
What did Jesus mean when he said, "You must be born again"?

This is probably the most important question you could ask about the Gospel. If you have missed what Jesus is saying here, then you have missed the wonderful gift of salvation that he is offering to every person on earth today.

Remember the context. Nicodemus, one of the most senior Jewish dignitaries of his day, came to Jesus by night and asked what he must do to be saved. Jesus explained that he must be born again. Nicodemus – like most people today – had great difficulty understanding what he meant by this. How was it possible to be born again?

"Marvel not that I said unto you
'You must be born again.'"
Jesus (John 3:7)

Consider birth for a moment. Why did the Lord use this particular expression? Well, to start with, birth takes place at a given point in time. It does not extend over a long period. One day you are in a given state, and the next day you are in a completely different state. What is more, it affects your whole being. There is no part of you that is untouched by a new birth. And the outcome is evident to all who know you, just like a natural birth.

God's point of view

Anyone who has been born again knows without the slightest doubt that it has happened to him or her, and can often give, not just the year or the month, but even the day. It marks a complete transformation in how he sees himself and how he relates to God.

You have probably heard that the word 'gospel' means *good news*. But did you know that, before we can hear the good news, we must first accept the bad news? And the bad news is that, in God's eyes, we are completely without redeeming qualities of any kind. This is true even of the most compassionate, most humble and most unselfish person we have ever met. The minimum spiritual standard for entry into heaven is total perfection, something which even the best of us can never possibly attain by our own efforts.

This may seem surprising to us in our human state, but ask yourself: Would you invite into your home a person who carried a fatal infectious disease? The person may be among the most selfless and loving you have ever met, but would you risk the welfare of your family in this way? As children of Adam we carry a similar spiritual disease – call it sin if you like – and unless we are cleansed of its devastating effects, there is absolutely no way we can enter the heavenly domain of the one, true living God.

The only way He can bring us back into His fold is through the suffering, death and resurrection of His son. Jesus took upon himself the consequences of our fallen state. In doing so he met the staggering standard of perfection that our loving Father requires of all who would enter His heavenly home. It is then up to us whether or not we accept the incredible gift that he is offering.

Salvation comes *only* through grace by faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves, absolutely nothing. Our good works, our kind deeds, our unselfish service to those in need – all have no bearing whatever on our salvation. The only way we can enter heaven is by acquiring, through adoption, the same righteousness as Jesus.

Becoming a child of God

Through his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus paid in full, on our behalf, the penalty of our fallen state. In doing so he earned the right to make each of us an adopted son and heir of his Father. To accept this gift we must set aside our pride and acknowledge our true spiritual condition; we must repent of our old, sin-filled nature and ask the LORD, in Jesus' name, to create a completely new nature within us.

Repentance is more than just a change of heart. It is more than just a solemn resolution to become a better person or a more religious individual. It is far more than this. In reality, it's the painful realisation of our complete alienation from God and of our need to become reconciled to Him by the only means possible, through the righteousness and shed blood of His only begotten Son.

When this happens, our heavenly Father sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. This alone brings the new birth. And from this we acquire a new nature, one which hungers after spiritual things. The old one still remains of course, but it is now subordinate to our new nature, which longs to please God.

Signs of the new birth

What are the signs that the new birth has taken place? Well, firstly, a born-again Christian will develop a personal relationship with God, living daily in the assurance that He hears our prayers and is mindful of our needs. This connection, which never shuts down, is precisely what God has always wanted for each of His children – "Am I a God at hand, said the Lord, and not a God afar off?" (Jeremiah 23:23).

From this relationship grows a deep understanding of God's grace and a great desire to know Him better by reading and hearing his Holy Word. Through the power of the Holy Spirit now living within us, we are able to discern and appreciate the life-changing truths that God has placed in the Bible for our benefit. As the Apostle Paul said, "But the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14)

Through his personal relationship with the living God, the born-again Christian acquires new spiritual qualities such as kindness, patience and love for his fellow man. Where once he may have acted out of duty or in conformity to a moral standard, he now wants to please the LORD and serve Him with joy during the years that remain to him here on earth.

These are just some of the signs. The crucial difference is that the individual, even someone who had 'always' professed to be a Christian, has now undergone a fundamental change. He or she is no longer a child of Adam but a child of God.

The Next Step

A great deal more could be said about being born again. A leaflet like this can only give a general sense of what it means.

If you want to learn more, why not visit a true Christian church and ask the pastor and church members the hardest questions you possibly can? Don't be afraid to reveal your doubts, your scepticism and – if it is the case – your disappointment with religion. You may be surprised to find that most born-again Christians have little time for religion. They had once been Christian in name only but had not been born again. What they had always wanted – and now have – is a genuine personal relationship with the one, true living God. If this is what you want, then why not take the next step?

"But let him who glories glory in this, that he understand and know me, that I am the LORD who exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, said the LORD." - **Jeremiah 9:24**

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