

JOHN 3:1-7

SAVED? OR BORN AGAIN?

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.”’”¹

The term “Born Again,” has been bruited about so casually that one wonders whether it has maintained any semblance of the meaning that God intended. An American President boasted that he was “born again”; then promptly promoted legislation that denied that contention. Voters in that particular election and in elections since that first campaign in 1976 popularised the concept that there exists a voting block of “born again” voters. Every few years, magazine articles attempt to discover what it means to be “born again” and try to understand the popular buzz was about being “born again.” Groups in Canada, though less overt, attempt to promote the Faith as a political ideal to mobilise the faithful to vote in a particular way.

There seems to be confusion about what is meant by the term “born again.” Likely, this confusion arises because the terms used to speak of our relationship to God are confused. This situation has come about primarily because differing communions have emphasised different terms. What is familiar may appear odd to those removed from that particular argot. Let’s think about what the Bible says and see if we can make sense of the terms that are commonly used.

SYNONYMS FOR SALVATION — Tragically, many churches, even Evangelical churches, have ceased speaking of salvation. Or if they do speak of salvation, they speak in the abstract. It is an academic concept in the minds of too many of the professed saints of the Living God. However, in the mind of God, all of mankind can be segregated into one of two categories—saints and ain’ts. Either one is saved, or one is lost. There is no middle ground; there is no process.

There was a day when all churches agreed on the truth that mankind was lost by birth and by choice. The Psalmist said that he was “guilty of sin from birth.” Moreover, he confessed himself to be, “a sinner the moment my mother conceived me” [**PSALM 51:5 NET BIBLE**]. The day in which all churches held to the conviction of total depravity is far behind us now; and that is to our detriment. Tragically, many of the professed saints of the Living God imagine themselves to be good enough to satisfy God and actually believe they do not qualify as sinners. Consequently, because they no longer believe themselves to be sinners, they do not need a Saviour. Too many of the churches of this day are convinced they do not require One to set them free from sin because they are not bound by sin. Opposed to this view is the Word of God. “This is the judgement: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” [**JOHN 3:19**].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

To speak of being saved implies that one was once lost. The concept is that at one time an individual had no hope of knowing God. Perhaps the individual was religious and performed multiple rites and rituals. However, there was no confidence that sin was forgiven or that the individual was accepted by God. If being baptised saves an individual, what keeps that one saved? If partaking of the Communion Meal is required to be saved, what happens when one misses a Communion Service? If reciting prayers is necessary to being saved, how many prayers must one recite to continue as a saved individual? What is needed is something more than the efforts of one so puny that they cannot keep themselves alive. What is needed is a transformation by Him who gives all people life.

Christ used the term “born again,” or more properly, “born from above.” He could have advised Nicodemus that he needed to be redeemed. The term is used elsewhere, such as when Paul writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” [GALATIANS 3:13]. Likewise, Peter states that we “were redeemed from [our] empty way of life inherited from the fathers, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish” [1 PETER 1:18, 19]. The term “redeemed” speaks of purchasing in the market place, as though we were held in slavery and needed to be purchased so that we might have freedom (which is actually the case).

Alternatively, the Master might have urged Nicodemus to seek forgiveness of sin. We are convinced by our experience and by the Word of God that “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [ROMANS 3:23]. When we permit ourselves to reflect on our present condition, we know that “There is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” [ECCLESIASTES 7:20]. When God speaks through His prophet, Zephaniah, saying,

“I will bring distress on mankind,
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the Lord,”

[ZEPHANIAH 1:17]

we find that we are compelled to agree with His assessment. We know intuitively that we need forgiveness of sin.

However, Jesus advised Nicodemus of the need to be “born again.” The concept is but a synonym for salvation. To be saved is to be born again. To be born again is to be saved. This is the great need of all mankind. The emphasis Jesus made in speaking of being born again, is the emphasis upon a relationship with the True and Living God.

SALVATION IS RELATIONSHIP — To speak of being redeemed speaks of being set at liberty, but it does not speak of relationship. To speak of the forgiveness of sin speaks of removing the threat of judgement, but it does not speak of relationship. To speak of being saved speaks of knowing that we no longer stumble in darkness without hope of knowing where we are going, but it does not speak of relationship. However, when we speak of being born again, we intuitively realise that it points to a relationship.

Among modern churches, we tend to emphasis religion at the expense of relationship. We “go to church,” rather than being the church. We “say prayers,” rather than praying. Likewise, we mindlessly perform our rituals rather than worshipping. In far too many of the churches we have defined worship as singing, whereas the Word of God speaks of worship as knowing God and enjoying Him. God saves us that we might enjoy a relationship with Him.

In the letter to Hebrew Christians [HEBREWS 2:10-18] is found a powerful statement of God's purpose in offering the New Birth to fallen mankind. "It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying,

'I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.'

"And again,

'I will put my trust in him.'

"And again,

'Behold, I and the children God has given me.'

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Perhaps you will recall that Jesus in His High Priestly prayer spoke of the relationship for which we were saved. "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" [JOHN 17:1b-3]. God saves so that those who are saved might enjoy a relationship with Him. For the reason, the redeemed saints are known as Children of God, and collectively, we are the Family of God.

BORN FROM ABOVE — We who are saved are collectively known as "the Household of God" [see EPHESIANS 2:19; 1 TIMOTHY 3:15; 1 PETER 4:17]. The concept implies that we are family; indeed, many translations properly speak of the assembly of the righteous as "the Family of God." The concept that we have this relationship arises because we share in the new birth to new life as God's holy people.

Peter opened his first missive by reminding readers of our shared relationship in Christ. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" [1 PETER 1:3-5]. Later, he would encourage those same readers by reminding them, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" [1 PETER 1:23].

James writes similarly, when he says, “By His own choice, [God] gave us a new birth by the message of truth so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures” [**JAMES 1:18 HCSB**].

Listen to one final statement of this glorious work performed by the Father. “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” [**TITUS 3:4-7 NET BIBLE**].

We Christians are born again, twice-born, born from above. We have been born into the Family of God by the grace of God through faith in the Living Son of God as the Holy Spirit drew us into this grace. We are a privileged people. We don’t deserve this grace; but God has extended it to us. The wonderful part of this account is that the same grace is extended to whoever is willing to receive it.

Paul says of Christ that He “is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe” [**1 TIMOTHY 4:10**]. The new birth is offered to all who are willing to accept what God offers. Forgiveness of sin is promised to all who will receive God’s provision. Redemption from our fallen condition is extended to anyone willing to accept the pardon for rebellion. The redemption, the forgiveness, the new birth is offered in Jesus, the Son of God. God says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10**]. To make the case stronger still, the Apostle cites the Prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:13**].

And that is our call to you. To be born from above, to receive the gift of life, to be forgiven of all sin, even now believe this promise of God and be saved. Amen.