

Born Again? How? **John 3:1-21**

What's it mean to be a Christian? What actually makes a person a Christian? If tomorrow morning you conducted a survey in the main street of Bathurst, what sort of answers would you get?

- A Christian's someone who goes to church every week. As long as you're actually there and sitting on the seat, that's what makes you a Christian.
- A Christian's someone who doesn't do bad things – they don't murder, rape, rob banks or break into houses. As long as you're not one of those really wicked people, then you're a Christian.
- A Christian's someone who does good things. It's not just that you avoid doing bad things, you must also do good things as well. You have to be like the Boy Scouts and do a certain number of good deeds for people each week.
- A Christian's someone who's baptised. Or confirmed. Or joined a church.
- Anyone who's born in Australia is a Christian because Australia's a Christian country.
- A Christian's someone who doesn't drink, smoke, dance, do drugs, go to the movies or wear make-up.

People have all sorts of weird and wonderful ideas about what a Christian is. Unfortunately, most of them are simply wrong. Most people just don't have a clue. None of the suggestions I just mentioned are right. They're all wrong. So, if you thought one of those was correct, you need to listen very carefully this morning to what Jesus says.

In this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, we

find Jesus' definition of what a Christian is. Not that Jesus uses the term *Christian* – He doesn't. That particular term wasn't invented till a few years after this. Jesus uses other terms to say the same thing:

- *see the kingdom of God* (3:3)
- *enter the kingdom of God* (3:5)

The issue Jesus discusses is: How does a person get into God's eternal kingdom? How's a person enter into life with God that goes on forever and ever and ever? That's the issue that's the focal point of this conversation. That's what we'll concentrate on this morning. At the heart of that issue is the answer to the question: What makes a person a Christian?

Who was Nicodemus?

One night, Nicodemus comes to Jesus and begins a conversation with Him. Who was Nicodemus? What's John tell us about this man?

- First, he's a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a special religious group in Israel that had been around for quite a few years. We're not sure exactly how many – they're not mentioned in the Old Testament but they're very important by the time of Jesus. As a group, they were very careful to observe all the Old Testament law in all its details. They had all sorts of rules and regulations to help them know exactly what they should and should not do. They tried very hard to live good lives.
- Secondly, he's a member of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling council. He's a highly respected person. Also, to achieve this position, it's likely he's an older man.
- Thirdly, Jesus calls him Israel's teacher. It suggests he had a recognised position as a religious authority

within Israel.

In other words, this guy's one of the Jewish religious heavy-weights. He's not just one of your ordinary, everyday, run-of-the-mill Jewish people. He's the professor of religious studies at the Jerusalem university – or something like that. He's studied his Old Testament. He knows about God. He knows about God's dealings with the Jewish people.

What did Nicodemus think about getting into God's kingdom? We don't know for sure, because we aren't told in this passage. We can only guess on the basis of what we know about general thinking in those days – especially the general thinking of the religious heavy-weights. By and large, they said all Jews would get into the kingdom – except those guilty of deliberately rejecting God and His requirements and those guilty of extreme wickedness. Otherwise, if you were a Jew, you were in. People of other nations could also get in by becoming Jewish – and they had to go through certain rituals to do that. So, as a Jew and as a religious leader, Nicodemus would think he's already in – that he's part of God's kingdom.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.

- Some think he's trying to keep his visit secret. Jesus is still fairly much an unknown. Nicodemus, because he's such an important person, may not want to be publicly identified with Jesus until he checks out the details.
- More likely, I think John sees symbolic significance. John's already told us Jesus is *the light of men* and that *the light shines in the darkness*. Now we have a man – a highly respected Jewish religious man – coming to the light. But even he comes

in darkness. Nicodemus, for all his religious training and thinking, still hasn't seen the light – still hasn't come to the truth about God's kingdom.

Being Born Again

In response to Nicodemus' polite introductory comments, Jesus says:

I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

Remember at the end of last week, John has told us Jesus *did not need man's testimony about man, for He knew what was in a man.*

That introduces this story. Jesus didn't need flattery from Nicodemus. He wasn't concerned whether Nicodemus could give Him a great introduction at the next meeting of the Sanhedrin or at some future political rally. He simply ignores the polite comments and answers what Nicodemus was about to ask – or should have been about to ask. This was the important issue. This was the issue this man needed to confront.

What does it mean to be *born again*? Or the phrase can equally be translated *born from above*. It's important we understand what this means. It became very popular in America about forty years ago – and you still hear it thrown around today. Some people claimed to be born-again Christians in such a way that they implied there were two different types of Christians: born-again ones and the rest – the ordinary, everyday garden variety. It's not what Jesus says here. Jesus says: you don't get to see the kingdom of God unless you're born again. You're not a Christian, unless you're born again. As far as what Jesus says, to claim to be a born-again Christian is repetitive – it's saying I'm a Christian Christian.

But what's this *born again* business mean? Nicodemus struggled with it. You can see that in verse 4:

How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!

On the surface, Nicodemus makes the same mistake as the Jews last week. He interprets Jesus' words in a physical sense. He raises difficulties with the whole idea of being physically born again. He seems to have this somewhat grotesque picture of a fully grown man trying to squeeze back into his mother's womb so he could come back out all over again. I'm sure his mother wasn't interested in that idea at all.

Now, I suspect there's also something else behind his question. I suspect Nicodemus was startled by Jesus' statement. Sure, he failed to understand what Jesus was talking about – what being *born again* was all about. But more than that, what Jesus said implied he wasn't in. He was on the outside. He, an important leader in the Jewish religious community – this community that had the inside running with God – he wasn't yet in God's kingdom. He thought he was already in – but Jesus says he has to be born again before he gets in. That's pretty disturbing. It'd be like being a member of a church for 50 years because you were baptised as a kid and then discovering that God said that church had it all wrong. They had God's word and they had God's promises but they missed the most important point. They weren't in.

Jesus answers Nicodemus' question by restating His comments in different words. Verse 5:

I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of

God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

I suspect most of us think that doesn't help. Many people think that's even harder to understand than being *born again*. And in verse 9, it looks like Nicodemus thought that as well.

So again, what's it mean to be *born again*? What's it mean to be *born of water and Spirit*? The key to understanding this is Jesus' expectation that Nicodemus should have understood it. Look at verse 10:

You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things?

As a teacher in Israel, Nicodemus studied what we call the Old Testament. There, God made promises about the kingdom of God. There, God said He'd do things in the future to put things right. Those promises were the basis for all the expectation surrounding Jesus that John's told us about already. It's why Nicodemus came to Jesus. That's what Jesus expected him to know. So the clue to understanding this must be in the Old Testament.

The key passage is Ezekiel 36:24-27

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. 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. 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 and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws.

Look at the aspects of God's promise here.

- God will bring a new age.
- God will do something about the ongoing problem

of sin in the lives of His people.

- God will bring a radical change in people's hearts.
- God will enable people to live in right relationship with Himself.
- God will enable people to keep His requirements.
- God will sprinkle them with *water* and put a new *spirit* within them. Water and spirit are brought together to speak of what God will do to renew His people – to bring them truly under His rule.

And if you look in the next chapter – Ezekiel 37 that we read before – you have the story of dry bones being born again – of dry bones coming to new life by the breath of God's word.

There's an unspoken assumption behind this conversation. To talk about God's kingdom is to talk about God's rule. To talk about being in God's kingdom is to talk about living under God's rule – that is, doing things the way God wants them done. To be part of God's kingdom is to submit to God. The problem is: we humans don't do that. As the passage in Ezekiel says:

- We humans need to be cleansed from our impurities and our idols.
- We humans have a heart of stone towards God and need that heart removed and replaced if we're to truly relate to God.

In other words, we humans have each set up our own little kingdom where we rule instead of God. And we don't really want to give up that rule – we enjoy running our lives the way we want to run them and we don't really want God telling us what to do. This is what the Bible means by the word *sin*. We humans have rebelled against God's rule and set up our own rule.

Now, the nature of kingdoms is that it's not really appropriate for rebels to run free. To allow rebels to roam freely in a kingdom only leads to anarchy. It's the same in God's kingdom. God won't let rebels in. That's fair – but it leaves us with a problem. All of us are rebels. How do we get in? How do we get to enjoy God's glorious kingdom?

This isn't a problem we can solve ourselves. The Old Testament promised God would do something about it. He'd cleanse us and give us a new spirit. He'd change us from the inside out so we'd give up the rebellion. Jesus says to Nicodemus – and to anyone else who'd enter God's kingdom: You must be born again; you must be born of water and spirit. This is the only way you can get in. God's got to change you. You need a new beginning.

Believing in Jesus

The conversation continues. *Born again* disappears. It's replaced by *believing in Jesus*. Verse 15:

everyone who believes in the Son of Man [Jesus] may have eternal life.

Second half of verse 16:

whoever believes in the Son [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life.

Verse 18

Whoever believes in God's Son [Jesus] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

What's it mean to *believe in Jesus*? First, it means believing what Jesus says. Verses 11 and 12:

I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we

testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

Jesus expected Nicodemus to accept – to believe – the things He said. He's the One who came down from heaven (remember, John's already told us that). So, He knows what He's talking about. He's an authority on these matters.

That's a significant claim. You and I can have our discussions about God's kingdom and the meaning of life. We can argue back and forth over what we think are the important questions. We can come up with our own definitions and our own entry-requirements. But they'll only ever be human ideas – human guesses. And even if we happen to be the cleverest and most intelligent people in the world, it won't change that fact. They'll still only be human guesses. Jesus claims something different. He says He's from God's kingdom. He's not guessing. He knows what He's talking about. Will you believe Him?

But there's still more to *believing in Jesus*. In verse 14, Jesus makes a reference to something that happened back in the days of Moses. It's recorded in Numbers 21. God sent poisonous snakes to punish Israel. The snakes bit the people; the people died. Yet, in the midst of that judgment, God provided a way that someone bitten by a snake could escape death. He told Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole. Anyone bitten who looked at the snake on the pole would not die – not because of any magic in the snake on the pole, but because God promised those who looked at the snake on the pole wouldn't die. They had to believe God's promise. They showed they believed by

actually looking at the snake on the pole.

Jesus says He also will be lifted up. We've read the gospel before, so we know He's lifted up at the end – when they nail Him to a cross and hang Him up to die. That event provides us the opportunity to be rescued. For the Bible says we also are subject to death – not death caused by the bites of poisonous snakes, but death as the judgment on our sin (our rejection of God; our rebellion against God). But God gives the opportunity for us to escape death – simply by believing in Jesus; by believing Jesus died in our place and gives us eternal life. That's how you are born again. That's how you enter God's kingdom.

This world's under God's judgment. It's condemned. By this *world*, it isn't referring to the mountains and rivers – it's referring to the people. You and I. We're under God's judgment. We're condemned by God because of our sin – our rebellion against Him. However, as verse 17 states, God's purpose isn't our condemnation or our destruction – it's our rescue. That's why He sent Jesus – to die that you and I may have eternal life.

But there's one small catch: you have to believe in Jesus. You have to actually acknowledge that it's through Jesus you're saved. And that's how you're *born again*.

People are divided into two groups. Verse 18:

- Those who believe in Jesus – they're in the kingdom.
- Those who don't believe in Jesus – they're already condemned.

They're the only two options. You can't sit on the fence

in the middle and say I'm half condemned and half not condemned. That just doesn't make sense.

You see the same two groups in verses 19 to 21. Two groups and only two groups.

- Those who come to the light. They recognise Jesus and believe in Jesus. They're the ones born again – or born from above.
- Those who refuse to come to the light. They don't want to give up their rebellion against God. They'd rather continue in their evil. They refuse to believe in Jesus.

Only two groups – which do you belong to?

Why do I Need to be Born Again?

For Nicodemus, I suspect Jesus' comments came as a shock. Nicodemus had a great religious pedigree.

- He was born a Jew. He was one of God's people – the nation of Israel.
- He studied the Old Testament. He knew all about God's laws and about what God did for Israel in the past.
- He lived a good life. He tried to obey God's laws and do things that pleased God.
- He was part of the most important religious group in Israel. He'd made it to the top.

I suspect Nicodemus thought he was already in – that he was already guaranteed entry into God's kingdom. But Jesus told him he wasn't in yet. He had to be *born again* – *born from above* – *born of water and spirit*.

The requirement hasn't changed. If you want to enter heaven – God's kingdom – eternal life – then you too must be *born again*. You must *believe in Jesus*. There's

no other way.

And it doesn't matter what your religious pedigree.

- You may come from some famous religious family. Perhaps your parents went to church all their life – and their parents before them. Perhaps you too have been to church all your life. If you're not born again, then you aren't in God's kingdom.
- Or you may see yourself at the opposite end of the scale. You've hardly ever set foot inside a church door. You've ignored God and the things of God. You've done many things of which you're ashamed. You too must be born again.

It remains the same. You must be born again. You must give up your rebellion. You must believe in Jesus.

Now, you may have come this morning knowing you're not a Christian. Or you may have thought you were a Christian, but now realise you're not born again. Do you want to be in God's kingdom? You may have tried all sorts of ways to get in:

- By being good.
- By being better than the next guy.
- By coming to church.
- By being baptised.
- By being Australian.

Those things are all good things – but they won't get you into heaven. You must be born again. You must believe in Jesus.

Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe it's His death on the cross that gets you into heaven? Jesus says: that's the only way in. And remember, He's the authority that's come from God's kingdom to let us know – and to

provide the way in.

- If you haven't believed that before and you now do, it'd be good for you to talk that over with someone – either myself or someone else you know is a Christian.
- If you haven't believed that before and you're still not sure and you've got other questions, it'd be good for you also to talk that over with someone – either myself or someone else you know is a Christian.