

Born From Above

John 3:1-36

“Have you been born again?”

I grew up going to annual revival meetings. I loved them. It was a time of immersing in Scripture as a church, and yes, it involved powerful emotional experiences of repentance while ‘Just as I Am’ was sung on repeat. I didn’t know how else to connect with God at this age, but it seemed to me that God was present in those meetings. I couldn’t get enough of it, and when I didn’t ‘feel’ God’s presence, I was confused and maybe a little hurt by what I felt was God’s absence.

For some of us, the phrase, ‘born again’ immediately evokes images of revival meetings and dramatic conversion experiences. It might call to mind soapbox preachers or vocal evangelism within the political sphere. It is often used to mean the difference between those who are ‘true’ Christians, and those who are Christians in name only.¹ John 3 is a critical evangelism passage, often preached from in revival meetings and altar calls.

But if you know me, you’ll know that the main question that came to mind as I studied this passage is a question of *context*. I wondered, *Is that really what Jesus meant? He was a well-learned teacher of the Jewish Scriptures, and Nicodemus was the equivalent of an Old Testament professor of the time—what did being ‘born again’ mean to them?*

For that matter, Jesus’ talk of being Light in the darkness is often used negatively, painting the world as a dark and evil place, and his words about wrath and condemnation are used to scare people into following him, or else they will burn in hell. The thing is, Jesus never talks about hell in this passage.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. First, we need to talk about this being born again business and what the Spirit has to do with that, then we’ll get to the odd throwaway about a snake in the wilderness, and then we’ll talk about light and darkness.

So, for some help, I turned to the Contemporary English Version (CEV), which captures the nuance of the phrase ‘born again’ a little better than the NIV: *Jesus replied, “I tell you for certain that you must be **born from above** before you can see God’s kingdom!”*²

Born from above. The Greek word here can mean either ‘born twice’ in the literal sense, or ‘born from above’ in a spiritual or heavenly sense. Most of our English translations have

¹ Tim Mackie, *I Am* podcast series, Episode 10 “Born of the Spirit,” November 30, 2017. Accessed October 6, 2025. <https://bibleproject.com/podcasts/i-am-who-i-am-part-10-born-spirit/>

² John 3:3, CEV

traditionally translated it ‘born again’ because of Nicodemus’ question, “How can a man return to his mother’s womb to be born a second time?”³

Language often has double meanings. Our English words do this all the time. We use literal phrases in a slang or metaphorical manner that means something else entirely. Old Testament scholar Tim Mackie uses this illustration: If someone says, “Nailed it!”, what are they referring to? They usually mean that they have done it well or perfectly or ‘spot on’, that they got it just right. But what does the phrase literally mean? Well, it means that you literally took a hammer and nailed something down.

This is how language works. There isn’t some secret hidden meaning in these words. Nicodemus takes the phrase ‘born again’ literally, but obviously a grown adult can’t enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time. Jesus means the phrase in the metaphorical sense. He explains, “*No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*”⁴

Water and Spirit. Water, referring to the things of earth, and Spirit, referring to the things of God.

Now, recall in the very beginning of the Bible where the Spirit hovered over the waters. Before a word was spoken, there was Spirit and there was water.⁵ Then God spoke and light was made, the waters were separated, and earth was revealed. From the earth, all kinds of animals and plants sprang forth, and humans were created from its very dust.

And then what happens? God breathed the breath of life into the human created from dust, and the human became a living being.⁶ The Hebrew and Greek words for *breath* or *wind* are the same as the word for *Spirit*. God breathed *His Spirit—his very life*—into the human, and the human became a living, breathing, sentient being tasked with caring and tending creation.

John says, “*The wind [Spirit/breath] blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit [wind/breath].*”⁷ Those who are born of God’s breath of Life contain the Spirit within them. This is how humans are intended to operate in the world—born of earth and water *and* born of Spirit.

³ John 3:4

⁴ John 3:5-6, NIV

⁵ Genesis 1:1-3

⁶ Genesis 2:7

⁷ John 3:8

But then, in Genesis 3, it is recorded that the human beings rebelled against their Creator, took what wasn't theirs to take, and died. This was the warning that God gave them: "*Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die.*"⁸ The consequence of their rebellion is that the humans are cast out from God's presence. Their relationship between themselves and God—and between themselves—is broken.

So, did they die by eating the forbidden fruit? Yes, they did—their Spirit-given life died. They are cut off from God, their Source of Life. They are now earth-beings only, and this spiritual death extends to all human beings thereafter. As the apostle Paul says, we are "dead in [our] sins."⁹ We are spiritually and relationally dead, even though we walk on this earth. We are shells of who God created us to be.

When Jesus describes being born from above, he is talking about being spiritually resurrected by the breath of God, the Spirit. This is a return to the garden state, back to a whole relationship between God and humans. He reminds Nicodemus of the dead army that God breathed into life in the book of Ezekiel¹⁰ and the words God spoke to the prophet Isaiah:

I will bless the thirsty land
by sending streams of water;
I will bless your descendants
by giving them my Spirit.
They will spring up like grass
or like willow trees
near flowing streams.¹¹

Nicodemus asks again, "*How can this be?*" Nicodemus is a great, learned teacher in Israel; he *knows* the Scriptures intellectually, but he still doesn't quite get it.

Jesus responds, "*If you don't believe when I talk to you about things on earth, how can you possibly believe if I talk to you about things in heaven? No one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from there.*"¹²

How is this possible? How can humans return to whole relationship with God and be spiritually resurrected? Carmen Joy Imes, in her book *Being God's Image*, says, "Jesus is not the image of God because he is God. Jesus is the image of God because he is

⁸ Genesis 2:17

⁹ Ephesians 2:1

¹⁰ Ezekiel 37:4-14

¹¹ Isaiah 44:3-4

¹² John 3:12-13, CEV

*human.*¹³ The way to God is open because Jesus became human. He is the bridge between heaven and earth, making it possible for us to be spiritually resurrected back to our creation state, made whole with God.

Then we come to the odd example of a snake being lifted on a pole. Jesus is linking back to an important moment in Israel's history. Moses was instructed to make a snake out of bronze and raise it up on a pole so that all the Israelites who were dying of plague for their rebellion against God could look at it and be healed. Numbers 21:8 says, *Anyone who gets bitten [by the snake] can look at the snake and be saved from death.*"

Jesus says that *he* is the thing that will absorb the rebellion, sin, and evil that is killing humanity. *He* saves humanity if only they will look at him. Jesus' exaltation is his death on a Roman cross. The apostle Paul records a beautiful hymn that the early church sang about Jesus:

*Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names, so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*¹⁴

Jesus says that life is found *only* in him—the Son who is God, come from the Father, the Spirit who breathes life into humans, who is victorious through death. He is the one who came from above and went down below to death itself so that humanity could also be resurrected.

How then do we gain this life? Simply, when we look to the one who has been raised for us. The Son, who is God, bridged the gap between heaven and earth and made it possible for all humanity to return to God if only they would look to him.

*"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him."*¹⁵

Just as the uplifted snake did not cast judgment on the people of Israel but saved all those who would look to it, so Jesus does not cast judgment on the world but entreats all people

¹³ Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God's Image*, 109.

¹⁴ Philippians 2:8-11, CEB

¹⁵ John 3:16-17, NLT

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to look to him, to believe in him, to proclaim their allegiance to him above all other gods, and to love him like no other.

Those who refuse to look choose death and darkness upon themselves; *this* is the condemnation and the wrath of God. It is the very same wrath as during the days of the prophets when God finally gave up his rebellious people to their own desires, allowing them to be taken captive and be killed at the hands of oppressors.

God's way is Light, but it requires giving up your own ways. John the Baptist, when asked about Jesus' works of teaching and baptism, said, "He must become greater; I must become less."¹⁶ John knew who was worthy of his worship, and it wasn't himself; it was Jesus. Everything John said and did in his ministry was to tell others about Jesus.

When we choose ourselves over others, we choose death. However, God's wrath is never simply for punishment; it is always about meeting people in the darkness and despair and showing them yet another way to life. Judgment always leads to repentance. It is not meant to induce crushing guilt, but rather a gentle conviction by the Spirit to lead us back to God. God lets people choose death so that he can meet them there.

So, you have a choice. I feel like I say this in nearly every sermon I preach, but this is simply the message of Scripture: *Choose the Way of God, the Way of the True Human Being, Jesus, who is both Human and God, or choose self, death, and darkness.* Simple as that. But rarely, in my experience, is life that black and white.

I have family and friends who have chosen to live a life without active faith in Jesus, and they are happy in it. What am I to do with that? For those of us who have chosen the Jesus Way, how can we, as John the Baptist did, testify to the presence of Jesus in our lives? What has Jesus done for me? For my family? For my community? How is my life better for knowing Jesus? And how can I share it with others without sounding superior or patronizing? These are all questions that we wrestle with honestly as we seek to follow Jesus and testify to what he is doing in our lives, even as those we love choose otherwise.

But also, there are those of us here who are struggling with faith—we're asking questions like, "What does it mean to follow Jesus? Do I even care? Do I believe in him at all?" You might be here today for the first time, or maybe you keep going to church even though you're not quite sure why it matters. I'm here to tell you that **Jesus meets you in the dark.** Nicodemus had questions, even objections, and Jesus met him right there.

¹⁶ John 3:30, NIV

There are those of us who have known the Scriptures all our lives but are all about the head and have missed having a relationship with Jesus. You *know* everything but have no idea what it means to listen to and follow Jesus. How can you get to know this Jesus, not as a concept, but as a *person*? This feels unattainable. After all, how can you have a relationship with a person who lived and died thousands of years ago, whom you can't see with your physical eyes or hear with your ears?

If Jesus is the True Human Being, God made Flesh, that means that he is embodied in every good and beautiful human interaction. He talks to you through the words and kindnesses of your friends, co-workers, neighbours, and even strangers. He meets you in prayer and in his words and actions in Scripture. He looks at you through the eyes of the homeless person, or the high school student who is struggling with loneliness, or the parent who is desperately trying to raise their child well, or the person who is unemployed—again!

Finally, there are those of us who have been walking with Jesus for a long time, but you're confused because life with Jesus isn't all that bright and light at all. Isn't life with Jesus supposed to be good and joyful? Instead, life is dull, dreary, and dark, and you ask, "Where is Jesus?"

Jesus meets you *in the darkness*. He's not afraid of your questions and isn't intimidated by your fears. A few weeks ago, I introduced the idea of bounded and centred set thinking, where bounded sets draw lines around their communities to define who is 'in' and who is 'out,' whereas centred set thinking is always oriented to the source of life in the centre—that, is, Jesus. Faith is that choice to continue walking toward Jesus, even if you can't see two steps in front of you, trusting that he will meet you there and lead the way.

Barbara Brown Taylor talks about darkness in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*—not in a scary, avoid-the-darkness-because-it's-evil kind of way, but how darkness is simply a fact of life. She says, "*If we turn away from darkness on principle, doing everything we can to avoid it because there is simply no telling what it contains, isn't there a chance that we are running from God?*"¹⁷

In the beginning, the Spirit hovered over the dark waters. God was there in the darkness before anything was created. God is present in the dark just as much as he is in the light. There is nowhere where God is not. The Bible commonly uses the wilderness as a metaphor for deep, desperate times of unknowing, searching, aimlessly wandering, and deep thirst. The dark, I think, is kind of like that, too.

¹⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 57.

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Those who are in the dark—and let's be honest, this is all of us at some point—aren't hopelessly lost. It's not for us to point fingers and say condescendingly, "Well, they're just lost. They don't know the Spirit yet." The dark might be the very place where God meets us most intimately.

J.R.R. Tolkien said, "Not all who wander are lost." We've all wandered; we've all been lost in the darkness and wilderness; we know what it's like to stumble along on our own way, making discoveries about life and God along the way. That's what most of life feels like—stumbling around in the dark.

So, we're grateful for the people who showed us what Jesus is like in word and deed, who make Jesus greater and themselves less. We make the choice to follow him—maybe we move away from him for a while because it just doesn't quite make sense, or think we have it all together and know the Scriptures, but we are missing the relationship we're meant to have with Jesus, or we're confused about what it means to follow Jesus. It's okay. Jesus waits for us all. He offers life to us all. He walks with us in the darkness, and he slowly turns it brighter just by being with us.

Let's pray.

Jesus, thank you for the Life that we have with you. Thank you that you are not afraid of the darkness and that you walked straight into it to resurrect us, this world, and everything in it. Thank you that we can choose you and walk with you in the light and in the dark. Amen.

Benediction:

From the First Nations Version: "The Great Spirit loves this world of human beings so deeply he gave us his Son—the only Son who fully represents him. All who trust in him and his way will not come to a bad end, but will have the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony."¹⁸

If you have questions about what it looks like to follow Jesus, come and talk to me or any of the pastoral staff. We will be at the front to pray with you after the service.

¹⁸ John 3:16, FNV