What does it mean to be born again?

Salvation & the Gospel · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/what-does-it-mean-to-be-born-again/

To be “born again” means to be spiritually reborn by the power of God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in which a person is given new life, moving from spiritual death to life through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:3–6; Eph 2:4–5). This is not a human achievement but a divine act—God makes us new from the inside out.

The phrase comes directly from Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. Jesus tells him, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). The Greek phrase *gennēthē anōthen* can mean “born again” or “born from above,” and both ideas are important. This new birth is not merely a second chance at moral improvement; it is a supernatural work that comes from God Himself. As Jesus explains, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

This teaching assumes a sobering reality about the human condition. Scripture describes us as spiritually dead in sin (Eph 2:1–3). A dead person cannot revive themselves. Just as physical birth is something we do not initiate, so spiritual birth is something God brings about. This is why Peter writes that believers have been “born again… through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet 1:23), and why James says God “brought us forth by the word of truth” (Jas 1:18).

Being born again is closely tied to faith in Christ. Jesus continues, “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Through faith, a person is united to Christ, forgiven of sin, and given new spiritual life. The Holy Spirit indwells the believer, producing a new heart and new desires (Ezek 36:26–27; Rom 8:9–10). This is what theologians often call *regeneration*—the imparting of new life by the Spirit.

Across Christian traditions, there is broad agreement that the new birth is necessary for salvation. Differences arise in how and when it occurs. Some traditions emphasize a conscious conversion experience, while others emphasize God’s work through means such as baptism (Titus 3:5). Even so, all affirm that the new birth is ultimately the work of God, not something we accomplish ourselves.

The result of being born again is a transformed life. Not perfection, but a real change. A person who has been born again begins to love what God loves, turn from sin, and grow in obedience (1

John 2:29; 3:9). This transformation flows from the new life within, not from external pressure or mere behavior modification.

Key Scriptures to Study

Core teaching passages

- John 3:3–8 — Jesus teaches that one must be born again (γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν, “born from above”) to enter the kingdom of God
- 1 Peter 1:23 — Believers are born again through the living and abiding word of God
- Titus 3:4–7 — The new birth is the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit
- 2 Corinthians 5:17 — In Christ, a person becomes a new creation

Supporting theological framework

- Ezekiel 36:25–27 — God promises a new heart and Spirit, anticipating the new birth
- John 1:12–13 — Those who receive Christ are born of God, not by human will
- James 1:18 — God brings us forth by the word of truth

Clarifying or balancing passages

- Romans 6:3–4 — New life is described as dying and rising with Christ
- 1 John 3:9 — Those born of God show evidence of new life in how they live

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: “Is being born again just about having an emotional experience?”
Response: No. While emotions may be involved, the new birth is not defined by a feeling but by a spiritual reality. It is the work of the Holy Spirit giving new life (John 3:8), whether or not it is accompanied by a dramatic experience.

Common Objection: “Can I make myself born again by deciding to follow Jesus?”
Response: Scripture presents the new birth as God’s work (John 1:12–13). We are called to believe the gospel, but regeneration itself is something God accomplishes in us.

Common Objection: “If I’m born again, why do I still struggle with sin?”
Response: The new birth begins a process, not instant perfection. Believers still struggle with sin, but they now have a new nature and the Spirit’s power to fight against it (Gal 5:16–17). Growth in holiness follows the new birth.

Why This Matters

Jesus said that without being born again, no one can see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). This is not optional—it is essential. Understanding the new birth clarifies that Christianity is not about external religion or self-improvement, but about new life in Christ. It also gives assurance that salvation is rooted in God’s transforming work, not our ability to change ourselves.

Recommended Resources

- *What Is the Gospel?* - Greg Gilbert
- *The Cross of Christ* - John Stott
- *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* - N. T. Wright