

Born Again to Believe

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Amen. Well, who here, I wonder, has been brave enough to sit through an episode of One Born Every Minute?

It's as real as reality TV gets, isn't it? I was prescribed a viewing of this show by my doctor wife when we found out that we were having a baby.

And I learned a lot. I learned a lot about babies and childbirth, but also a lot about families and the kinds of hopes and dreams that new parents had for their wriggling newborns.

And often what these parents wanted for their babies was the chance for a new life, a new start free of the kind of emotional and relational baggage that the parents had brought into the delivery room.

But where does new life really begin? Well, in our passage this morning, we see that none of the hopes and dreams of those new parents for a new life comes close to comparing with the newness and greatness of the life that Jesus came to bring.

[1 : 27] So far in John's Gospel, we've seen that Jesus is the promised one. The Son of God sent by God to bring his kingdom into the world.

The fine wine at the wedding and the tearing up of the temple both speak of a new beginning. At the start of God's rule of grace and truth is now here in his son Jesus.

He is the Son of God. God, come to give us true life with God. And as we see more of him in this Gospel, John now begins to tell us how it is that we can have this life.

How do we come into his good and gracious kingdom? Well, Jesus says to us today, there is only one condition for us to come in, but it is high out of our reach.

For all the promise and potential of a newborn, simply being born does not give us new life. Even a life well lived does not give us new life.

[2 : 36] To the surprise of this man, Nicodemus, a lifetime of achievements, years of religious living, a list of theological degrees, teaching in the best seminaries.

It doesn't cut it. What's needed is much bigger, says Jesus, because our need is so much deeper. Not being born, not being well born.

You must be born again, he says. Born again to believe in him. Coming into God's kingdom isn't hard for us.

It's impossible. But we find here that what is impossible for us is indeed possible with God. He gives us new birth to believe in his son.

So let's listen then to the king telling us how to come into his kingdom. We see there are three keys that he gives us for entry. And the first key that the king gives us is this.

[3 : 41] You must be born again. The scene opens at night. And a man steps out of the darkness.

His name is Nicodemus. And John tells us two things about him, doesn't he? That he is a Pharisee. And that he's a member of the ruling council.

Now, we can't hold these things against Nicodemus. Pharisees have a bad reputation in the church. But being a Pharisee in itself wasn't a bad thing.

Pharisees devoted themselves to the scriptures. Pharisees, they worked for a holy life. They had a high view of personal holiness. So today, it would be a bit like saying that he had graduated from Oxford.

We can place him in a certain cohort. We can kind of work out where he fits in society. We might be able to piece together some of his views on different topics.

[4 : 44] But it doesn't make him a bad person just because he didn't graduate from Cambridge. But what does make Nicodemus a shady figure is the fact that he came at night.

Why come to Jesus under the cover of darkness? Some writers suggest he didn't want to be seen. Or words to get out that perhaps he had changed sides.

But I think closer to the point is the idea that for John, darkness is symbolic. Spiritually speaking, the darkness sets itself against the light.

Remember back in chapter 1 and verse 5, we read, The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The darkness wrestles against the light, though it cannot win. And so John mentions that it was night, probably to suggest to us that darkness was Nicodemus' natural habitat. The darkness outside reflects the darkness inside, though he does not know it yet. [5 : 56] And that is indeed what we find as this conversation begins. Rabbi, says Nicodemus, We know that you are a teacher who has come from God.

For no one could perform the signs you were doing if God were not with him. So here he's seen the miraculous signs that Jesus has been doing in Jerusalem, and he's clearly impressed. Clearly, this is a teacher from God. So he comes to tell Jesus the good news. Yes, Jesus, he says, you've passed. You've won our respect.

Welcome to the ranks of the faithful. Teacher from God. A lecturer in the great university of religion. Well, what does Jesus say? If Nicodemus was expecting Jesus to say, Well, thank you for this great honor. Well, he's in for a surprise, isn't he?

[7 : 00] Instead, Jesus replies this, verse 3. Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

Press pause, says Jesus. Stop. You've got it all wrong. Because the question isn't whether I'm part of your circle. The question is whether you are in my kingdom.

Notice how Nicodemus has tried to reshape Jesus in his own image. Bring him into his gang in the playground. When he looks at Jesus, he just sees a version of himself staring back a teacher from God.

But that's the problem, isn't it? If we begin by asking how Jesus fits into our world, how Jesus fits into our lives, we only end up recreating him in our own image.

And that's not the real Jesus. It's only when we start by asking how I fit into his life, how I fit into his kingdom, that we begin to see him as he is.

[8 : 16] But to do that, to turn our hearts from being self-centered to him-centered, we need a drastic solution. No one can see the kingdom of God, says Jesus, unless they are clever enough.

No, unless they are born again. What, says Nicodemus, how can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born?

Jesus simply says again, doesn't he? Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Jesus insists that to really see God's king, to come into God's kingdom, we cannot do it unless, unless we are born again.

To give an illustration, it would be a bit like me trying to get a job at MI6 on Her Majesty's Secret Service.

[9 : 27] I get my CV in order. I read books on espionage. I watch all the Bond films back to back. I spend hours in the gym at training, creating secret identities.

And then I sit down in front of M. We've been over your records, Mr. Hall. He says, your fitness is pathetic.

Your understanding of being a spy is infantile. In fact, there's nothing here that we can work with. You don't need one or two tweaks here or there.

You need to become a whole new person. You must be born again. That is what Jesus is saying to us about coming into his kingdom.

In the words of John Calvin, he means not the amendment of a part, but the renewal of the whole nature. Hence, it follows that there is nothing in us that is not defective.

[10 : 39] What's more, Jesus is saying this to none other than the right honorable reverend Dr. Nicodemus, ruler of the Jews. Not even his qualifications get him through the gates of the kingdom.

His best guess at who Jesus is was wrong. So if Nicodemus is not qualified for God's kingdom, how can any of us come in?

As Nicodemus rightly points out, it's not difficult for us. It's impossible for us. How can we begin again?

Be born a second time, have new life. Well, listen again to Jesus' answer in verse 5. Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Jesus tells us, doesn't he, here's how we can begin again. Being born of water and the Spirit. Remember that wonderful new covenant promise we saw some weeks ago.

[11 : 55] I will sprinkle clean water on you. I will give you a new heart. I will put my spirit in you. Ezekiel chapter 36. God's promise of a new relationship with him.

That he gives to us as a gift symbolized by water and sealed by the Holy Spirit. So what is impossible for us is possible with God.

The Holy Spirit can and must give us a new heart for us to see Jesus for who he truly is. And to come to him as we are.

It doesn't matter how high functioning or hard working we are. How many letters we have after our name.

How many hours we spend studying. Not one of us. Not one of us can come to Jesus on our own. Our need for him is so deep that we can't even really know him.

[12 : 58] Without God first giving us a new heart. But that is exactly the gift that God has promised to give. Perhaps this morning you don't feel qualified for God.

You don't feel you've reached those spiritual heights. You don't feel good enough so you can't come. But the new birth tells us that's not true.

It is true that we are not qualified. But the new birth says we can come. Because it's not a question of how high we can reach.

None of us can reach high enough. But of seeing how deep in sin we all kneel before God. We all stand equally in need of his grace.

And so the ground at the foot of the cross is perfectly level. Whether you've been a Christian 50 years. Or you've never thought twice about Christianity in your life.

[14 : 05] There is no one in this room. No one on this planet with any more right. To come into God's kingdom than anyone else. And so if you don't feel qualified this morning.

Well perhaps you are closer to the kingdom of God than you think. Because we need no qualifications to come. Only God's gift of new birth.

And that is exactly the gift that God gives us in his son. Jesus Christ. As we heard at the start of our service. To all who did receive him. Who believed in his name.

He gave the right to become children of God. Born not of blood or human will. But born of God. When we come to him as broken sinners.

We find to our delight. That we have in fact been born again. As his beloved children. The first key into the kingdom then.

[15 : 08] We must be born again. But the second key Jesus gives us. Is that we are born again to believe. To believe. Nicodemus still struggles.

Doesn't he? To get his head around what Jesus has just told him. How can this be? Nicodemus asked. Well you are Israel's teacher. Said Jesus. And do you not understand these things?

Very truly I tell you. We speak of what we know. We testify to what we have seen. But you people still 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? See the problem is. Nicodemus doesn't yet believe.

Either in his need to be born again. Or in Jesus himself. Now why should he believe. His qualifications have just been through the shredder.

[16 : 06] Haven't they? But now Jesus sets out his qualifications. See that verse 11. We speak of what we know. We testify. To what we have seen.

You might not get it Nicodemus. Says Jesus. But I do know what I'm talking about. Jesus is saying what he's seen.

The one who was there. Is acting as a witness. For us who were not there. Where was that? How does he know? What has he seen? Well let verse 13 blow you away.

No one has ever gone into heaven. Except the one who came from heaven. The son of man. When Jesus speaks to us about heavenly things.

Why should we listen? Well because he's been there. He has stood inside the engine room of the universe. He sees how it works.

[17 : 07] No one can tell him differently. Because who else has seen it? If you browse online. You'll find stacks of heaven tourism books.

Out there. People claiming they have gone up. And spent time. And come down. To tell the story. But what does Jesus say? No one has ever gone into heaven. No one has. Paul does write about a man. Taken up into the third heaven. But he certainly doesn't write a book. Sell millions of copies. And get rich. The point is. The only one who is qualified. To teach us about heavenly things. Is the one who came from heaven. Jesus Christ. He can testify to God's character. To his work. Because he was there. And we were not. That's why we can believe him. When he tells us. How it is we come into his kingdom. [18:10] He is worthy of our belief. But believing in the gospel. Isn't only agreeing. With what Jesus says. It goes further than that. Believing is agreeing. With what Jesus says. And trusting him. To do what he says. See that in verse 14. Just as Moses lifted up. The snake in the wilderness. So the son of man. Must be lifted up. That everyone who believes. May have eternal life. In him. Jesus says. Believing in him. Is like what the Israelites. Did with that snake. In the wilderness. It's a strange part. Of the history. Of God's people. Isn't it? They are in the desert. They have no food. Or water. They come and complain. To Moses. And to God. [19:02] Did you just bring us here. To die. As a punishment. For their ungratefulness. God sends venomous snakes. That bite the people. Lots of them died. And when the people. Asked the Lord. To forgive them. For their ungratefulness. The Lord told Moses. To make this metal statue. Of a snake. A bronze serpent. And hold it up. So that if a snake. Bit anyone. He would look. At the bronze serpent. And live. And just like that. Bronze serpent. Says Jesus. So he must be lifted up. And just like the people. Looked at the bronze serpent. And live. So everyone. Who believes in him. May have eternal life. Nobody. In the camp. That day. Glanced. At the snake. [19:59] Or. Looked. Blankly. At it. Or looked at it. Half-heartedly. No. They ran. And they stared. In desperation. All their trust. Resting. On that bronze serpent. That God had sent. To rescue them. From their punishment. Well believing in Jesus. Is like that. It's not simply agreeing. That he saves. It's trusting him. To do it. To see him lifted up. On the cross. For your sins. So that you would not die. And trusting. That he did it for you. For your new birth. And your forgiveness. Your right to become. A child of God. Reconciled. To the father. Through the death of his son. That is believing. Jesus says. His death. [20:54] Was for everyone. Who believes. Not just. Some special. Born again. Class of believers. Everyone who believes. Why is it important. For Jesus. To have said this. After speaking. About the new birth. Well because. Belief. And the new birth. Always go together. They cannot. Be separated. It's not as if. There are. Born again. People. Walking around. Out in the world. Of not following. And trusting Jesus. It's not as if. There are people. Out there. Or in here. Who are following. And trusting Jesus. Who have not been. Born again. So if new birth. Happens inside. What comes out. Is belief. So to come into. God's kingdom. We must be. Born again. And we must believe. But. They are not. Two separate boxes. For us to tick off. Though they come together. [21:50] Like. Two sides. Of the same coin. And we could spend weeks. Looking at the implications. Of that for us. But to take just two. Firstly. What do. Jesus words. Mean for reaching. Non-Christians. That we know. With the gospel. Jesus says. We all need. New birth. And we all need. Belief. So we need. To ask. God. To please. Give them. A new heart. Because we can't. Birth. Anyone again. And we need. To lift up. Jesus. And point. To him. Because we cannot. Believe. For them. One without the other. Only praying. Or only pointing.

Is underselling. God's kingdom. Because Jesus. The king. Says that both. Are needed. For anyone. To come in. I wonder.

[22 : 48] Which of these. Do we struggle. With most. There's a question. To think about. This week. Or. Or to ask. At home. Or with friends. That you're close to.

Which of these. Could you use. Most help with. As you reach out. To non-Christians. That you know. Praying for the lost. Or pointing. To Jesus. Or perhaps.

If we're honest. It's often. Both. Secondly. Though. What did Jesus' words. Mean for us. Ourselves. We can't.

See our hearts. Can we? There's no test. To see. If we are. Truly born again. I can't see your hearts. But you do know. If you.

Believe. And so. There's no point. Waiting to believe. Until. We know. Our hearts are changed. Because we will never know that. We only know.

[23 : 43] Our hearts are changed. When we believe. So if you are. Holding back. This morning. Waiting. Until God. Changes your heart. You need to know.

That anyone. Who believes in Jesus. Has eternal life. In him. Whoever you are. If you believe. You will be saved. Or perhaps.

You feel. That you're. Trust in Jesus. Is on shaky ground. You're not sure. Whether your heart. Has really been changed. But you know. You do believe.

Well let. Even that. Shaky trust. Give you confidence. Because even that. Is evidence. Of a changed. Heart. Christ. Was lifted up.

On the cross. To save us. With broken hearts. And with weak faith. And if he has renewed. Our hearts. He will surely. Give us.

[24 : 39] What we need. To believe. Each. And every day. Without fail. As a man. Once said to Jesus. So we pray. Lord. I believe. Help.

My unbelief. How does anyone. Come into God's kingdom. We are born again. To believe. In Jesus. Rescue. And the third.

And final key. That Jesus gives us. Is. Himself. God. Finally. Of course. We need. The son. Sent. In love. For God.

So loved. The world. That he gave. His one. And only son. That whoever. Believes. In him. Shall not perish. But have eternal life. For God. Did not send. His son. Into the world.

To condemn. The world. But to save. The world. Through him. We've seen. How very deep. Our need goes. Our need. That God.

[25 : 36] But just look. At the love. That meets. Our deep. Dark. Need. That God. So loved. The world. That he sent. He gave. His one.

And only son. We've seen before. In this gospel. How the world. Is not talking. About number. But kind. John is not interested. In how many people. God loved.

But what kind. Of people. God loved. What is the world. Like. He was in the world. And though the world. Was made through him. The world. Did not know him.

The world. Did not welcome. The son of God. When he came. So why did he come? For God. So loved the world. That world.

This world. The world. That pushed him away. When he came. To the door. God loved. This world. To the point. That he gave. His one and only son. To save it.

[26 : 32] That is to save. Sinners like. Me and ye. Who have spent. Our lives. Pushing him away. He gave his son.

To save his enemies. Because. He loved them. Out of love. He did not send. His son into the world. To condemn. As we deserve.

But to save. Have we forgotten. That at the heart. Of our faith. Is God's. Is God's. Unthinkable love. For his world.

The love of God. In giving his son. For people. Like me and you. Who would not know God. If he showed up. In front of us. Who would not. Have loved God.

If he had not. First loved us. That he would send. His son. To save us. From the rightful punishment. For our sins. This is love.

[27 : 28] Says John. Not that we have loved God. But that he. Loved us. And gave his son. To be. The atoning sacrifice.

