

How Can I Be Born Again?

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] It would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at page 1065 there as we look at that together. There's an outline inside the notice sheets if you'd find that helpful.

It's been a week when there's been a lot of flyering of, especially international students been giving out flyers. We had a special meal here on Thursday. I was saying last Sunday night, it reminded me of a friend of mine who, when the film *The Passion of the Christ* came out, I've got a friend who's a minister, and in his church they had all these flyers that kind of, for people who'd seen the film *The Passion of the Christ*, that would help explain why Jesus had died.

So there were these little tracts to give out. So they decided to arrange themselves as a team and go to the local cinema and give out these tracts as people left the film. They could hand them out to offer people to that.

So they got together and they prayed. And one of the guys kind of disappeared off around the corner in this multiplex cinema and came back a few minutes later and said, that was great. I've given them all out, all the flyers.

And they said, that's a bit odd. The film hasn't finished yet. And it turned out that he'd been at the wrong door. And for 20 minutes he'd been standing outside this door handing out flyers to people who'd just watched *Scooby-Doo 2*, saying this will help you understand the deeper meaning behind what you've just seen.

[1 : 23] So I don't know what they'll have made of that. Anyway, let's pray. Let's pray and ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Father in heaven, we thank you so much for the gift of your word to us.

And we ask that you will open your word to our hearts and open our hearts to your word. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, we're thinking this morning about getting through the door of God's kingdom. And it's a good theme to be covering this weekend in Glasgow because it's our Glasgow Open Doors Festival. I didn't plan that, but it's perfect. Yesterday, lots of us were going around the city, being allowed into buildings that we're not normally allowed into.

Buildings that are normally exclusive. But today and yesterday, the doors were open. And yet this morning, we're thinking about that most crucial of questions for any religion. How do you get through the door into what's being promised here?

How do you get into heaven? Martin Luther said that justification, how you get right with God, is the summary of Christian doctrine and the article by which the church stands or falls.

[2 : 30] And the reformer John Calvin said that justification was the main hinge on which religion turns. And they were both basically talking about this issue. How do you get to a point where God approves of you, you're justified, you're right with him, so that you can be with him in this new kingdom he's promising?

It's the most important thing to make sure that you get right in your life. Now, in chapters 1 and 2 of John's Gospel, as we've looked at it, the focus has all been so far on who Jesus is.

But here in chapter 3, we move on to a new question. Who has he come for? In other words, how do you get to be part of this new kingdom that he has come to build?

Jesus is in Jerusalem. He's performing miraculous signs. And we heard at the beginning of our reading that many people saw the signs and believed in Jesus. But then this strange verse, 24, He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

Literally, he knew what was in a man. The word *entrust* is the same word as *believe*. So it's literally saying, they were believing in him, he didn't believe in them. And now John zones into one example of that.

[3 : 52] From many men, many people, to one man. You see that in chapter 3, verse 1. Now there was a Pharisee, a man, named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Jesus knows what's in a man. Here's a man. And you'll have noticed that he came to Jesus at night, in verse 2. Now, of course, there might have been various reasons for that. Jesus was hard to get to in the daytime.

And maybe he needs to be secretive about it, because the Jewish leaders wouldn't approve. But in John's gospel, night is very significant. When Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus and leaves the upper room, John says, it was night.

So with Nicodemus, this makes us cautious about him. I don't know if you remember this, but years ago, the leader of the Conservative Party was Michael Howard. And the politician Ann Widdicombe said about him, there's something of the night about him.

Not a very flattering thing to say. And it's a little bit like that here. John is deliberately telling us there is something about Nicodemus. He's in the dark still. And the first thing we find out as we see Jesus meet him is a fresh start.

[5 : 05] We need a fresh start. Nicodemus comes to Jesus. And I think if we'd heard him, we'd have thought it sounds very positive. If I heard someone say of Jesus what he says in verse 2, 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.

I'd probably think he was a Christian if he said that. Wouldn't you think that? And we might expect Jesus to say, thank you. But in fact, this is a great example of that chapter 2, verse 23 faith. People who say they believe in him, he doesn't believe in them. And so Jesus hits it with a straight bat in verse 3. Jesus replied, Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

It's a very striking phrase, isn't it? Celtic got hammered this week by Paris Saint-Germain. And they might need some new players. Now just imagine if I saw that in the news and thought, well Celtic might need a bit of help from me.

And I saw where Celtic train and I went along to the training ground and I asked if I can sort of join in with the training session one day, take my boots with me. And, you know, I try some keepy-ups in the warm-up and that sort of thing.

[6 : 25] And then after a while I go and see Brendan Rodgers on the sideline and say, so Brendan, what do you think? And Brendan looks at me and says, Martin, if you want to play football to any decent level, you'd have to be born completely all over again.

It's that kind of idea. It couldn't be more critical. Okay? We'd have to go right back to the moment we were born, change our whole nature, change our nurture.

Everything would have to change. And with Jesus, this is about getting into heaven. In verse 3, he says it's about seeing the kingdom of God. In verse 5, entering the kingdom of God.

He looks at Nicodemus and says, if that's what you want, Nicodemus, you're going to have to be born all over again. And the same is true for everyone. Because the shocking thing for us is that it's Nicodemus, Jesus says this too, because he is the best we've got.

The Pharisees were devoutly religious. They were the Bible people. Nicodemus is also a member of the Jewish ruling council. So he's like a combination of being the moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and a senior judge in the court of session.

[7 : 40] In verse 10, Jesus says he's Israel's teacher. So he's like a combination of an archbishop and a fellow of the Royal Society. And Jesus says, you need to be born again.

So it's not like me playing football in front of Brendan Rodgers, because I'm rubbish. It's like Cristiano Ronaldo turning up and being told, you've got to start all over again.

Nicodemus is Mr. Good. And he's probably been telling people for years about all the good things they have to do to get right with God and stay right with God.

And so he's so thrown by what Jesus says, he takes it literally. Have a look at verse 4. How can someone be born when they are old?

Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. That is actually really gross, isn't it? Really gruesome. But Jesus clarifies, he says, very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit.

[8 : 47] Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. In other words, your mum can only give you physical life. You need the spirit of God to give you spiritual life.

It's as if Jesus is standing there and then by the gateway to heaven and he's put up this big no entry sign and it clarifies underneath, no entry for the religious.

No entry even if you're devoutly religious like Nicodemus. No entry even if you say Jesus does miracles. No entry for Nicodemus and he is the best we've got.

It's extraordinary. Just think all over Scotland today people think that Jesus calls you into traditional morality, moralistic life in religion. And here is Jesus challenging exactly that with the best example we could give him.

And it challenges lots of ideas for us about what really makes you a Christian. You have to be born again. You can read Christian books without being a Christian.

[9 : 55] You can go to church every week. You can even enjoy going to church without being a Christian. You can be baptized without being a Christian. You can be a church musician or worship leader without being a Christian.

You can be ordained as a pastor without being a Christian. You can lead junior church or kid zone without being a Christian. You can have said a prayer of commitment when you were a teenager without being a Christian.

You can stand up for Christianity in the workplace without being a Christian. you can become a UN ambassador or a charity worker or win the Nobel Prize for Peace without being a Christian.

You can even experience miracles without being a Christian for becoming a Christian is none of those things. And if you're anything like me, we just have our categories of people that we don't apply that to.

We just don't live as though we really believe that nobody can enter the kingdom of God unless they're born again. I don't know who that would be for you that you don't really deep down believe that for, that they're perishing without Christ.

[11 : 02] Maybe the nurse who works all the hours because she's just like an angel or the GP or devout Muslims who go on their pilgrimages to Mecca or the family member who's a churchgoer but you're never really quite sure what they believe or the boss at work who's a church elder but again, you just don't really know.

So this brings us to the heart of what a real Christian is. It's meant to shock us that Jesus says that and our second point is a complete change. We need a complete change.

The key to understanding why we have to be born again is in that little phrase Jesus uses in verse 5. He says, It's from the prophet Ezekiel.

God promises through Ezekiel, we read it together at the beginning of our service, he's going to restore his people and to do that he needs to do two distinct things. He needs to forgive them and that's symbolized by the washing with water and the gift of his spirit is needed.

His presence with them changing their hearts and enabling them to keep trusting him. And again and again through the history of God's people, they have failed to do that even just to keep trusting him.

[12 : 16] So he says this, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit in you.

God promises this new start because he is absolutely committed to saving a people. He's promised he's going to do that. But all of us, without exception, we need forgiveness from God and new hearts that trust him.

The Russian poet Alexander Solzhenitsyn said this, he said, if only there were evil people insidiously committing evil deeds and it was only necessary to separate them off from the rest of us and destroy them.

But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. So our only hope is this new birth being offered by the spirit of God that would give us forgiveness and a fresh start.

And we see in what Jesus says to Nicodemus, it's a complete change. So we see that the new birth can start right away. In verse 3, Jesus says no one can see the kingdom of God unless they're born again.

[13 : 29] In verse 5, no one can enter the kingdom of God. But he's promising there that if you are born again, you'll see the kingdom, you'll enter the kingdom right away. It will happen for you straight away when you're born again.

And for Nicodemus, that was just unthinkable. As a Pharisee, as a first century Jew, he would have thought about entering the kingdom of God at the end of time, at the end of the world.

God will come, he'll judge the world, and there'll be this new kingdom. And that's when you would enter. But Jesus says, when you're born again, you enter the kingdom of God straight away because you get new life by the spirit and it starts the day you're born again and it continues forever.

And for those of us who are born again, there is that kind of newness, isn't there, to the Christian life that things are different when you're a Christian. And if you can remember a time when you weren't a Christian, you know, people look back and say it's almost as though I was only seeing the world in black and white.

And now I see it in full color in a way I'd never seen it before. It changes how you feel about the Bible. And if you're like me, you might be somebody who, when I became a Christian, I was actually quite familiar with stories from the Bible, from school and from occasional church going.

[14:43] And they'd never really moved me at all. And then suddenly, because I was born again, you're looking again at stories about Jesus and you are comforted and moved and inspired in ways that you'd never been before.

And you already knew the stories, but the way that you, as you see Jesus with the man on his mat in John chapter 5 and he can't get in the water and it's pathetic and he's sitting there and he wants to get in the water because he thinks he'll be healed but he can't move.

And Jesus just says, get up. And he walks. And suddenly you're gripped and comforted by these stories in a way you'd never been before. There's another mark of that complete change and it's that we listen to Jesus.

If you have a look at verse 11, Jesus says, we. I was a bit confused by that when I read it because it's just him. But what he's doing is he's contrasting with what Nicodemus said in verse 2.

You see, in verse 2, Nicodemus is kind of representing human religion and he says, we know this about you, Jesus. From our authority, our scholarship, our traditions, our expertise, we have decided you are a teacher from God, young man.

[15:57] As though Jesus will be really pleased. But Jesus is the one with authority. So in verse 11, he says, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen.

But still you people do not accept our testimony. The Jewish council can think what they like about how you get right with God. Any of us can think what we like, but Jesus knows.

He's the one who knows. And it's tempting, isn't it, for us to think there are other ways to get right with God. I'd like to think there's another way. People like to think, well, I like to think everyone will get to heaven.

Or maybe we think, well, I'd like to think everyone will get to heaven except the people I think are not good enough. And let's face it, you could find a church that would affirm you in that.

It wouldn't be hard in Glasgow to find churches and ministers who would tell you people have got nothing to worry about when it comes to getting into heaven. There are lots of ways to get into heaven. But if any of us thinks there's another way to get into heaven, we're rejecting the testimony of Jesus.

[17:01] And he came from there. In verse 13, he says, no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man. He's the only one who knows the truth.

It's obvious, isn't it? And a key mark of being born again is that we accept that Jesus knows. He's got authority instead of our own feelings or our own ideas about God.

So it's a new life. It starts the day you're born again. It goes on forever. It's lived under the authority of the word of Christ. And it helps you see the world differently so that you're moved afresh by Jesus and his salvation.

It's a complete change. And so time spent with Nicodemus like this is time for self-examination. We should be asking ourselves, each of us, have I been born again?

Have I really let go of any confidence in my own performance and goodness to please God? Do I recognize in myself the new spiritual life that Jesus offers here?

[18:08] And if you're not sure about that, then talk to someone about it. Ask somebody, a friend, a Christian friend or a member of the ministry staff team here or the people on prayer ministry.

But just ask a Christian for help in discerning whether you've been born again. And the reason it matters so much is because we need to be rescued. Jesus goes on to tell us that.

Our third point, it's an urgent rescue. Just have a look with me at verse 14. Jesus says, Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

Jesus is referring us back to an incident recorded for us in Numbers chapter 21. God's people were roaming the desert, heading towards the promised land and they sinned.

They grumbled against God. They complained. They rebelled against God. And because of that sin, God sent a judgment among his people. Venomous snakes that bit the people and lots of them died.

[19 : 17] And then Moses prayed to the Lord to take this judgment away and the Lord said to Moses, Make a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole and anyone who gets bitten by a snake and looks at the snake on the pole will be healed and they will live.

So if you were bitten by a snake, you could be rescued. And it's a picture because now today we stand under the judgment of God because of the evil in our hearts.

The dividing line between good and evil cuts through every one of our hearts. and God is providing a rescue for anyone from that judgment. When the snakes were killing the people, it was a snake that was lifted up to provide the rescue.

And for us, it is sin that is killing us, not snakes. And so God's rescue is to lift up Jesus on a cross and treat him as a sinful man to bear our guilt so that we can be rescued.

Behold a man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders. And the plague of snakes, back in Numbers, it emphasizes for us the degree of urgency about this.

[20 : 34] If you've been bitten by a venomous snake, you don't wait around, do you? The clock is ticking. There was a missionary in the 19th century, William Haslam, and he had a print on his mantelpiece of a medieval painting of that scene in Numbers 21.

And the serpent being held upon a pole and on one side he could see someone in the painting who was looking at the serpent so they'd been healed, they'd been rescued. And then there were other people in the painting who were perishing, four people.

One of them was looking at Moses instead of looking at the snake. Just as people today might look to a human leader, a priest or a religious leader or even their parents, but they've never actually looked to Jesus at the cross and put their trust in him.

Another of the people in the picture was on their back as though they were safe and didn't realize there was any danger. Just as there are so many people around us today who don't realize that we're under the judgment of God and the day of reckoning is coming.

A third person in the picture was someone helping others who'd been bitten by snakes and today you can see the suffering all around us of a world that is under God's judgment because of sin.

[21 : 50] We see the effects of sin everywhere and you can spend your whole life and everything you've got helping others who are in need but without ever dealing with the coming judgment by looking to the cross and pointing them to the cross.

And the fourth person was doing battle themselves against the snakes instead of turning to God's solution. Just like I guess many people are trying so hard to deal with their sin problem on their own to be good people to justify themselves to be right with God all on their own effort instead of turning to God's solution that he's offering.

And all the while there was this urgency about the picture. If you're here today and you've never accepted this rescue I'd want to urge you to put your trust in Jesus and his offer of forgiveness. That's the heart of what it means to be born again. That by a work of God's spirit in us we believe we trust that Jesus has died for us and we accept that gift.

And lastly here Jesus compels us to do that by telling us why this rescue is on offer. Our fourth point is a striking reason and it's God's love. 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.

[23 : 19] It's good to remember that because lots of us don't like the idea of being rescued. I don't know whether you've ever been rescued from being in danger. Someone had to come and rescue you. Needing to be rescued can be very humiliating.

I remember when I was a child I was probably about eight or nine years old and there was a wave machine at this swimming pool we went to and fancying myself as a stronger swimmer than I probably was I swam into the deep end where this wave machine was and I realised as the waves were bigger than I thought that I couldn't keep my head above water properly.

So I got to this point where I was sort of kicking treading water coming back up gasping for breath and then going under and I couldn't get back up again and I was really frightened and I remember sort of coming back up one more time breathing in and thinking I'm going to sink and there was a girl probably only about 12 or 13 years old holding on to the side of the pool and she'd been watching me and she must have seen the sort of the fear the panic in my eyes and she just grabbed me by the neck and pulled me to the side and she rescued me and I could grab the side and I was fine but I never told anybody it had happened didn't tell my parents that I got into trouble it was humiliating turns out I couldn't swim we don't want to be rescued but this rescue is worth humbling yourself to receive because it's a rescue not moved by pity by some bystander who thinks what a mess you've made but rather by love it's done not to humiliate you but to transform you to leave you rejoicing and marvelling for all eternity at the love

God has demonstrated for you in history love that was willing to do everything within its power to bring you back so that accepting it means that you're engulfed by that love enfolded by that love and you might not feel you're a very lovable person but there's a radically inclusive word in verse 16 isn't there whoever 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 and as we read on in John's gospel Nicodemus shows us the way he doesn't get it here in chapter 3 but we meet him twice more in John's gospel and when Jesus is crucified he comes with Joseph of Arimathea and he asks to have the body and we hear that they wrapped the body and they prepared it for burial with spices in the way that people would have done in the first century he'd become a disciple and when you read that there are two remarkable things about what

Nicodemus did the first is that to ask for Jesus' body at that moment was incredibly brave the other disciples had deserted Jesus and lost hope and he had the courage at that moment the moment where there was apparent defeat to say I'm with him I want the body the second thing about what Nicodemus did was that it was extremely humble to prepare a body for burial at that time was something that the slaves did you didn't do it if you were important you certainly didn't do it if you were a man what's happened Nicodemus was born again he knew he needed to be rescued he knows God's love for him and it transformed him it made him more brave and it made him more humble and the same is true for us it makes you more brave and at the same time more humble than you were before willing to stand with your saviour and say I'm with him and willing to be a slave for him let's pray together

[27 : 23] Lord Jesus we praise you that you are God's lamb the one who takes away the sin of the world we thank you for confronting us with the truth that we might know the truth and respond rightly we pray that you will help us to examine ourselves that as you look at us you would not find those in whom you do not believe those you don't entrust yourself to rather Lord Jesus we accept your rescue we look to the cross we thank you that at the cross we see your father's love for us and that as we believe in you we have hope of eternal life we pray that you will enable us to share that news with those around us who are perishing for the glory of your name

Amen