

Have I Been Born Again?

by Roel Velema
The Netherlands

(Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the NASB.)

"Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him'."

Jesus answered and said to him, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Nicodemus said to Him, *"How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"*

Jesus answered, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

Nicodemus said to Him, *"How can these things be?"* Jesus answered and said to him, *"Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life"* (John 3:1-16).

Jesus, the Son of God, lived some 33 years on this earth. The last 3 were His public ministry. His conversation above with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader and teacher of the Jews, took place in the early days of Jesus' ministry. The topic was *"being born again,"* also called *"being born from above"* or *"regeneration"* or *rebirth*. The importance of this topic should not be underestimated, for without being born again, one cannot see and enter the kingdom of God (see also Colossians 1:13). Being born again makes the difference between being lost and having everlasting life (John 3:16).

Therefore, this pressing question: Have I been born again?

Although Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel, he did not understand what it was to be born again. In the conversation, Nicodemus asked Jesus two questions:

1. *"How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"* (John 3:4).

2. *"How can these things be?"* (John 3:9). Upon this the second question, Jesus says: *"Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things"* (John 3:10). The first question was aimed to know what regeneration is and the second question how someone can be born again. The what and the how go together. If Nicodemus had answered the second question, he, as a teacher of Israel, would also could answer the first question.

What is rebirth?

Let's start with Nicodemus' first question, the question of what the rebirth is. He thought that a person had to be born again physically. Jesus answered that someone had to be born of water and the Spirit. It was a spiritual birth. But why do we need to be born again spiritually? For the answer to that question we must go to the first book of the Bible, to Genesis 2:2,16-17:

"And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

Adam and Eve ate of the tree, but they did not die physically that day. It was a spiritual death. They lost contact with God, and there was a spiritual separation between God who is holy and man who sinned. Based on the work of Christ on the cross, God wants to give new life through the rebirth. And who would not want that? Therefore, this urgent question: Have I been born again?

Apparently, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, should have known what the rebirth is. Which part of the Bible should he have thought of? That is Ezekiel 36:24-28:

"For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:24-28).

Ezekiel wrote these words about 600 years before Christ, and they are more relevant than ever. We see God bringing the Jewish people back from the diaspora to the land that He gave to the Jews through a covenant with Abraham. This will result in the Jews also being born again on a national basis, as is already the case for everyone who comes to faith NOW.

What is this birth from above then? Ezekiel says that with the rebirth we receive a new heart and a new spirit. This is accompanied by cleansing by water. That is not a literal water, but the inner cleansing of the body that becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. And who wouldn't want that?

That is why this urgent question: Am I born again?

When we receive a new heart and a new spirit, our spirit is attached to the Spirit of God, comparable to two glued pieces of paper that can no longer be separated:

"But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Corinthians 6:17).

When that happens, the spiritual contact with God is restored. We then receive spiritual discernment to grow in life with Christ. That is why people who come to faith become so enthusiastic. Those around them often cannot understand that. The believer does understand, because he or she has passed from spiritual death to spiritual life, from a "non-spiritual or natural man" to a "spiritual man." The apostle Paul says about this:

"But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

We can only understand spiritual matters if we have God's Spirit. But about the spiritual man, the born-again man, Paul says:

"But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:15-16).

Isn't it wonderful to become a spiritual man and learn to live and walk with God, the relationship for which we were created? *"God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9).*

God has called every person into the fellowship to know Him better. Who wouldn't want that?

Therefore, this urgent question: Have I been born again?

By nature, we have no spiritual discernment. If we are not born again, we are only aware of what comes from our natural birth. We are spiritually dead when it comes to the true meaning of our existence. We cannot naturally know what the purpose of our existence is. Then we try to make the best of it. Such a life may certainly command respect, but when it is placed in relation to God and eternity, that person is spiritually dead to these things. They belong to another world, and our natural birth does not open the way to that. The only way is in the new birth. That is why Christ said, "*Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again'*" (John 3:7).

We see this all around us all the time. People cannot understand what is of the Spirit and at most come to the statement that "there is something". They do not know the immense significance of rebirth.

The new birth is the spiritual birth of a Christian. Just as our natural birth is the first step and experience in our natural life, our spiritual birth is the beginning of our spiritual life. Rebirth is never the goal of our spiritual life, just as our natural birth is not the goal of our natural life. Birth always and only indicates a necessary beginning. Spiritual growth must follow from that.

The Word "Rebirth"

The word "reborn" is connected in Greek with two words: 1) the Greek verb *gennaoo*, which means "to cause to be born; to beget," and 2) the Greek adverb *anoothen*, which means "from above; from an earlier time, over again."

First, *anoothen* indicates a place where something begins or comes from, for example from heaven (James 3:17). Only secondly is the word a time indication (Acts 26:5; Galatians 4:9). Our rebirth is therefore first a birth "from above," from heaven, and secondly a birth that takes place "again." Our rebirth or spiritual birth is also called in the Bible a "birth from God." This "birth from God" also fits better with a birth from above than with a birth that takes place again:

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12,13).

Through this "birth from God" we become a "child of God". It is not a future right or power, but an immediate power or mandate (Greek: *exousia*), which comes into effect immediately when we receive the Lord. A spiritual birth then takes place through which we become a child of God. And who would not want to become a child of God?

Therefore, this urgent question: Am I born again?

(In Matthew 19:28 we find another word for "rebirth" in Greek: *paliggenesia*. It is derived from the Greek word *palin* which means, among other things, "again" and the Greek word *genesis* which means "birth". It has an eschatological meaning in Matthew 19:28 and refers to the coming restoration in the Messianic age. This is not the subject of this article and must be distinguished from our present personal rebirth).

How do I become born again?

In answer to this question, Jesus says:

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whoever believes in Him have eternal life" (John 3:14,15).

This is a reference to Numbers 21:8:

"Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey.

The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food."

The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us."

And Moses interceded for the people.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived" (Numbers 21:4-9).

As the serpent of brass was lifted up, so Christ was lifted up upon the cross. He became a spectacle to the world. The lifting up of the serpent is a type or shadow of Christ's victory over Satan, the serpent of old. His head was crushed when Christ on the cross *"disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him"* (Colossians 2:15). When you look up at that cross and see its meaning for your life, it determines whether you will survive. Why did Jesus go to that cross? Because God in Christ loved you and me. Jesus died for us of His own free will. Whether or not we accept the finished work on the cross determines whether we will perish or have eternal life. We can summarize this in probably the most famous and important verse in the Bible:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The serpent refers to the evil one, the devil, who has deceived humanity and whose slave we have become.

"Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you will go, and dust you will eat all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:13,14).

However, Christ took the curse upon Himself and was made sin for us. *"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE" (Galatians 3:13),

I am born again by accepting Him who went on the tree, on the cross of Calvary. I then receive the immediate authority to become a child of God (John 1:12,13). This acceptance is done by a prayer of faith:

"And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22).

When we embrace our authority, it will embrace us. What we receive in pure faith will in due time also become an inner assurance through the witness of the Holy Spirit.

"The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16).

This assurance and the assurance of 1 John 5:11-13 is ours:

"And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life."

Jesus said to the paralytic: *"Get up, pick up your pallet and walk"* (John 5:8). He was still paralyzed but had to take Jesus at His word. His faith brought him healing. In the same way, we take God at His word and accept the authority to become a child of God.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20).

Will you also take Jesus at His word and open the door of your heart? Then He will come in to eat with you. This means that you will have a living relationship with Him! Who wouldn't want that? Why delay when He is knocking now, because *"for He says, 'AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU'"* (2 Corinthians 6:2). For example, you can pray:

"Lord Jesus, I open the door of my heart to You. Come in! I hereby accept You to become a child of God. I believe that You went to the cross to save me through Your death and shed blood. Thank You that NOW, through Your resurrection, I have received the authority to be Your child. Amen."

Study Questions

1. Explain what rebirth is.
2. Have you been born again? Why do you think so?
3. What happens internally when you are regenerated?
4. What Bible passage specifically talks about rebirth?
5. How do you get born again?
6. If you have not been born again, write down what you want to pray for to receive new life in Christ.
7. Having been born again is the beginning of our spiritual life in Christ. The first step after that is to seek out other Christians with whom you can learn how to grow in your faith. Think about this.