

Born Again

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[0 : 0 0] Our loving Father, we ask for that authentic work of your Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds that sows your word into our hearts and blesses us with obedience to our Saviour.

We ask it in his name. Amen. One Sunday afternoon in January 1939, there was a small group of people stood around the font at St Mary's Anglican Church in Caulfield.

It was a baptism service. It was my baptism service. And there were my parents, my godparents, my godly grandmother, and the vicar of the parish, who the vicar of course duly signed the baptismal certificate.

And one of the prayers that they prayed at that ceremony, as at any Anglican baptismal ceremony, was that I would know what it is to be born again.

Eighteen years later, that's exactly what happened. As a young man listening to the late Bishop Alfred Stanway speaking to young people at the Melbourne Town Hall, I heard very clearly what it means to become a Christian, to come out of darkness into light.

[1 : 2 6] And I knew that something I'd been hungering for for the last three or four years was suddenly, the answer was suddenly clearly in front of me. And that night, I was born again.

That expression, born again, is bandied around these days in the media, sometimes to mock Christians and to mock the church, and other times as a handy two-line cliché and so on.

It's a good thing for us to get back to the roots of what the Bible means, because the expression is a very old one. So this morning, I'm going to move on through John 3, verses 1 to 16, in three steps.

First of all, outlining the action in that part of the chapter. I then deal with the real roots of the expression, born again.

And there's some encouraging and perhaps challenging application. So moving into the outline of these verses we're looking at, in verses 1 and 2, we meet Nicodemus, for the first of about three times in John's Gospel, and he arrives with his burning question.

[2 : 4 3] And his question, the words of which you can see there, the beginning of John 3, has been triggered by the signs Jesus has been doing.

In the Bible, the word sign usually means an attesting miracle, a miracle with a purpose, a signpost to God. And I would suppose that perhaps the most astonishing one was the one recorded in full in John 2, the changing of water into wine.

But I suppose that Nicodemus began to get some inkling, even though the periodic table of the elements wasn't discovered until about 150 years ago, the Nicodemus got some inkling that this was the act of the creator.

Water, simple molecular structure, H₂O, being changed into a very good wine, an act of creation.

It's perhaps interesting to reflect that for about the past 60 years, mankind has been able to split the atom and look at its component parts.

- [3 : 58] And what have we done with it? Largely destruction and a fairly dodgy method of generating electrical power, as we learned from Chernobyl and a few other places.
- But we haven't succeeded in doing what the creator does and synthesising new molecules from old. Nicodemus was aware of all these things and he comes with his question, which is really a theological question.
- In effect, he's saying to Jesus, aren't you from God? And Jesus' answer is wholly personal. He says, I say to you, you must be born again.
- Now Jesus already knows what's going on in this man and that's why he replies the way he does. He tells this man the thing he needs to know now. Nicodemus, you must be born again.
- We know from the end of chapter 2 that Jesus knew exactly what was going on in Nicodemus' heart and mind. We're told that no one needed to tell Jesus what was going on inside man.
- [5 : 09] Jesus himself knew what was in man. Then in verses 3 to 9, there's the famous conversation about being born again where Nicodemus has three questions and each one shows that he has not yet clearly understood.
- Then in verse 10, there's Jesus' question for which Nicodemus has no answer, but there is an answer and we'll come to that in a little while.
- Verses 11 to 13, there's what I've called heaven's testimony as to who it is that's come among us in the person of Jesus. And verses 14 to 16, I believe this is where Jesus got Nicodemus' undivided attention if he didn't already have it.
- Because he mentioned Moses. He said, just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. You see, the ultimate authority for a Pharisee would be Moses and for the very best of reasons.
- Perhaps the greatest man of God in the Old Testament, the bearer of much of the word of God as we have it in the first five books of the Bible. So Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has come down from heaven to do what Moses had foreshadowed back in the book of Numbers when he lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.
- [6 : 46] You may recall the story. The Israelites had been again into disobedient, untrusting behaviour and God sent a plague of venomous snakes across their tracks on their pilgrimage.
- And as an act of mercy, God said to Moses, make a brass snake, put it on a pole and lift it up to where everyone can see it and those who look to it will live.
- Likewise, we know as Christian believers the looking to the Saviour who was lifted up and crucified for our sins is God's antidote for sins effects.
- Why? Verse 16. Because God so loved the world. Well, that's the outline of those first 16 verses. And now moving on to the expression born again and its roots.
- As I hinted before, the only helpful way forward is to get behind the controversies and misunderstandings that are around in our generation about those words born again.
- [8 : 00] the expression has been dragged through the mud by the efforts of some so-called tele-evangelists in America, some of whom ended up in jail after some of their actions.
- But my experience of ministry in the hills was often when I had a couple come to see me about having a child baptised and we'd talk about the baptismal service and what we're looking for God to do in the life of this child, we've come to the expression which is there in our baptismal service.

We're asking God that this child should be born again and made an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. And time after time I'd have a young couple look at me slightly worried and the husband or the wife would say you're not one of these born againers, are you?

To which I would say well yes, I am born again but I think I know where you're coming from. And certainly in the hills and probably other parts of Australia a lot of people who were worried about born againers were people who'd perhaps been to a fairly exuberant service perhaps in a Pentecostal church where as in the Latin American church there's a great deal of movement, a lot of singing, a lot of sound and sometimes some pretty extravagant expressions of praise and worship.

Or perhaps they'd met some of these people who were very pushy about the need to be born again, very keen to tell their own story of it and so they've got a one-sided view and that when it got down to the wire their view of born againers was they're good people to keep away from but unfortunately a very distorted understanding.

[9 : 50] So let's go to the roots of what Jesus meant. Well I've chosen two verses from John 3 to direct us in this. First of all in verse 7 a statement from Jesus to Nicodemus don't be astonished that I say to you you must be born from above which is the same as saying you must be born again.

in verse 10 this is a question asked by Jesus are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?

One thing that's clear from those two verses that statement in verse 7 and the question in verse 10 is that for someone who knew their Bible there should be nothing new or astonishing in Jesus statement you must be born again.

A teacher of Israel was a person who had one textbook basically the Bible or as we'd now call it the Old Testament everything from Genesis to Malachi and Jesus is indicating to Nicodemus that what he's talking about it's already there.

We could with the enormous advantage of hindsight as Christians say Nicodemus you know your fellow Jewish leaders 30 years before that incident knew quite well where to expect the birth of the Saviour when Herod called the religious leaders together with the arrival of the wise men he'd said where is the Christ to be born and straight away they said that's easy in Bethlehem according to the prophet Micah chapter 5 it's all there so we would say to Nicodemus perhaps perhaps with slight unfair gloating well if you knew about that why didn't you know about the second birth that is clearly foretold in prophecy in the same way as the birth of the Saviour now the place of prophecy is the what was read for our first lesson this morning and just quickly going through the main points of that in

[12 : 29] Ezekiel 36 God is promising that the day is coming when he will sprinkle clean water on people they will be clean from their uncleannesses he will give them a new heart and a new spirit and it goes on to say I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances that statement from Ezekiel is nicely summed up by Jesus in those two words born again cleaned up new heart the spirit of God content to reside in our hearts and direct our lives Jesus amplified his statement a little further when he expressed it in the words Nicodemus if anyone is to enter the kingdom of heaven they must be born of water and of the spirit when

Ezekiel spoke God's words back in about 600 BC or so and spoke of a washing that would deal with all uncleannesses we need to remember that any true washing away of sin requires a sacrifice the writer to the Hebrews spends a fair bit of time on restating this fact that's clear in the Old Testament that without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin that is life must be given up and so it is that a few verses later in John 3 after talking about being born again Jesus says to Nicodemus that the son of man is to be lifted up but Jesus meant the cross his life given up for us and the glorious outcome of that is also expressed by the writer to the Hebrews in those wonderful words when he talks about the effect of the blood of

Christ he says how much more shall the blood of Christ cleanse your consciousness from dead works to serve the living God wonderful words and that's one of the things God's doing that washing away of sin to be born of the spirit which is spoken about or foreseen by Ezekiel in verses 26 and 27 of his 36th chapter as Christians we know have known for a long time that the endowment of the Holy Spirit the Holy Spirit being poured out and coming and dwelling for life in believers lives that requires a risen saviour saviour who has been crucified risen from the dead and ascended to heaven to send the spirit Jesus said that himself in John's gospel chapter 16 he said to his disciples look if I do not go away the helper shall not come to you but the helper of course did come because

Jesus did go away for crucifixion and then briefly appeared for those 40 days and ascended back to heaven and having ascended as Peter said later in his Pentecost sermon Jesus received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit and poured out this and he's been doing this ever since Pentecost so I want to put it to you this morning that the cross the resurrection the ascension and the ascending of the spirit are there in embryo even as far back as Ezekiel 36 I think these things were firmly in the minds of the apostles Paul writing to the Corinthians on another subject but talking to them about their Christian status in 1 Corinthians 6 uses these words but you were washed you were sanctified you were justified in the name of our

Lord Jesus Christ and in the spirit of our God a different way to say those truths expressed in Ezekiel 36 that statement of the roots of the expression born again one thing that Jesus makes clear is that for a person to enter the kingdom of heaven or even see the kingdom of heaven first they must be born again and in effect he's saying this is the ultimate life transforming experience there's nothing like it and there's nothing like it because it is from above it is not the result of human striving it's the gift of God it's the one experience the one authentic experience from God that deals with all the issues between us and God and gives us the one authentic new start when you're in ministry you're sometimes privileged to see some things that you may not have seen if you weren't in ministry particularly with people who have come to you with spiritual problems and I've never forgotten a person who I called

[18:20] Ben who came to me once in a fair bit of distress and summed up what they thought about themselves in words which I couldn't repeat to other Christian people but I realised from the way the impassioned way is being said he felt pretty dreadful about himself so I told him about the promises of God and after a time of reading about the leper who was full of leprosy and cleansed by Jesus and asking if this man would have a similar blessing from God he sat back and said I feel as though I've been cleaned right through from the inside out I've never had anything like this before his beginning experience of an authentic new start from God now around us there are more and more people in the new age stuff who talk about karma which is really the issue of unforgiven sin or they are hoping to be improved through a process of reincarnation or they're hoping by going to some new age practitioner and doing the right psycho type stuff they'll go through some sort of rebirthing experience all of which is saying they understand however dimly that things are not well with them spiritually and they're desperately wanting a new start and God says to everyone come and be born from above there's nothing like it when before

I talked about the born againers and described the way some of our Pentecostal Christian friends behave and so on I certainly didn't mean that in a slighting way there is very good reason to be excited about the concept of being born again and I don't believe my own excitement about this has died down much at all since I was 18 shortly after I was converted a good friend passed on a packet of cards each one with a Bible verse on and said memorize these they'll be good for your soul and this bloke could have qualified as a prophet he was exactly right and when I got to the card which had 2 Corinthians 5:17 on and there's nothing memorized in the Bible the words stick around for a long time I can still quote it if anyone be in Christ he or she is a new creation behold old things have passed away and all things become new and as

I read that card I said yes this is what God has done for me it was a point of enormous assurance there already been the changes that showed me that God was on about making a new man in the light of that saying that a ceremony will do to say well you've been baptized what else could you need is a terrible sham in the Anglican catechism there's a statement which nicely puts two things together about the sacrament for example the sacrament of baptism a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace and so a baptism is the outward sign of a new birth and that's why it's imperative when the child of Christian parents the baby child of Christian parents is being baptized that we pray that this child will know what it is to be born again now on to some encouraging and challenging application first of all there's enormous confidence from God that comes with being someone who has come into his kingdom through new birth

Peter in his first letter I'm sure was at least as excited about it as I was when I first experienced it he talks with almost extravagant spiritual language about the fact we're born again to a living hope not a wish not a fading thing but a living hope an inheritance imperishable kept in heaven for us the next encouragement lies in the words from Ezekiel it's really good to be encouraged by the fullness of spiritual experience that's described there and secondly to see to it before God that this is something that continues to unfold in our lives because that's what he wants next there's the challenge of being charitable about it in the sense that the unfolding of the experience of being born again is just as Jesus says in verse 8 he says the wind blows where it chooses can't see it coming you know it's been true and you can't see it going for some people to be born again is a memorable in some cases cyclonic dramatic moment it was for

Paul on the Damascus road it's been that way for countless believers ever since but because the wind of the spirit blows where it chooses there are Christian believers for whom coming to new birth has been an impasse to be slow development into the experience Worm and I have three children all married now two of them are unable to put a date when they came to true faith in Christ growing up in a Christian home they realised that what God had for them as the benefits of new birth was something that they had inherited which is delightful one of them remembers a particular date youth camp in his early teens where he realised his parents faith wouldn't do for him he would have to come to faith in Christ for himself I say this because sometimes Christians wound each other by saying if you haven't had a knock them down born again experience then I don't think you're a

[24 : 52] Christian now that can be quite wounding as well as so often being quite untrue we need to be charitable we need to keep Jesus words in mind that the wind blows where it chooses the Holy Spirit works in different ways with different people well I have to admit that having seen the fact and faith film produced by the Moody Bible Institute before I was 14 and not being converted until I was 18 I really wonder if God had to pull that over to 4v2 to do what he needed to do with my thick head and perhaps that's the way it is with some of us but it seems he doesn't give up finally after what you heard this morning about the roots and meanings of what Jesus was talking about when he used the expression to be born again if someone asks you well what does it mean to be born again you can confidently say have I got good news for you may God bless us all in such experiences

Amen