

Born of God – Beginning a New Life

Introduction: If you are already a Christian, you have already made the biggest decision you will ever make. Most people make this most critical decision when they are young. In fact, researchers have consistently found that the average age at which people make a lifelong commitment to a given religion is between the ages of 15-16.¹ Essentially, most of you have made this important decision when your entire adult life is still ahead of you.

Being born again isn't the end of your spiritual journey; it's the beginning. Being saved is a spiritual birth that brings you into a family relationship with God in which you may then grow to be conformed to the image of His only begotten Son.

Our heavenly Father has had the perfect Son from all eternity. He wants more children *just like* the One He has. In Romans 8:29, the Scripture says that "whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be **conformed to the image of His Son** that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." God's intention is not just to have a lot of children, but to have a lot of children who are like His first child. If you have been born again, you have been born to be like Jesus!

Your spiritual transformation will be much like the physical and mental transformation you've been experiencing for the past 15 to 25 years. It is a process of maturation and growth. It is growing to "mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13, ESV). It is the work of a lifetime.

Our goal in this lesson is to explain the process of the new birth as described in the Gospel of John and then to consider the ramifications of the new birth in your life, as described in 1 John.

BEING BORN AGAIN: JOHN 3:1-7

The phrase "born again Christian" became popular back when Jimmy Carter ran for President in 1976; he was the first Presidential candidate to describe himself as being born again. By the next election, all three of the major presidential candidates claimed to be born again!

No matter how politically savvy it may be to claim to be a "born again Christian," the phrase itself is a little redundant. If you are a Christian, you have been born again – it should go without saying. Unfortunately, many who claim the new birth have never truly experienced it.

In John 3, Jesus told Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." "You must be born again."

¹ Johnson, P. E. (1959). *Psychology of religion (rev. ed.)*. New York: Abingdon Press.

Roberts, F. J. (1965). Some psychological factors in religious conversion. *British Journal of Social and Religious Psychology*, 4, 185-187.

Gillespie, V. B. (1991). *The dynamics of religious conversion: Identity and transformation*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press.

For centuries, virtually everyone who read Jesus' words here understood that "water" referred to baptism. And then John Calvin came along in the 16th century. His admittedly "new" interpretation muddied the water! Even so, many denominational scholars and Calvinists will still acknowledge that "water" in this text is an obvious reference to baptism:

- Presbyterian scholar Albert Barnes wrote, "By water, here, is evidently signified baptism." (*Barnes' Notes*)
- Methodist scholar Adam Clarke said, "Baptism by water, into the Christian faith, was necessary to every Jew and Gentile that entered into the kingdom of the Messiah." (*Commentary on John*)
- Anglican priest William Wall observed concerning Jesus' reference to "water" in John 3 that, "There is not any one Christian writer of any antiquity in any language but what understands it of baptism....I believe Calvin was the first that ever denied this place to mean baptism. He gives it another interpretation, which he confesses to be new." (*History of Infant Baptism*)

The book of Acts repeatedly shows that baptism in water initiated believers into their new life in Christ (Acts 8:36-39; 10:47; cf. 2:38; 8:12; 16:12, 33; 18:8; 19:4-5; 22:16).

Despite these facts, there are many who claim to have been born again without water! My grandmother would sometimes complain when she heard the claims that thousands were being born again in Billy Graham crusades by merely praying the sinner's prayer; she would shake her head and wonder how anyone could be born again "without a drop of water." If we believe Jesus' description of the new birth, we know that it just cannot happen.

But there is much more to the new birth than baptism. Water baptism is the outward physical act necessary to be born again, but the regeneration is inward. Fans of the TV show *Dr. Who* know that when the doctor regenerates, he has a completely new physical appearance, but the guy on the inside is pretty much the same. Being born again is much different. A person who is born again is a new creature; every perspective and relationship is changed (2 Corinthians 5:14-17).

Being born again is also a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. Using language very similar to that Jesus used in John 3, Paul says that God has saved us "...by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). "Regeneration" literally means "rebirth." "Renewal" suggests "a complete change for the better" (*Thayer's Greek Lexicon*). The Holy Spirit works through the word of God which is inspired by Him to renew us. So Peter says in 1 Peter 1:23 that "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." Trust in God's word, exhibited in baptism, enables the Spirit to change us from within, and we become new creatures.

YOUR NEW LIFE

In 1 John, we have a description of the new life that is lived by those who have been born again. Four things will characterize your new life.

1. **You practice righteousness.** 1 John 2:29 says that “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.” One of the distinguishing differences between a child of God and a child of the devil is that a child of God practices what is right (1 John 3:10). A child of God does the will of His Father, seeks to please His Father, and generally imitates his Father. “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children” (Ephesians 5:1).

2. **You do not sin.** You do not want to grieve the Father or break His heart (1 John 3:9 & 5:18).
 - “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God” (1 John 3:9). Sin here refers to one’s walk or habit. We know that continuing in sin would break God’s heart, and we just don’t want to do it. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” (Ephesians 4:30)
 - You “keep” yourself! “We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him” (1 John 5:18). As children of God, you keep yourself pure, unspotted from the world, and from idols (1 Timothy 5:22; James 1:27; 1 John 5:21).

Illustration: Recently there’s been a popular book making the rounds called “50 Shades of Grey.” Have you heard of it? It’s been on the best seller list and the news media has touted it as the next great novel. They say it is amusing, intriguing and a powerful “erotic novel.” Now, it may be erotic. It may even be well-written and intriguing. But it’s just an evil story in fancy language. It’s an evil novel, written by a sinful person, and it will be turned into an evil movie. There are many evil novels and evil movies. But I chose this particular book because of its title. “50 Shades Of Grey.” What they’re implying, is that there are 50 shades of “naughtiness.” Or more literally: 50 different shades of evil. And God says to you... don’t go there. “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5). “Walk in the light.” (1 John 1:7). God does not want His children to experience 50 shades of grey, but ONE shade of white – one shade of purity.

3. **You love your Father and your family.** “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). We have been begotten by a Father who is the very definition of love. We love Him because He loved us. And because we love our Father, we love all of His children. Being born again brings you into a loving family. Family love is special. It transcends all other relationships. “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him” (1 John 5:1). It is impossible to be holy without being loving. It’s unlikely that you’ll behave morally if you don’t love others. Your changed life is an outgrowth of your changed affections – not just a change in what you love, but first and foremost a change in whom you love.

4. **You overcome the world.** “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4). In this verse, *victory* is translated from the Greek word *nike* – in Greek mythology, Nike was the goddess of victory. Nike means to conquer, overcome, and get the victory. There’s a battle to fight, but we win!

Picture two men walking down the street. One is born again and the other is a worldly man. Physically, there is little or no difference. They are living in exactly the same world, the same environment, with the same sin surrounding them, and the same temptations. However, there is a substantial difference between their lives. One is continually beaten by this world – he loses in temptation and in trial, and he fails to attain anything of lasting importance. The other, who had the faith to be born again, has the faith to trust God at every turn. It may not be seen or understood by the world, but he is living a victorious life (Colossians 3:1-3; John 3:8).

Conclusion: The new birth begins the process of growing to be like Christ. Living in His image is our passport into heaven. We must look like our Passport to gain entry into the world to come (1 John 3:1-2, cf. 2:29). How many of you have ever had a passport? You realize that when you visit a foreign land, you MUST have a passport. That passport says who you are, what nation you belong to... and it has a picture of you inside. I recently read about a woman who traveled a lot and eventually needed to get a new passport. She posed for a new picture, and as she handed in her 10-year-old passport she took one more longing look at the picture inside. Then she looked up at the clerk and sighed, "I like this original picture better." The clerk smiled and said, "Trust me. Ten years from now, you'll like this one." In this life, as you grow older, you like the pictures taken of you when you were younger. But in the next life, it's the final picture that we will like the best – for then we will look like Him!

Being born again is not merely the moment you began to call yourself a Christian, but the moment you began to become Christ-like. Living life in the Son leads to eternal life in the Son. "And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son" (1 John 5:11).