

COMMON QUESTION NO. 12

HOW CAN YOU BE SURE YOU ARE BORN AGAIN?

One way of describing a Christian is to say he or she is 'born again'. This is what Jesus told Nicodemus as recorded in John 3:3-5. No one can truly claim to be a Christian unless born again. It is so important to know what this new birth means, and then to be sure it is true of you.

1. Is it possible to be very religious and yet not "born again"?

See how Nicodemus is described.

- ★ A Pharisee (3:1). Pharisees were leaders in the Jewish religion, dedicated to keeping the law of God as strictly as possible. Paul testified "that according to the strictest party ... I have lived as a Pharisee" (Acts 26:5). Here is a man who thought he had totally given himself to God.
- ★ A ruler of the Jews (3:1). He was very highly respected so a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest legal court for Jews.
- ★ The teacher (3:10). He is called "the" teacher", and as such Jesus expected him to know about the new birth, but he was completely ignorant.
- ★ Very positive about Jesus (3:2). What made him so different from many other Pharisees is that he believed Jesus was "a teacher come from God" because of the miracles He performed.

Yet he was not born again. It is very possible to be full of religious practices, have great knowledge of the Bible, and even believe Jesus is from God, and yet not be born again. So also Saul of Tarsus.

2. What does being "born again" mean?

Jesus explains that the being "born again" (3:3) is the same as being "born of water and the Spirit" (3:5). Because Nicodemus ought to have known this from the Old Testament it seems that Jesus is referring to Ezekiel 36:25-26 where the blessing promised is of water to cleanse from uncleanness (sins), and of the Spirit dwelling in the people of God. Note that the Spirit and a new heart guarantee that the person will surely be careful to obey God's law (36:27). So this new birth is becoming a new person spiritually. When the Spirit brings life to a stony heart everything is changed. The darkened mind is enlightened to understand. The desires for sin are replaced with desires for righteousness. No longer is life lived selfishly but now for the glory of God. This is why the picture of birth is used; it represents a new beginning, a new life. Peter uses the language of "born again" in 1 Peter 1:3,23. John uses the language of "born" for the Christian in John 1:13, and in 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1,4,18.

So Jesus is telling Nicodemus that, despite all his achievements in religion, in education and in society, he must start his life all over again if he is to enter the kingdom of God. And this is something only the Spirit of God can do. No child can give birth to itself! Jesus emphasizes that only the Spirit can give birth to "spirit" (3:6). He likens being born of the Spirit to the wind (wind and Spirit are the same word in the original languages), that "blows where it wishes" (3:8).

3. How can you be "born again"?

Our Lord does not give any instructions to Nicodemus how to be born again. He does not teach that if you believe then God will respond by giving a new birth. Indeed faith belongs to the new heart; the stony heart is one of unbelief. You cannot appeal to John 3:16 for it says that the one who believes receives eternal life, not the new birth. Faith is the result of the

new birth, as taught in John 1:12-13 and 1 John 5:1. The new birth is a sovereign and powerful work of the Spirit of God in connection with the word of God. Jesus called upon dead Lazarus to come out of his tomb. He could not; he was dead! But the word of Jesus had life giving power, raising him from the dead, so that he came out. In the same way, the message of the gospel is powerfully used by the Spirit to give a new birth so that the person comes to Jesus = believes. If you ask, 'Why are some born of the Spirit and not others?' then I can only respond in the words of our Lord, "The wind blows where it wishes."

4. What is the evidence of being "born again"?

What is the evidence a new baby has come into the world? It moves and makes noise. In the case of the one born of the Spirit you cannot observe the birth taking place. Likewise you cannot see the wind, but "you hear its sound" (3:8). Jesus says "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit". What is this "spirit"? These are things that only the Spirit of God can produce; the "flesh" cannot produce them, for it can only produce "flesh" (3:6).

★ Faith in Christ (John 1:12-13). John very clearly writes that those who believe give the evidence they "were born ... of God".

John's first letter was written to give assurance to Christian believers who had been troubled by false teachers, those who John calls "antichrists" (2:18-19). They can be assured if they are ...

- ★ Practising righteousness (1 John 2:29). The new birth by the Spirit brings a life that loves righteousness instead of sin. This is because the Father of the new child is righteous Himself. The son is like the father.
- ★ Not sinning (1 John 3:9, 5:18). Although translations have 'make a practice of sinning' (e.g. ESV) this is more an interpretation. In the context, it seems to be a reference to the fact that one born of God cannot be "lawless" (3:4), like the devil (3:8). This is because "God's seed" abides in one born a God, probably a reference to the Holy Spirit.
- ★ Loving one another (1 John 4:7-8). There are many exhortations to love the brethren. This is grounded in the very character of God, "God is love". If God is your Father you will love like Him.
- ★ Believing in Jesus (1 John 5:1). Believing that Jesus is the Christ is the result of being born of God. The false teachers denied this (2:22). Those born of God receive Jesus as the long promised Messiah, their anointed Prophet, Priest and King.

Overcoming the world (1 John 5:4). The world are those desires and values that are opposed to God (see 2:16). The one born of God has a new nature that does not seek to satisfy such sinful desires, and is therefore free to keep God's commandments.

5. So how can you be sure you are "born again"?

It is not difficult to tell if the new born is alive. It is obvious when a tree bears fruit. Ask yourself the following questions.

Have you received Jesus Christ? Have you believed in His name? Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? Is your faith sincere?

Are you devoted to a life of righteousness because you know that God is righteous? Are you serious about keeping the commandments of God (1 John 2:3-6)?

Are you being kept by Christ from turning away from the faith? Your perseverance in the face of many trials is a great evidence that you are born again (see Hebrews 3:6,14).

Are you genuinely loving other Christians? We have a special love for fellow Christians, as Christ loved us (1 John 3:16-18).

Is your life one of overcoming the world? Has God changed your inner life, your thoughts and your desires?