

BORN AGAIN

11th March 2018

Readings: Ezekiel 36:26-29; John 3:1-16

This is the first time I've been able to preach since the passing of Billy Graham. It's hard to put into words the impact he's had in the life of the church. One significant contribution was his persistent and faithful call to be born again. Now I'd already chosen today's passage before I made this connection, so with a clear focus on Christ and respectful nod to Billy Graham we're going to explore what it is to be born again.



Let's pray

Those of us who're parents will remember bringing our first child home from hospital. She looked so small and the car seat so enormous as I strapped her into the back of the car. Very, very carefully I eased out of the hospital carpark and travelled just as carefully home. Maybe I should drive with the hazard lights on - just to make sure.

That first day, when your child is in the car with you, well it's a scary day. Do you know when the next scary day is - when your child's in the car with you? It's when they turn 16, and you're doing what? You're handing over the keys. They're moving out of the passenger seat into the driver's seat. Now, that's a scary moment.

It was a big deal when I handed the keys over to my daughter. Up until then, I'd been driving. I'd choose the destination. I'd choose the route. I'd choose the speed. She was in the passenger seat. But if she's going to drive, we have to change seats. I have to hand over the keys. I have to trust her. It's all about control. Whoever's in the driver's seat is in control.

Now when it comes to our walk with Christ, - to following Jesus - who needs to be in the driver seat? Him or me? Which is scarier?... Now, with one of these in the driver's seat then drive leads to frustration after frustration, but with the other in control - though scary at times - this will lead to a life fully engaged, wonderfully rewarding, truly worth living.

So, with this question of "Who's in the driver's seat" we come to John 3. It is one of the best-known Bible passages and includes the most famous of all Bible verses. I'm talking about the late-night encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus and John 3:16

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. John 3:16

So let's dive right into John 3:1

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. John 3:1

Here we're introduced to Nicodemus. Who is he? Well, he's a Pharisee. Not just any Pharisee. He's on the ruling council. With just seventy in this elite group Nicodemus is a powerful man. Now, this doesn't bode well. Why? Well, the Bible portrays religious leaders in opposition to Christ. Not only this, but the higher the status the greater the opposition. Except for here. Indeed Nicodemus is most respectful.

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." John 3:2

Now, there's a lot that could be said here, but at the end of the day Nicodemus is coming to Jesus with an agenda - his agenda, an important agenda. Why else would Nicodemus come at night so no one - especially other Pharisees - could see. Well, he's got something serious to discuss. It's like, he's coming to Jesus in the driver's seat, saying, "Hop in Jesus, I'll drive, you come along." But Jesus' is having none of it. He's about to completely disrupt Nicodemus and his agenda. Nicodemus doesn't even get the key in the ignition before Jesus says, "Actually, I'm driving and you're the one coming with me." See how Jesus does this...

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." John 3:3

This is really "left field". Can you think of a more random way to start a conversation. You almost can hear Nicodemus' mental gears struggling to work out what's Jesus' on about

"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!" John 3:4

A sensible enough reply, but Jesus continues to disrupt.

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. John 3:5

And Jesus continues until Nicodemus exclaims (vs 9)...

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? John 3:9-10

A reply reminding Nicodemus who's in the driver's seat.

Now let's unpack this: born again, born of the water and the Spirit. What's it all mean? Well, we're going to open up the text in three ways. We're going to look at...

- I. Why we must be Born Again
- II. What happens when we are Born Again
- III. How we can be Born Again

I. Why we must be Born Again

Jesus makes the "why we must be born again" clear in John 3:16

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. John 3:16

In the negative we must be born again because if aren't... we will perish. The default of every person, without exception, is grim. Being as good as we can and hoping for the best isn't enough. Not at all. What we're talking about here is a one way ticket hell - the place prepared for the devil and his fallen angels. Do not pass go, do not collect one hundred dollars. Now, we might not like this. We may think it's terribly unfair. We may find this so offensive we shake our fist at God. But... if we take the Bible seriously - especially the words of Jesus - we're left with no option. Hell is real and it's the fate of everyone in this room - unless we're born again.

That's in the negative. In the positive - we must be born again because this is how we gain eternal life. Later in John's Gospel Jesus tells us...

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full John 10:10

Life to the full. A life fully engaged. A life full of hope and vitality. Abundant life, in part this side of eternity and in all fullness when we meet our dear Lord.

So why must we Born Again? - so we won't perish and so we'll have eternal life. This leads to what happens when we are born again.

II. What happens when we are Born Again

In many respects what happens is a mystery. Jesus indicates this in verse 8.

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." John 3:8

However, Jesus' gives us a double clue of what happens when we're born again by referencing spirit and water.

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. John 3:5

Now, to understand this reference we need to turn to Ezekiel 36:25-27. Ezekiel was a prophet who lived when Israel was in exile - way before Jesus' time. Ezekiel speaks of when God's people will be freed from oppression and wonderfully restored. In this time of new beginnings God tells us...

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. Ezekiel 36:25

So, Jesus referencing being born of water is all about cleansing. Being born again, at it's core, is being cleansed. The pollution, the staining, that goes way down deep, is washed away. Indeed, the work of Christ on the cross is very much one of cleansing and forgiveness. So when we're born again, we're born of water, which is to say - we're sprinkled clean.¹

What about Jesus's second reference, to being born of the Spirit, what's that about? Picking up again in Ezekiel 36:26 God tells us...

I will give you a new heart and put 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.
Ezekiel 36:26-27

Being born again sees us being given a new heart - our heart of stone is replaced with a heart of flesh. We also have a new spirit. Not just any spirit but God's Spirit - the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is placed inside us. He comes to take up residence. The Holy Spirit guides, empowers and moulds us to be more like Jesus. In short we are transformed by the Spirit when we are born again.

So, to recap, why must we be born again? - so we will not perish but have eternal life. What happens when we are born again? We're cleansed and the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us. Now we turn to...

III. How we are Born Again

Again John 3:16 holds the key... we are to believe: "whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" So, crucial to being Born Again is believing. Now, what does this look like? Romans 10:9 is a great help.

¹ This is also a reference to the water of baptism. But this is for another sermon :)

That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9²

This is tremendously practical when it comes to the how-to of being born again. First, we confess with our mouth, “Jesus is Lord”. Now, it’s not in our nature to have someone else as Lord of our lives. In fact we go to great lengths to make sure we’re at the centre of our world. We’re in the driver’s seat as much as we can and that’s how we want it to stay. But being born again is us saying to Jesus - “I want you to be the centre. Up ‘till now I’ve been in charge and it’s not worked out too well, in fact, it’s a disaster. But now, Jesus, I want you to be Lord. I want you to be in the driver’s seat. Here are the keys.”

Now, a word of caution and challenge. A lot of us find Jesus handy to be in the car as long as he's in the passenger seat. Why? Because something may come up where we need his help. “Jesus, I’ve a health problem, and I need some help.... I want you in the car, but I'm not so sure I want you driving.” You see, if Jesus is driving, I'm not in charge of my life anymore.

If he's driving, I'm not in charge of my wallet. If I put him in control then it's no longer a matter of giving money now and then when I'm feeling generous or when I'm flush. No. Because now it's his wallet. That’s scary.

If Jesus is driving, I'm not in charge of my ego anymore. I no longer have the right to satisfy every self-centered ambition. No, it's his agenda. It's his life.

Now, I'm not in charge of my mouth anymore. I don't get to gossip, flatter, cajole, deceive, rage, intimidate, manipulate, exaggerate. I get out of the driver's seat and hand the keys over to him. That’s what it means confess Jesus is Lord. That’s what’s like to be born again.

And we cannot do this in our own strength. My goodness me, no! We need to be captivated by Christ and his work on the cross. For being born again firstly means handing over the keys, confessing Jesus as Lord, but secondly we must believe in our heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. From our heart. Being born again starts with the physical, historical resurrection of Jesus. This is a non negotiable of our faith. But it’s more than a mental acknowledgment. No, it is a truth that captivates the core of our being. As we ponder that only truly innocent man who ever lived, died a torturous death beyond imagination then our hearts are moved, melting, captured. As we see his enemies torment him in his moment pain. As Jesus cries out, “My God my God why have you forsaken me” our emotions are

² For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. Romans 10:10

stirred, even to tears. Yes, the unfolding reality of what Christ did on Calvary moves from our hearts to the very core of our being.

If you... believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved Romans 10:9

You will be born again.

So, let's tie all this together. Being born again is at the core of what it means to be a Christian. Jesus made it clear it is not an option. Why? - because it's the only way to eternal life, and our only other option to perish in the very fires of hell. Secondly what happens when we are born again? We're cleansed by water and the Holy Spirit takes up residence within us. And finally we've looked how to be born again. We confess Jesus is Lord - we hand over the keys. And we believe in our hearts that God raised him the dead.

And as I close I leave you with this challenge. If you're not born again, or not sure, ask Christ into your heart. In prayer confess you've sinned, you're worthy to perish. So ask forgiveness and hand over the keys - ask Christ to be your Lord. And as you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved, you will be born again.