're curious, it was a book called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. It's the only work really ever written by the professor of divinity, a man called Henry Schugel.

[2 : 06] He only lived to the age of 28. He died very young, but he wrote this book. And this book was used by God. And this young man, George, later wrote, he said this.

He said, though I had fasted, watched and prayed and received the sacrament, sat at the Lord's table so long, yet I never knew what true religion was, till God sent me that excellent treatise by the hands of my never-to-be-forgotten friend.

Well, the two brothers you might have heard of were John and Charles Wesley. The young man called George was a man called George Whitefield. And God used these three instruments in what became known as the Great Awakening.

You see, the church was slumbering, sleeping. The people in the pews were going through the motions, but what was missing was a profound heart change, a profound life change.

And these young men embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ, and their lives were never the same again. And I would say the history of the Western world was never the same again.

[3 : 17] And they came back to a theme time and time again. And that's our theme this morning. You must be born again.

You must be born again. John Wesley, it's estimated that he preached 30,000 times. Now, if a minister preaches three times a week for 50 years, that's 7,500 sermons.

30,000 sermons. It's estimated that 6,000 of those sermons were on this text. You must be born again. So often and so frequent did Wesley preach on this text that as he made his way around the British Isles, the American colonies, that people would say, Mr. Wesley, why is it that you preach you must be born again?

To which he would simply reply, because you must be born again. Attending church, reading the Bible, taking part in the various activities of church, exercising, spiritual exercises like prayer and reflection, all of these things are absolutely essential in the life of the believer, but they are not in and of themselves sufficient.

Something must happen inside. Something must happen inside you and inside me that we cannot put on the gospel.

[4 : 45] We cannot put on what looks like the clothes of a Christian. One of the sermons that Wesley preached very early in his Christian life, he spoke about the outside of a Christian.

You look the part. You act the part. You say the right things. You're at the right places. You're not at the wrong places. But he says it's just like the outside. You see, the gospel always begins on the inside and works out.

God begins a work in the human heart. You see, we cannot fix the broken heart. We cannot change the broken heart. In fact, the apostle Paul tells us that spiritually we are dead.

We're not dying. We're not in danger of death. But spiritually, we are dead in our sins and our transgressions. And we need a profound work of God that only he can do.

So when Jesus says you must be born again, the religious man Nicodemus did not have a clue what he is talking about. And maybe if you're honest, you're saying to me, I understand the words that you're saying, but I do not have a clue what you are speaking about.

[5 : 58] Well, you're in good company. Because this man, Nicodemus, met Jesus at night. But as you read through John's gospel, you'll realize that this man, Nicodemus, appears three times.

Very unusually. That we have a character like this that appears more than once. And we see that there is a progression in the life of Nicodemus. Take a chance later today, if you'd like, you can see for yourself in John's gospel where you can find Nicodemus.

And maybe today you're at this point that Nicodemus was at this juncture. Because the context here is critical. You see, this man, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus at night.

He comes to Jesus at night and he comes with a compliment. Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God. For no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Now you're here today. And I'm persuaded, or I'll take it for granted, that you're here today for the right reasons. You're here today because this is where the people of God gather.

[7 : 06] This is a place where you sing God's praise. This is a place where prayer is offered. A place where the word of God is read. And a place where the gospel is preached. All of these things are good.

All of these things are beneficial. Nicodemus came to Jesus because he felt that somehow Jesus had something to say to him. But notice in verse 3, Jesus answered him.

Now this is translating the language specifically. Some of the other modern editions don't capture this. But Jesus answered Nicodemus. And when you look at the verse and you'll say, but Nicodemus didn't ask a question.

Nicodemus didn't pose a question to Jesus. Nicodemus just said a complimentary word to Jesus.

So why did Jesus answer Nicodemus? Well, I would suggest to you this morning that Jesus understood that within Nicodemus were unanswered questions.

That he understood that in Nicodemus there was something missing. Something missing in his life. Something missing in his heart. And he comes to Jesus at night looking for that missing piece.

[8 : 17] Looking for that answer to the question of life. And I hope that if you're not yet a follower of Jesus that you're here today because something is missing. You might not put your finger on it.

You might not be able to express it. You might not be able to explain it. But something is missing in your life. And something is missing in your heart. And somehow, somehow, Jesus might be able to say something that can fix or fill or transform.

Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Now this idea of being born again, you can use a fancy word like regeneration.

This is the absolute essential, one of the absolute essential elements of the Christian faith. John Wesley again.

As he preached on this text, he began his sermon in this way. He said, if any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may properly be termed fundamental, they are doubtless these two.

[9 : 22] The doctrine of justification and that of the new birth. The former, justification relating to that great work which God does for us in forgiving our sins.

The latter to the great work which God does in us in renewing our fallen nature. So we think of justification by faith.

We think of the writings of the Apostle Paul. We think of the life and times of Martin Luther. So by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, you and I can be declared righteous because of his righteousness.

We can be forgiven because of his sacrifice. All that he does, we receive. All that he secures, we benefit from. So that's justification. What God does for us.

But the new birth is what God does in us. Inside us. And Nicodemus doesn't have a clue. He doesn't understand.

[10:21] He understands, in a sense, the words that Jesus says. But he doesn't understand what Jesus means. And I don't know about you, but for a significant period of my life, either I did not go to church because I was not interested.

Or when I did go to church, I honestly just didn't have a clue. I could understand every word that was being said, but I just didn't understand what it all meant. And Nicodemus is trying to figure out what Jesus is saying here.

Because Jesus is talking about birth, and he's talking about new birth. And it makes Nicodemus think of his mother. Not surprisingly. Because when birth happened the first time, Nicodemus would think, that was when my mother gave me birth.

So Jesus, are you saying to me that my mother must do this again? Because it's such an absurdity, isn't it? A grown man can't be born again. He's too big.

Can't fit. It's impossible. But Jesus is not going back to Nicodemus' mother. Jesus is going back much further. Because the source of life, yes, our parents gave us life.

[11:30] But the source of life ultimately is God himself. Genesis chapter 1 and 2. Where did life come from? Where did human life come from? Human life came from God.

God gave Adam and Eve life. So Nicodemus, you must be born again. Jesus is saying, go right back to the very beginning. You need God to make this new birth happen in your life.

It's not about your mother. And it's not about you. It's not about what you do. But there's something here that's required that only God can do. Because only God can give life to begin with.

Life just didn't happen. God gave life. God created the creatures of the sea. He created the creatures of the air. He created the land creatures. But then he kind of paused and then he created man and woman in his own image.

Special, unique, infinitely valuable and precious. Genesis 1 and 2, everything was good. Revelation 21 and 22, everything is good. But we're living in between those two bookends, aren't we?

[12:35] We're living in the reality of Genesis chapter 3. Where everything went wrong. But we're also living in the light of John chapter 19, Luke chapter 23, Mark chapter 15, Matthew chapter 27.

Where God put things right again. So I'm asking you this morning. Do you realize that there's a problem? Do you come to Jesus with questions that have no answers?

Do you find yourself here? And you might actually not even know why you're here. There's something that draws you. Something that intrigues you. Something that interests you. Or there's just an openness to say, maybe I just don't get it.

Maybe I haven't figured it out. Because you're in good company this morning. And Nicodemus did not have a clue. And what's more, he should have had a clue. He was a teacher.

He was a responsible leader. And he should have understood. But Jesus said, you're Israel's teacher and you still do not understand. Now the good thing, of course, is.

[13:39] Is that Jesus didn't write Nicodemus off. Jesus didn't send Nicodemus away. Jesus doesn't write you off. Jesus doesn't send you away.

He doesn't say, well, by this point they should get it. By this point he should understand. By this point she should have figured it out. They've heard enough sermons. They've read enough chapters of the Bible.

They've heard enough testimonies. No. Jesus does not do that. So the context is a man looking for answers. Coming to one who has answers.

But then the command. And this reminds us that Jesus does not give advice. Jesus does not make suggestions. Jesus has all power and all authority.

And he commands us to do something. You must be born again. Not you might. Or you may. Or you could. Or you ought to.

[14:40] Or you may find this helpful. You must. It's not an option. It's a requirement. Something has gone wrong. And something must be put right.

And this is absolutely essential for every man, woman, young person here today. You must be born again. It does not matter. Well, it does on one level.

It matters whether your parents are born again. It matters whether your friends are born again. Yes, absolutely. But Jesus is saying you must be born again. You and me.

This is a personal requirement. Yes, it's a collective command. It involves all of us. But it's expressed and it's experienced individually.

So here we are as a congregation. We're a group of people. We're gathered at the same place at the same time. We sing the same psalms. We add our amen to the same prayer.

[15:35] And we're opening the Bible, reading the same chapter. But are you born again? Church attendance is not sufficient to answer that question.

Agreement with the great statements of the faith is not sufficient to answer that question. There's a command that Jesus gives that he's looking for a response. But as the great teacher, Jesus doesn't just give the command and leave it at that.

He explains the command. He explains what he's talking about. Because it's obvious here, first, that you must be born again, that he's speaking of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

There is a work that only the Holy Spirit can do. And this is the work of salvation in the sense that Jesus has died on the cross. Jesus has paid the price for sin.

Jesus has been buried and has been raised from the dead. And the Holy Spirit primarily, all three, of course. We know Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are actively at work in all of the work of God.

[16:38] But primarily, it's the work of the Holy Spirit to take that which pertains to Jesus and applies what pertains to Jesus to me, to you. To take the work of Jesus and apply the work of Jesus to my heart.

To give me a new heart. To give me a new mind. To give me a new life. To give me new desires instead of old. New motivations instead of old. And this is clearly, as Jesus says, the work of the Spirit.

And sometimes you might not understand how the Spirit works. But one thing's for sure. You can see when the Spirit works. Jesus says, the wind blows where it wishes.

I don't need to tell you in the island of Lewis about the wind. You know when it's windy. You know when the gales are blowing. You can hear them. Or you can see the effect. Or you can feel them on your face. The wind blows where it wishes.

You hear its sound. But do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. It's obvious. When there's a change of heart, it's obvious. You're speaking and living and acting in a different way.

[17:47] You're reacting differently. Your desires and your motivations have changed. And it's a profound difference. So it's not just the outside of a Christian.

But there's a profound change to the inside. So this new birth has something to do with the work of the Holy Spirit. It's mysterious. And yet it's obvious.

It's mysterious how the Spirit works. But it's obvious when the Spirit works. And secondly, Jesus explains the new birth in terms of the Gospel. There's some inextricable link between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the new birth.

So Jesus not only uses the wind as an illustration. He uses the serpent and Moses as an illustration. And he's speaking to somebody who knows the Bible. And if you know the Bible reasonably well this afternoon, you'll know what Jesus is getting at.

Verse 14. Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. So must the Son of Man be lifted up. But whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[18:56] There was a problem. The children of Israel were complaining. They were grumbling. They were reflecting on Egypt. And wasn't Egypt great?

The food, terrific. Living conditions, wonderful. All of a sudden, God and Moses have taken us from that wonderful place called Egypt and have brought us into the wilderness to die.

So they were complaining against God. They were complaining against Moses. Now, their recollection was maybe not all that accurate. And sometimes we're like that.

Sometimes we hark back to an age or to a time and we think it was wonderful and idyllic. They were slaves in Egypt. They didn't enjoy the greatest of food.

They didn't enjoy the wonderful living conditions. But they hark back because at least it was familiar. And then God sent fiery serpents and the people had been bit and some had died and others were dying.

[19 : 55] And the people cry out to Moses. They cry out to Moses for help. We're sorry, Moses. And God says, place a serpent, a bronze serpent on a pole. And anyone who looks to that serpent will live.

Of course, the opposite is also true. Anyone who does not look to that serpent will not live. But that's the gospel. A visual illustration. A clear representation of the good news of Jesus Christ. Look and live. And if we didn't get Moses and the serpent, verse 16 gives it crystal clear. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

That whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. The people were dying from snake bites in the Old Testament.

They're in the wilderness. What do they need to do? They need to look at the bronze serpent on the pole and live. You and I are dying. The problem is sin. Our sin. Our guilt.

[20 : 54] Our shame. What do we need to do? We need to look. Who do we need to look to? We need to look to Jesus. We need to look to the one who is lifted up. The one who is lifted up on the cross.

The one who paid the price for sin. The one who satisfied our debt. The one who paid a price to set us free. The one who was willing to be broken so that we could be made whole.

The one who was willing to be despised and rejected so we could be reunited. So the gospel, the work of the Holy Spirit and the gospel of Jesus are inextricably linked to this new birth.

There can be no new birth without the work of the Spirit. There can be no new birth without the gospel of Jesus Christ. So only by responding to the message of Jesus.

Only by responding to the offer of Jesus. Only by responding to the invitation of Jesus. Only by responding to the work of Jesus can we ever enjoy this new birth.

[21 : 55] So Jesus commands us. And Jesus says that this command, if obeyed, this invitation, if accepted, will transform you.

You will not be the same ever again. Just like light and darkness. Just like night and day. Just like past and present. Listen, we're now new people.

So we now live in a different way. So the evidence of the new birth is the work of the Spirit. The evidence of the new birth is the work of Christ, the gospel. But the evidence of the new birth is personal.

We now live. We now speak. We now act. We now think in a profoundly distinct and different way. Look at the words in verse, well for example in verse 17.

If you're a Christian here today, let me just ask you this. If you have the opportunity of sharing your faith. If you have an opportunity of commending Jesus.

[22 : 56] Do you commend him in good terms? Positive terms. Because look at verse 17. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world.

But in order that the world might be saved through him. The message of Jesus is not bad news. The message of Jesus is profoundly good news. And if we are being faithful to that message as his people.

We have to convey the good news. Yes, there's bad news. I know there's bad news. But our presentation cannot stop with the bad news. We must make sure that we make it to the good news.

That Jesus has not come to condemn. Jesus has not come to make us feel worse. Jesus has not come to make a bad situation worse. Jesus has come to make a bad situation good.

He's come to fix what you and I have broken. And when Jesus fixes what you and I have broken. Just look at what happens. That instead of darkness.

[23 : 57] We now love light. Instead of hating that which was good. We now embrace that which is good. Instead of embracing that which was evil. We now shun that which was evil.

There's a transformative power. Whoever does what is true comes into the light. So that it may be clearly seen. That his works have been carried out in God.

John Wesley went to Newcastle. Newcastle upon time for the first time. And this was his impression of that city.

He said we came to Newcastle about six. And after a short refreshment I walked into the town. I was surprised. So much drunkenness. Cursing and swearing.

Even from the mouths of little children. Do I never remember to have seen and heard before. In so small a compass of time. Surely this place is ripe.

[24 : 56] For him who came. Not to call the righteous. But sinners to repentance. You see he had experienced a new birth himself. He knew that he could not fix.

His heart. He knew that only God could fix his heart. And God had fixed his heart. Had changed his heart from the inside out. So what does that say to John Wesley? And what does that say to you and I? That there is hope.

Hope. If we have received this hope. There is hope for others. And if this hope does not depend upon our performance. But quite the opposite. It is completely independent of our performance. It depends upon the performance of Jesus. It depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit. Then that means that we now have hope for other people. So in his diary Wesley goes on to say.

That on the Sunday he said at seven. I walked to Sandgate. The poorest and most contemptible part of the town. And standing at the end of the street. With John Taylor began to sing the hundredth psalm.

[25 : 54] Three or four people came out to see. What was the matter? Who soon increased to four or five hundred. I suppose there might be twelve or fifteen hundred. Before I had done preaching. To whom I applied those solemn words.

He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him. And by his stripes. We are healed.

John Wesley saw the sin. John Wesley heard the curses. John Wesley observed the drunkenness. And he said to himself. I'm in the right place. I'm in the right place. Because I have the right message.

I don't have a message for good people. The gospel is not a message for good people to get better. The message of the gospel. Is a message of life for dead people.

It's a message of restoration for broken people. It's a message of hope for people in despair. So if you're a Christian today. And you encounter sin.

[26 : 51] You say to yourself. God you've placed me in the right position. You've placed me here for a reason. You might be the only Christian in your place of work. You might be the only Christian in your year group at school.

You might feel as if you're surrounded by people. Who think and act and behave differently. Well say to yourself. Well God. You've placed me here for a purpose. You've given me a message.

It's a message that's changed my life. It's good news that's transformed the way I live. And it's a message that I can then pass on to other people. So the command requires a response.

You must be born again. And there's a consequence when you respond to the gospel. Just like those who look to the serpent. They looked and they lived.

When you look to the son. When you believe in the son. For God so loved the world. God does not hate the world. God does not hate you. God looks upon you with love.

[27 : 49] He's created you in his image. He's made you and you are precious. He looks upon you with affection. He looks upon you with concern. He sees your lost situation.

And he's done something about it. Let me just share one further glimpse into the past. There's an American. An evangelist. He had a great passion for preaching the gospel.

But as he preached the gospel. Primarily he preached the gospel in terms of. God is righteous. Men are sinful. And God is standing over you about to judge.

Now all of those are true. Those are truths. But one time an Irishman. Wanted to preach in this man's pulpit. He was very keen. To preach in this American's pulpit.

The American his name was D.L. Moody. He said he was not particularly enamored of this young man. Actually I said Irish. He met him in Ireland. But he was actually English.

[28 : 48] D.L. Moody was a large man. This man Harry Morehouse was quite a small man. But Morehouse persisted. He said when I come to Chicago. I want to preach in your church. And Moody was leaving town. And said to his wife.

Well look. If he comes. Let him take the Monday night meeting. He can't do much damage. That's our least well attended meeting of the week. So lo and behold. Mr. Morehouse comes to Chicago. He takes the Monday night meeting. And he says I've been thinking all day. About what text I should preach from. And he said I can't find a better text than John 3.16. A few days later.

Moody comes back and says to his wife. How'd he get on? Oh he's a much better preacher than you are. Every night he tells the people how much God loves them. What do you mean every night? Well he preached on Monday night. And the response was so favorable. That they wanted to hear him again. And Tuesday night. He preached. And he said the only. The best text I can find tonight. I can't find any better text tonight.

[29 : 45] Than to preach from. Is John 3.16. And he went through the whole Bible. And explained how John 3.16. Was expressed from Genesis to Revelation. He preached for eight consecutive evenings. And Moody reflected upon that preaching.

And he said from that point forward. My preaching changed. I no longer preached primarily. The anger and wrath of God. But I focused my preaching. On the love of God.

And the love of God broke people's hearts. Because they heard the love of a Savior. Who lived and who died. They heard the love of Jesus. Who died not for the good.

Who died not for the pure. Not for the perfect. But he died for the ungodly. He died for the weak.

And he died for people. Not like them. Whoever they are. But he died for people like us.

And that preaching broke people's hearts. And this ministry of D.L. Moody. During his lifetime. He preached to 100 million people. He preached in England.

[30 : 43] He preached in Scotland. He preached in Wales. He preached throughout the United States. And the same theme constantly came through. The love of Jesus Christ. For lost people.

That's all I can offer you today. That God so loved the world. That he gave his only begotten son. That whoever believes in him. Shall not perish. But have everlasting life.

That's his promise. That's his guarantee. That's the gospel. You must be born again. Something has gone terribly wrong in life. Something has gone terribly wrong in your life.

But I tell you. There's a solution to that profound problem. And that solution is found in a person. And his name is Jesus Christ. And I present him to you.

And when you trust in him. I guarantee you. Your life will never be the same again. Because the work of the gospel. The work of the spirit. And the reality of the new birth. Means that he works in us.

[31 : 39] To work through us. And the change begins. On the inside. Let us pray.