

# Born Again, Really? (John 3:1-10)

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[ 0 : 00 ] Right. So today we'll be reading, taking a little bit of a break from our series in Corinthians, and we'll be reading through John chapter 3, verse 1.

So give everyone a minute, a moment to turn to the book of John, and we'll read through it together. John chapter 3, verse 1. I'll be reading, actually I'll just read up on the screen. We'll follow along.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you were doing if God were not with him.

In reply, Jesus declared, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. 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. Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

[ 1 : 21 ] 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.

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. How can this be? Nicodemus asked.

You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things? So we'd like to invite Barry up to speak to us today.

So, yeah, time over to you, Barry. Thank you. Good afternoon, PCVZ. How is everyone doing?

Good. All right. Just lovely to be back here. In case you don't know me, my name is Barry. I usually go to the morning service, you know, on the Cantonese side.

[ 2 : 27 ] My wife, Jenny, usually go with me, and we've got two teenage children, and we have another one expecting, so thank you.

So, well, I'm still catching up to Pastor William there. That seems like an impossible task for me, but yeah. All right. So the topic I'm going to share with you guys today is born again.

Really? Really? Do you like being called a born-again Christian, first of all? How many of you like being born, I mean being called a born-again Christian?

Like you're super proud of this? Yes. Hallelujah. Yay. Amen. Amen. Now, but being born, I mean being called born-again Christians nowadays can carry some unwanted baggage.

Our pastor wrote these words. For some, it means you are a Bible-thumping fundamentalist or a political conservative.

[ 3 : 36 ] For others, it means you were converted at a Billy Graham crusade. I know it's too old for many of you here. And countless stereotypes are created in endless confusion.

Would you agree? So what would be the first word that comes to your mind when we say born-again Christian? Anyone?

Anyone? Good people? Good people? Nice people? Pardon?

Bible basher. Hopefully we are not one of them. So, but why do we need the label born-again Christians in the first place?

If my understanding is correct, people use this label to differentiate themselves from those who are born Christians. That means those who are just born into the family, you know, without really accepting the faith and the transformation that comes along.

[ 4 : 47 ] Well, let's zoom out and look at the bigger religious landscape. According to the 2018 census, for the first time, the number of non-religious New Zealanders who make up just under half of the population outnumbers Christians.

Most major denominations have shrunk over the past 20 years. But the good news is that born-again Christians in our country aren't doing too bad.

We now have about 120,000 Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and born-again Christians. Despite the overall decline in religion, it is quite interesting to see smaller religions have grown at a steady pace.

Believe it or not, 20,000 people professed allegiance to the Church of Jedi. Psst, psst, psst. And 4,000 people claim to worship the flying spaghetti monster. Unbelievable. Evangelicals and born-again Christians are often associated together, like in the census.

[ 6 : 05 ] And do you know what people think about Evangelicals and born-again Christians? A writer in foreign affairs magazine wrote this.

They are essentially modern and informal. They emphasize a personal relationship with God and hold an indifferent attitude towards ancient ecclesiastical and theological traditions.

Would you agree? Is that a fair comment? Now, these are pretty benign comments from people outside of faith. However, people inside Christian faith can be much more critical of born-again Christians and Evangelicals.

And rightly so. Theologian and famous author, I think we've seen his videos in the NCC series, right?

Who unfortunately passed away pretty, I think, a few months ago or a couple. Evangelical, so he wrote, Evangelical used to denote people who claimed the high moor ground.

[ 7 : 19 ] And now, in popular usage, the world is nearly synonymous with hypocrite. So sad. Now, that's a truly damning comment from one of our own.

If born-again Christians are often lumped together with Evangelicals, it would be almost inevitable that people outside of faith might think, well, these people are just a bunch of hypocrites.

It isn't helped by the wide range of scandals exposed in the news, even here in Aotearoa. So it is a baggage to be called born-again Christians these days, unfortunately.

But today, we'll dig into the origin of this born-again label and hope that it can help us to get rid of this unhelpful baggage.

So since we have already read the scripture, we're going to not read it again. So we'll focus on verse 1 all the way to verse 10.

[ 8 : 38 ] Okay, let's continue. Can you guess who this person is? So this screen capture is from the movie The Gospel of John.

Okay. So, yes, yes, I see some nodding. So who is this guy? Nicodemus. Nicodemus. Right. So if you ever watched the movie The Gospel of John, you will notice that there are people wearing black cloak, like being a little bit sinister and dark, always holding that grumpy face towards Jesus.

Those are the gang. Okay. So they play the antagonist role in the movie. Right. But there is one very interesting guy among that gang of black cloak people.

So that's Nicodemus. So he actually looked at Jesus with a sense of admiration. So now we know this person is a high-rank member of the Jewish ruling council.

In today's term, he's the big brass calling the shots. People respect him. Whatever he says carries weight. There's something interesting in verse 2, if you look at the Bible.

[ 10 : 07 ] When did he come to find Jesus? At night. Why? Probably he wants to avoid his colleagues seeing him associated with this young, fiery, prophetic figure called Jesus who seeks to threaten their status quo.

Despite his powerful status, Nicodemus is a humble man. He calls Jesus rabbi while he is a rabbi himself.

Nicodemus fully acknowledges Jesus being someone very special. He saw some signs Jesus performed and knew they are from God. However, as readers of the gospel, we don't really know what exactly Jesus has done besides cleansing the temple in chapter 2.

But we can be sure that there are more than one signs because of the plural form of the word.

Maybe Jesus healed someone in the town miraculously. Maybe the fact that Jesus came out unscathed from the temple, with temple guard around itself is a sign.

And Jesus knows why Nicodemus wants to see him. Nicodemus wants to know deeper about the truth. All we can say, he wants to get closer to the truth with a capital T.

[ 11 : 35 ] So Jesus replied to him, Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

Now here is our verse in question. Born again is the first step to get closer to the kingdom of God. But why do we want the kingdom of God in the first place?

Because we know that this world or the kingdom of this world is far from perfect. It's full of suffering and injustice.

There must be something far superior out there. A world of peace and harmony. We live in a fallen world far away from God's original design and purpose.

And God certainly won't leave us in this sorry state of affairs forever. He must have a way out for us. And being born again is the first step to get there.

[ 12 : 44 ] Nicodemus too wants to get out of this sorry state of affairs. His own nation is now controlled by the bloodthirsty, all-conquering Romans.

Corruption is rampant. Just about 30 years ago, the puppet ruler Herod insanely ordered the killing of all boys under two years old.

Surely the kingdom of God doesn't look like this. Nicodemus was like, Born again? Really? So he protested.

How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. The first thing that came to his mind was physical birth.

His thinking about physically being born again, which is impossible, right? The way he answered seemed to challenge Jesus and urge him to clarify what he means.

[ 13 : 49 ] So Jesus answered him, Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

That probably makes the situation worse, isn't it? What does Jesus really mean here? Now let's pause for a moment. What does it mean by born again to our understanding?

Some people reduce the born again label to a ticket of salvation. We sometimes get asked, Are you a born again Christian? If you are welcome to the club, your eternal life is secured.

You have to take it to the heaven after you die. But being born again shouldn't be viewed as a ticket. It flattens the meaning to a utilitarian meaning.

Born again seems also to suggest a person must have a messed up life before accepting Jesus. There is a hidden expectation on the conversion experience.

[ 14 : 58 ] It's like the experience of spiritual rebirth and transformation must be dramatic enough in order to be called born again. Now that's another hidden baggage.

Do you see? Especially for the people growing up in church. How many of you have been growing up in church? Maybe since you were in the womb of your mother. How many?

Yeah, I hope that doesn't become a baggage for you. Look, this is entirely unnecessary. Perhaps a more proper way to understand born again is to see it as a process of regeneration.

Our lives must be renewed or regenerated in order to enter the kingdom of God. When do we often feel renewed or refreshed?

Maybe after taking a shower, after a good night of sleep, born again is kind of like that. You don't have to dip yourself in the mud, then take a shower in order to get refreshed.

[ 16 : 11 ] Now let's talk about the kingdom of God for a moment. Because for many people, that's the whole point of coming to faith. What kind of goodies are there for the kingdom of God to offer?

Love, yes. What else? Pardon? God, yes. That's the ultimate. Pardon? Restoration, yes. Amen.

Well, you guys answered pretty theologically.

What about like the real goodies? Eternal life, yes. Right. Maybe for little children. Hi, little children. Back there.

Hello. Maybe they want unlimited candies and chocolates, right? I'm pretty sure there will be unlimited candies and chocolates in heaven. Right?

For teenagers, they probably want unlimited screen time and video games and sleep until afternoon. For adults, what do we want? We probably want a world where we are always on holiday, sunbathing on the beach, you know, fishing, hunting.

[ 17 : 23 ] We want a world without mortgage, inflation, and with everything comes to us free of charge. Right? That's what we want.

Yeah. For older folks. Okay, like me. We want a body that doesn't complain, you know, and deteriorate. A body that's always fit and strong so that we can just go out there and enjoy the nature, enjoy life.

Right? Sounds like heaven, doesn't it? Yeah. Yeah. So, in essence, we want to see beyond this suffering world and hope for a better world.

But where is the kingdom of God? Is it in the future? Or is it at the present? Is it a physical one? Or a metaphorical one?

Is heaven the only place that counts as the kingdom of God? Let's have a look at these next scriptures. Jesus says in Luke 17, 21, The kingdom of God is in your midst.

[ 18 : 30 ] The kingdom is now. It's already happening. Right? But on the other hand, Jesus also said, For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruits of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.

The kingdom is clearly in the future. Do you see? What if the kingdom of God is both future and present? You may have heard of the term already, but not yet.

We can say the kingdom of God is already unfolding, but it's not yet in its fruition. We are in the middle of the process.

How exciting can it be? You see the danger of treating God's kingdom as something distant and in the future. It implies that it doesn't matter what we do here on earth.

It's all futile and useless. Thankfully, Christianity, as we know, is not like that. Christianity is about here and now.

[ 19 : 35 ] But it's also about future and hope. We're not holding on to a ticket to wait for the train to heaven.

We are on the train. Do you see that? Now, back to the born again question. How shall we enter the kingdom of God?

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Verse 5. Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Here, seeing the kingdom of God means not only seeing it from afar, but actually experiencing the kingdom.

To experience God's kingdom, then you have to do what? Enter it, right? Seeing and entering here mean the same thing. So, Jesus redefined born again as born of water and the Spirit.

[ 20 : 43 ] Do you see the parallel there? We don't often read scripture like that, do we? Now, remember I told you earlier that we will try to get rid of the unnecessary baggage of being a born again Christian, right?

Listen to this. First, unbeknownst to many people, the adverb again in the original Greek happens to also mean from above. Now, the phrase becomes a double entendre, or we can say one word carrying two meanings.

So, we thought we were born again Christians, but now we've got a new meaning to think about. We are born from above Christians. What if Jesus has been all along talking about born from above, but Nicodemus took it differently, and he only thought about physical birth?

Now, if you look at the NRSV translation, and we'll see whether it opens up some new meanings for us.

Look at verse 3. Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Verse 7. Don't be astonished that I said to you, you must be born from above.

[ 22 : 01 ] The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Now, from this reading, we don't need to be concerned about whether we are born again Christians or not. The more important thing is that we are born from above.

Our origin is from above, from the heavenly realm and beyond this earth. Our origin comes from the Holy Spirit, who is God Himself.

So, it is not a must that we have to label ourselves as born again in order to prove that we are real deal and authentic Christians. We are free from the label and baggage as long as we know we are from above.

You see, part of our being, because our origin isn't here. We long to connect to a world that is invisible, yet the most beautiful, sublime, awe-inspiring.

[ 23 : 17 ] The world that is perfect and just, replete with goodness and brightness. It is the ideal but real world Jesus wants to invite us to enter.

Even the best thing we experience in this world is just a shadow of what we will experience in heaven. But we don't have to wait until this world to be over to start tasting it.

Like watching movie trailers, you don't experience the entire movie, right? But you know what kind of excitement you are promised when you actually see the movie.

So, the kingdom of God we are experiencing at the present age is like a foretaste, like a movie trailer, of what's to come in the eternal age. Let's talk about water and the spirit.

Notice how Jesus elaborates being born from above actually means born of water and the spirit.

Now, this verse has got to be the favorite verse of us Baptists, right?

[ 24 : 26 ] You must go under the water in order to gain the entry to God's kingdom. It says it right here. Baptism makes you born of water.

So, you can be saved. But look, the spirit part has got to be the favorite verse of Pentecostals.

Look, you must speak in tongue in order to demonstrate you are born of the Holy Spirit.

If you don't speak in tongue, then you can't be sure you're saved. So, here is the new logic. If you are baptized in a Baptist church, then move on to a Pentecostal church, then you fulfill the two requirements and you finally be saved.

No, of course, we can't read scripture like that. Because in the original Greek, the preposition act, which connects water and the spirit, they need to be viewed together and not separate.

So, we have to zoom out to see the context. Jesus goes from born above in verse 3 to born of the water and the spirit in verse 5.

[ 25 : 43 ] And to be born of the spirit later on, without water this time, in verse 8. All pointing to a single idea. It's all about a new kind of birth.

That's it. Where does water come from? From the ocean, you may say? From above.

See? Just like rain. Where does the spirit come from? From above as well. Do you see the hidden connection there? So, next time when you see rain outside, hopefully, it will remind us being born from above.

Involves water, giving us life abundant. When we feel the wind outside, it will remind us of the spirit of God that is invisible yet powerful.

That's what this passage is all about. So, I leave all of us with a three-point conclusion. First, think beyond born again.

[ 26 : 48 ] We are born from above. By focusing too much on the dramatic experience of being born again, we would lose sight on the more important truth, which is that our origin comes from God above.

Second, think beyond water in baptism. We are born of God's spirit. Being born of God's spirit doesn't come with fireworks.

Sometimes it happens in quiet places. Only you know, and God knows. There is a real story about a woman called Hannah.

She used to love spending her time hanging out with church people, but she found the gospel message was just too plain weird. So, the church people did some Bible studies with her over the summer, and she kept looking at them in astonishment.

They read about Jesus walking on the water, rising from the dead, and ascending into heaven. And she was like, you guys really believe that?

[ 27 : 58 ] Later, she told them that they absolutely sound crazy. Yet, she kept telling herself, well, these guys seem to be reasonable people.

I mean, sensible people who are able to hold down jobs. Then one day, a friend challenged her, don't wait until all your questions have been answered.

Just ask yourself whether you can trust Jesus. So, Hannah went home, and she described how she was sitting on the floor in her front room, when suddenly, she knew all of the things that she studied was true.

In that moment, she became a Christian. What happened as she sat on her living room floor? The Holy Spirit came upon her, and there was no loud voice, no bright lights, no firework.

But the Holy Spirit was there to give her a new life and faith in Jesus. And thirdly, think beyond heaven.

[ 29 : 11 ] We are fully empowered to live a godly life on earth. And Anglican priest, William Temple said, it is no good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear and telling me to write a play like that.

Shakespeare can do it. I can't. And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that.

I can't. Jesus could do it. I can't. But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could live in the right place like his.

And if the spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then I could also live a life like his. Amen. Yes. This is the whole point of being born by the spirit so that we can live a life like Jesus on earth and experience the kingdom of God.

We don't have to wait until heaven. We can start right now. So I would like us to close our eyes at the moment and just listen to the spirit and let's see what he's telling you.

[ 30 : 38 ] We can reflect on your own life, how you came to faith. Was that through someone you love?

Or when you hear God's word in church, did it come with something supernatural or just ordinary? It doesn't matter. Because right now, the Holy Spirit surrounds us and it works, and he works in us. His will is to make our life flourish and to be more like Jesus. Let's spend some more moments in prayer.

Let's spend some more moments in prayer. Let's do this. Let's do this. Let's do this.

[ 32 : 05 ] And if today you're not sure whether you're born of the spirit you may ask the creator God he is very generous to give you the spirit he'll give you the assurance and peace that you need if you want to pledge your life to Jesus the time is now let's keep praying dear Lord almighty you're present among us because you have poured out your spirits freely in us yes Lord we need to accept

Jesus to receive that spirit so Lord help us to open our hearts we praise you today for the gift of the Holy Spirit because through your spirit we are empowered to live out the calling your place upon us we thank you for the power and peace and guidance you've given us through the Holy Spirit thank you Lord in Jesus name we pray Amen