

What Do We Mean by “Born Again”?

by Anthony Buzzard

Almost everyone knows about John 3. This is the famous conversation between Jesus and a leading rabbi, who ought to have known what **born from heaven** meant, but did not (v. 9-11). Nicodemus, fearful about being seen by his friends associating with the “unorthodox” or “questionable” rabbi Jesus, had come by night. Nicodemus was honest enough to know that no one could possibly have done the miracles Jesus did, unless the true God was with him and had commissioned him (v. 2: “come from God,” that is, commissioned by God, not remotely meaning that Jesus was alive before he was born!).

Jesus gave a most basic lesson. Unless we are **born again** or born from above, that is from God’s creative activity, we cannot ever see or experience the Kingdom of God. We cannot be saved. We cannot understand the Kingdom now, and we will not gain immortality in the Kingdom when Jesus comes back. These are really big issues — the only ones that ultimately count!

Jesus made the **rebirth** from water and spirit a condition for tasting the power of the Kingdom now, and gaining immortality in the future Kingdom. Israel’s Scripture (Nicodemus ought to have known this) spoke of an outpouring of spirit in Isaiah 32:15-18. He and Israel should have known about the renewing effect and power of spirit. The Hebrew Bible is full of marvelous prophecies for a bright future, after punishment. Isaiah had foreseen that “one day from the heights of heaven a **spirit will breathe into us**, till the downs grow like an orchard, and the orchard like a forest. Justice fills the very downs, and honesty the orchards, and justice brings us peace and quiet; honesty renders us secure. My people will have homes of peace and rest in houses undisturbed. Ah, happy folk...” (Moffatt translation)

This was the promised rebirth from above, by spirit, which Jesus announced in advance of the worldwide appearance of the Kingdom of God. If we want to be in that Kingdom when it comes at the Second Coming, then we must be reborn *now*, receive the spirit of new life and be fit to inherit the Kingdom of God when Jesus reappears. Regeneration, rebirth, must happen to us now in advance of the great renewal of the world. Jesus spoke of this coming regeneration of the whole world in Matthew 19:28, and Paul in Titus 3:5 teaches our need for renewal through washing and rebirth through holy spirit.

Jesus and Paul of course taught the same saving Gospel, and both knew of Isaiah 51:16 and 65:17-25 where we read of the great coming new society on earth, the new heavens and earth, a new world order with the capital at Jerusalem. All this is Kingdom Gospel material to be believed in response to the command that

we are “to repent and believe God’s Gospel of the Kingdom” (Mark 1:14-15).

Jesus and Paul were intensely conscious of an accompanying text in Isa. 32:1 “One day a King will reign in justice with princes who rule uprightly.”

Our destiny, as a mass of Scripture says, is to assist Jesus in the organizing and administration of that coming new society on earth. Christianity is never about “going to heaven as a disembodied spirit when you die.” It is *always* about inheriting and possessing the renewed land and earth (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10; 20:1-6), with Jesus and all the faithful of all the ages, when Messiah returns. To make your point ask your friend, “Where are you hoping to be in the future?” “I hope to be with Jesus in heaven,” she will predictably say. Then counter with this: “Why do you want to go to heaven, when Jesus won’t be there?!”

Many churchgoers are very far from having the Bible’s view of the future! Much less do they grasp the Christian destiny, the point of our present training and tribulation in view of our election to royal office in the future Kingdom. Do you frequently meditate on Revelation 2:26-27 and 5:10: Jesus has constituted the true believers “a kingdom of priests” (Rev. 1:6) and they “will rule as kings **upon the earth**” (Rev. 5:10). Daniel 7:18, 22, 27 is a key passage for presenting the Gospel. The time will come when “the saints will possess the Kingdom, and all nations and people will obey them” (Dan. 7:27). I will repeat this since so little is known of these amazing propositions: “The kingly power, sovereignty and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be given to the holy people [saints] of the Most High. Their kingly power will last forever, and every realm will serve and obey them” (Dan. 7:27, Revised English Bible).

Ask your pastor to preach extensively on all of this. For participation in immortality and rulership in the coming, peaceful Kingdom of God on earth, we *must* be born again, Jesus said. Is John the only writer to have dealt with this very basic theme? Certainly not. Matthew and Mark and Luke were just as impressed with the all-important issue of rebirth, and they record how Jesus treated the same subject by speaking of the **seed** which must lodge in our hearts for new birth to occur. This is an agricultural picture, well known to us all. Jesus speaking to Nicodemus used the biological idea of rebirth by seed, gaining a new parentage.

Many of your friends have been told that being **born again** involves “an acceptance of Jesus in your heart.” This concept is often very vague. Open to all sorts of imaginative guesses. It lacks entirely the clarity and specificity of the Kingdom Gospel teaching of Jesus. Jesus, you see, begins his ministry by calling on all to “repent **because the Kingdom of God is approaching**” (Mark 1:14-15). More than that, Mark calls this Gospel

preaching of Jesus the announcing of **the Gospel of God** (Mark 1:14). There is no higher authority than that! People in the days of Jesus **knew what the Kingdom of God meant**. It signified the great time coming when God would install His elected Messiah on the restored throne of David in Jerusalem, resulting in world peace and disarmament (Luke 1:33; Isa. 2:1-4; Luke 2:25; Acts 1:6, etc.).¹

“The Gospel of God” is a wonderfully unifying key phrase and title in the New Covenant. Jesus announced **“God’s Gospel”** (Mark 1:14-15). He commanded belief in that Gospel of the Kingdom. Paul framed his whole teaching in Romans by calling it **“God’s Gospel”** (Rom. 1:1; 15:16). Paul often preached God’s Gospel without financial charge (2 Cor. 11:7). In 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8, 9 and 1 Peter 4:17 **God’s Gospel** is the most dramatic piece of information for all mankind.

Jesus announced this Kingdom, and then followed with these imperative words: “Repent [change your mind and your life radically] and **believe that Gospel about the Kingdom.**” The command is clear — we are ordered by Messiah to believe that Gospel of the Kingdom. We are to believe, in other words, in God’s great world plan for us and everyone else. That is where the faith (belief) begins. That is where “the obedience of faith” starts (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). It includes, as we know now, belief in the **sacrificial substitutionary death of Jesus to atone for sins, and of course his resurrection on the third day**. In addition, of course, belief in Jesus’ current session at the right hand of the Father in heaven (**Ps. 110:1**, etc.). The Messiah at the right hand is “my lord,” not “my Lord,” as wrongly rendered in many versions. Jesus is the “my lord” Messiah, the Messiah-lord of Luke 2:11 and 1:43: “my lord” (cp. John 20:13).

The simple truth about the Gospel of salvation is well encapsulated by Hebrews 2:3. This teaches us that Jesus was the first preacher of the **Gospel of salvation**. Hebrews 5:9 makes this simple proposition: “Salvation is based on **obeying Jesus.**” Jesus said exactly the same in John 3:36. He lays out the stark choices before us: either to **believe** in the Son or to **disobey** him. To believe Jesus is to have “the life of the age to come.” To disobey Jesus is to be under the wrath of God (John 3:36). That is exactly why Paul defines true faith as “**the obedience of faith.**” Faith is not real faith if it does not go hand in hand with obedience, and obedience without faith and belief in the Gospel as Jesus and Paul preached it is not obedience. (The command that we all be baptized in water to demonstrate our commitment to the

God and Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:12, etc.) is also one of the non-negotiable requirements of the NT.)

Think about how Bible writers make things doubly clear and emphatic. They frame their writing with the same key concept. In other words they begin and end what they have to say by repeating the same idea. This is an excellent way to teach systematically and effectively.

Note how Jesus in the Beatitudes begins with a reference to the Kingdom and completes a series of parallel sayings by referring to the Kingdom (Matt. 5:3-10). No wonder then that Jesus uttered these marvelous purpose statement Gospel words: “Seek above all the Kingdom of God and all its ways of doing right, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). So also with the Lord’s prayer. The Kingdom is at the beginning and the end. Jesus announced his own fundamental, eye-opening, career statement by saying, “I must announce [I am divinely compelled to announce] the Gospel of the Kingdom to the other cities also: **that is why GOD commissioned me**” (Luke 4:43). That is our Christian commission too (Matt. 28:19-20).

In the parable (illustrative story) of the sower and the seed, Jesus drew on an Old Testament idea, just as he did when speaking of being born of the spirit (cp. Isa. 32). Jesus was very familiar with the tremendously hopeful words of Jeremiah 30 and 31, chapters brimming over with the prospect of national joy and restoration for Israel, following a future time of Great Tribulation, the “time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jer. 30:7). In Jeremiah 31:27-31 Jesus read these words: “The days are coming, says the LORD God, when I will **sow** Israel and Judah with the seed of man and of cattle. As I watched over them with intent to pull down, and to uproot, to demolish and destroy and inflict disaster, so now [at that future time] I will watch over them to build and to plant... The days are coming when I will establish a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.” Sowing is the symbol of prosperity and progeny. Now observe Hosea 2:23: “I **will sow** her [Israel] for Myself in the land; and I will love her who was not loved, and will say to those who were not my people, ‘You are My people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”

Jesus knew these words well, and he saw as his task as Messiah, using the saving Gospel of the Kingdom, the **sowing and planting** of the international people of God in advance of the yet future recovery of Israel and Judah. Jesus went out to **sow the seed of rebirth** and conversion, the germ of future immortality. He sought to bring about the rebirth and change of mind among people, the offer being made first to Jews and then to the whole world. Via the Great Commission, Jesus was creating the new international people of God, the saints. The process requires a rebirth under the influence of the creative spirit of God working through the Gospel of the

¹Billy Graham wrote that the Christian hope is to “polish the rainbows” in heaven and “prepare heavenly dishes” (*Hope for the Troubled Heart*, p. 214). This, we think, should alert readers to how very far some have moved from the biblical mind of Christ.

Kingdom. Sowing and planting of kings and rulers was a biblical notion (Isa. 40:23, 24).

For Jesus the recipients of rebirth were and are being trained and groomed for royal office in the coming Kingdom. That process of gaining a place in the future Kingdom is to be “through much tribulation” (Acts 14:22). Navy Seals are trained and tested under severe conditions. The rulers of the future world government must also be tested and tried in various ways. Jesus and God are watching their people with “X-ray” eyes, testing the hearts and minds, an activity which Jesus now shares with Yahweh (Ps. 7:9; Rev. 2:23; Jer. 17:10). God is “seeking men and women to worship Him in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24). He wants people for His government who will give up everything for discipleship to His Son. Jesus said that if we are not willing to give up all for him, we cannot even be his disciples (Luke 14:26).

He urged us on with these warning words: “Strive, struggle to enter [the Kingdom] through the narrow door” (Luke 13:24). “Narrow is the gate and constricted the road that leads to Life, and those who find them are few. Beware of false prophets [fake preachers] who come to you dressed up as sheep while underneath they are savage wolves...Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven [Kingdom of God] but only those who do the will of my Heavenly Father. When that day comes, many will say to me: ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Out of my sight; your deeds are evil’” (Matt. 7:14-23).

Once again we see the need for the “obedience of faith for salvation.” We are first to obey the Gospel of God about the Kingdom (Mark 1:14-15). Let no one mislead you by saying that there is a different Gospel for us! Paul always preached the **same Gospel of the Kingdom** as had Jesus (Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23: to Jews; 28:30-31: to everyone else; cp. Philip in Acts 8:12). Paul framed the book of Romans by speaking of the “obedience of faith” in 1:5 and 16:26. He also called his saving Gospel by the same title as given to the Gospel of the Kingdom preached by Jesus in Mark 1:14-15. He called it God’s Gospel (Rom. 1:1; 15:16). Observe carefully that Paul made no distinction at all between the **Gospel of the grace of God and preaching the Gospel about the Kingdom** (Acts 20:24-25). To preach or fall for a Gospel *other than* the one Gospel of the Kingdom is to put oneself under a curse (Gal. 1:8-9).

The matter of being born again through spirit and seed is developed in Jesus’ famous parable of the sower and the seed. The seed which must be sown in our hearts and minds is identified and defined as the “word [Gospel] about the Kingdom” (Matt 13:19). Luke

abbreviates this to simply “the word of God” (Luke 8:11) and Mark remembers it as “the word” (Mark 4:14). Misdefining this Gospel/word is the source of all deception. Listen to the words of Jesus in Luke 8:11-12. Jesus began by defining the Gospel as the word of God (certainly *not* just a synonym for the Bible, which is called “the Scriptures”).

Then observe with the greatest attention the amazing teaching of Jesus in Luke 8:12: “The seed along the footpath stands for those who hear the word [Gospel of the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19], and then the Devil comes and carries off the word [Gospel] from their hearts for fear that they should **believe it and be saved.**” This text, I used to say to the students, ought to be preached several times every Sunday! It is a brilliant summary of the saving Gospel, the message which determines whether or not we eventually gain immortality in the Kingdom! Yes, immortality! The hugest issue in our lives — by far. The Gospel is something to be *obeyed!* “Those who refuse to obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:8) are the unconverted, the unsaved. The Gospel must be defined of course before it can be intelligently obeyed.

The Same Seed and Rebirth in Peter

Not many seem to realize that Peter, who had listened for hours to the Gospel teaching and preaching of his master Jesus, repeated the whole account of the parable of the seed and the sower. We can read it in 1 Peter 1:22-25. He begins like this: “Since you have purified yourselves in obedience to the truth [you have believed and obeyed the Gospel of the Kingdom, Acts 8:12], producing a sincere affection towards your fellow Christians, love one another wholeheartedly with all your strength. You have been **born again** not of mortal but of immortal seed, through the living and enduring word of God. As Scripture says, ‘All mortals are like grass; all their glory like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower falls, but the word of the Lord [the Gospel] endures forever,’ and this ‘word’ is the Gospel [of the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19] which was preached to you.”

Peter was an excellent student of Jesus. He is listed in a leadership position among the twelve (Matt. 10:2). He had heard the Messiah preach the Kingdom Gospel/parable of the sower over and over, even from a boat to folk standing on the beach! Peter here combines the idea of “**having been born again**” — pause here to note that anyone who says you cannot be born again until the future resurrection is very much astray! — “born again not from perishable **seed**, but from the **seed** of immortality” (1 Pet. 1:23). Ponder that amazing truth. Our physical lives derive from the seed of our fathers. Our immortality derives from the seed of immortality

provided by the Creator God, the God and Father of Israel and of Jesus.

No wonder then that “you must be born again” if you hope to live forever (John 3:7). And “having been born again” we are commanded to seek the milk of the word (that is not an unborn fetus!) “Like the newborn infants you are, you should be craving for pure spiritual milk, so that you may thrive on it and grow into salvation. For surely you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet. 2:2-3).

Peter then goes on to give the people of God a clear idea of their true identity as believers: “So come to Jesus, to the living stone who was rejected by men, but chosen by God and of great worth to Him. You also as living stones [like those of a temple building] must be built up into a temple and form a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...You are a **chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, a people claimed by God for His own** to proclaim the glorious deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people at all, but now you are God’s people. Once you were outside his mercy; but now you are outside no longer” (1 Pet. 2:4-10). Peter has here taken the identity markers of the ancient people Israel and applied them to the international true church. It was Israel who were designated to be priests and kings for God (Exod. 19:6). Now it is the international Church who assume that privilege. That is not all: Israel was to be the special treasure belonging to God. And that impressive status is now given to the Church in Titus 2:14 and 1 Peter 2:9.

The one nation which was Israel is now the one holy nation, the Church (1 Pet. 2:9). To these people Jesus said, “Fear not, little flock: It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom (Luke 12:32). The Kingdom was removed from Jews hostile to Jesus and given to the little flock who bear fruit from the seed of the Kingdom (Matt. 21:43).

There is of course *also* a future recovery for now blinded and hardened ethnic Israelites (see Rom. 9-11 and much prophecy in the Hebrew Bible).

Peter is thrilled too with the destiny of the faithful who according to Paul in Romans 2:7 are commanded to “seek for glory and honor and immortality.” Peter described “our new birth [being born again] into a living hope [of the future Kingdom]” (1 Pet. 1:3). Peter balances the present trials and tribulations which come to all believers with the greatness of the Christian’s future destiny: “Much more precious than perishable gold is faith which stands the test. These trials come to you so that **your faith** may prove itself worthy of all praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet. 1:7). Yes, “*your faith*”!

James, Jesus’ half brother, was equally impressed with the fundamental teaching about how to gain immortality in the Kingdom. He gave us a similar picture of **rebirth**, speaking instead of birth from a mother: “Make no mistake, my dear friends. Every good and generous action comes from above [cp. ‘born from above’ in John 3:5], from the Father who created the lights of heaven. With Him there is no variation, no play of passing shadows. Of his own choice He **brought us to birth** by the word of Truth, to be a kind of firstfruits of His creation” (James 1:16-18). James had in mind no doubt the destiny of the Christians prophesied by Daniel: “Many of those who are asleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to **the life of the age to come** [‘everlasting,’ ‘eternal life,’ some 40 times in the NT] and some to the reproach of eternal abhorrence [annihilation in the lake of fire]. The wise leaders will shine like the bright vault of heaven, and those who have guided the people in the true path will be like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:2-3). Yes, God has His stars, not to be compared to the world’s version!

John in 1 John 3:9 speaks with equal passion of the **seed of God** in the Christian believer. The parable of the sower is his reference point, of course. God is the parent of all true believers by the transmission of the seed of the immortal God placed in the believer via the **Gospel of the Kingdom of God, God’s Gospel**. 1 John 5:1 speaks of God as the “begetter, parent” and the believers are those begotten, born again from the Gospel. Jesus in 1 John 5:18 is the unique Son who was begotten, brought into existence, and as God’s Son by miracle begetting, he now protects the believers who have been begotten by God, i.e. regenerated (don’t read the KJV here, which is corrupted in this verse).

Paul spoke often of salvation as springing from the same Gospel promise. “You, brothers and sisters, are children [i.e. born again] of promise” (Gal. 4:28). The promise in this context was the promise made to Abraham, the Abrahamic covenant which is the basis of the NT Gospel (“the Gospel was preached ahead of time to Abraham,” Gal 3:8). The promise to Abraham was of property (land, Kingdom), progeny (seed, the Messiah) and prosperity (every possible blessing). The promise to Abraham, said Paul, was that “he will be heir, inheritor of the world” (Rom. 4:13). (See the article “The Promise to Abraham That He Would Be Heir of the World” at our site restorationfellowship.org, and my book *Our Fathers Who Aren’t in Heaven*).

Here is the same Gospel teaching in Ephesians 1:13: “In Christ, you also, after listening to the Message of the truth, the Gospel of your salvation, having also believed [cp. Mark 1:14-15: ‘Repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom’], you were sealed in Christ with the holy spirit of the promise [that is, of your future inheritance of the Kingdom].” Again in Ephesians 2:12: “Remember

that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God [Greek: atheists!] in the world.” He goes on to say that now as believers in the Kingdom they are part of the commonwealth of true Israel, the true people of God, fellow citizens with the saints.

Paul repeats the same theme over and over. In Galatians 3:1-5, Paul urges them to understand that the spirit is received in response to intelligent “hearing with faith” — intelligent reception of the one Gospel of the Kingdom.

The spirit, as Peter said so well, is “given to those who obey God” (Acts 5:32). And “the spirit is the truth” (1 John 5:6) since the words of Jesus “are spirit and truth” (John 6:63). For a full list of all the synonymous terms describing the Gospel, see Appendix 1 in my *The Amazing Aims and Claims of Jesus*.

The Importance of This Topic

Many churchgoers think of Jesus as only the one who died and rose. Those facts are of course absolutely central to the Gospel, but **they are not the whole Gospel**. The death and resurrection are picked out as *among* the vital elements of the Gospel, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:1-3 (*en protois*). But the Gospel was first preached by Jesus, and for a long time Jesus said nothing about his death and resurrection (see Matt. 16:21: he **began** to speak of his death). He preached the Kingdom constantly.

Jesus laid the foundation of the entire Gospel by announcing the Gospel of the Kingdom which Mark defines as “God’s Gospel.” Jesus’ first command was that we are to believe that Kingdom Gospel. That is where obedient faith begins (Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

Jesus unpacked the great saving truth of the Gospel of the Kingdom in **the parable of the seed and the sower**. Jesus noted that none of his parables could be grasped unless the key parable of the sower was first understood (Mark 4:13). Repentance, conversion, and new life in preparation for immortality in the coming Kingdom are the product of that seed message of the Kingdom. In Mark 4:11-12 Jesus uttered these astonishing words: “To you [true believers] God has given the mystery [the revealed Plan] of the Kingdom, but those who are on the outside get everything in parables [in that case inscrutable enigmas and puzzles!], so that [quoting Isaiah 6:9-10], they may see and not perceive, and hear but fail to understand. Otherwise [if they did comprehend] they would be able to repent and be forgiven, by God.”

This is a staggering preaching, **echoing Jesus’ first words in Mark 1:14-15**: “Repent and believe God’s Gospel about the Kingdom of God.” In the absence of a clear understanding of the Kingdom Gospel, repentance

and forgiveness are not possible! Luke 8:12 is equally a riveting teaching from Messiah Jesus. The Devil knows very well what is at stake in the matter of responding intelligently and **believing the Gospel of the Kingdom** as preached by Jesus and all the NT writers: “When anyone hears, is exposed to, the word of God [the Kingdom of God Gospel, Matt. 13:19; Mark 1:14, 15], the Devil comes and snatches away the Message from his heart, **so that he cannot believe it and be saved**” (Luke 8:12).

The NT church faithfully preached that same **Gospel of the Kingdom** and required belief in the Kingdom Gospel message before men and women were ready to be **baptized in water** and become part of the body of Christ. This is the whole point of Acts **8:12**, easy to remember in view of Luke **8:12** just discussed!

Once the **Gospel of the Kingdom** has been grasped, believers must persist in obedient faith until the end. “Some people,” Jesus taught, “believe *for a while* and then fall away” (Luke 8:13). The seed Message of the Gospel of the Kingdom must be retained and produce the necessary fruit, which results in a successful entrance into, inheritance of, the Kingdom of God when it comes. In the US currently, the President elect is choosing his cabinet, seeking the most qualified and talented personnel for the various jobs in government. An exact parallel is found in the Biblical teaching and preaching of the Kingdom. Jesus the Messiah and King of the Kingdom was “about his Father’s business” (Luke 2:49) — and still is to this day, selecting those who will be honored with governmental positions in the first ever really successful world government (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10; 20:1-6; Luke 19:17, “Excellent servant, you are to be in charge of 10 towns”). “May your Kingdom come!” (Matt. 6:10). The Kingdom of God frames the Lord’s prayer as the central and most important topic in God’s great world plan. Daniel 7:27 is an astonishing vision of the world and its societies as they will be when the 7th trumpet announcing the return of Messiah sounds (Rev. 11:15-18). ✧