

## Born Again?

1. Warm-up question: Have you seen any good one's lately? What's your favorite?
2. We often see bumper stickers proudly proclaiming, "Born Again Christian." In our culture today, that term is often associated with evangelical Christians and carries a lot of negative baggage. As a result, many have a tendency to shy away from using the term. On Sunday, Jeff invited to try to put aside the cultural baggage, travel back in time 2,000 years, and thoughtfully consider what Jesus was trying to teach us when he first coined the term. So let's read John 3:1-16, as printed on p. 3.
  - a. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which was a Jewish sect that strived to follow all the commands of the Mosaic Law in excruciating detail. It was religion as rule-keeping. By contrast, Jesus taught his followers to embrace a life guided by the Spirit and characterized by the highest values (love, kindness, patience, humility, etc.). To Jesus, rules had to take a back seat to Spirit and values. Have you ever known someone trapped in religion as rule-keeping? What are your observations? Is it life-giving? Why is religion as rule-keeping insufficient?
  - b. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he's missing something critical – that religion as rule-keeping doesn't cut it. Instead Jesus says he needs to be "born again" if he wants to live in the fullness of God now and in the next life. It's one thing to be born physically (of water), and quite another to be born of the Spirit. In other words, each of us needs to come to a point in life where our soul awakens. Until then we're only half alive – kind of like the difference between a flat two-dimensional photo and an actual 3D person. Think about your life before you spiritually awakened. How would you compare before and after? What's different?
  - c. Jeff said, "God seeks us, Jesus pursues us, and the Spirit whispers to our soul, saying 'Wake up! There's a whole spiritual dimension to life. And I am right here with you.'" Then Jeff shared a couple stories of people awakening spiritually – one about a boy at the top of a tower, looking out, and being stunned by the beauty of God's creation, and another about a man in prison who encountered God in solitary confinement. Looking back across your life, tell us about an experience that began to awaken your soul to God and the spiritual side of life.
  - d. What didn't God create us in a way that when we're physically born, our spirit is also automatically activated? Why did God make the spiritual birthing process a choice that we get to make? Any thoughts?
3. If being born again is a prerequisite to being fully alive, that raises the question the question, "Ok, so how do I get born again?" Jesus replies in verse 8 by saying, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." In the time of Jesus, people could experience the wind; they knew it was real.

But they had no idea what caused it or how it worked. It was a complete mystery to them. Jesus says that being born again is like that. How people get born again – how the spirit gets awakened within them – is a mystery. We can't explain it or diagram it. There's no one set formula for how someone awakens to God in their life.

- a. Despite Jesus warning that the process of being born again defies formula, many churches still try. What was the preferred formula in your past churches for inducting people into the faith? Did that formula work well for you?
  - b. Why do you think God didn't give us one set formula for being born again? Wouldn't that have been a lot clearer and easier?
4. Although there's no set one-size-fits-all formula for activating the spirit inside us, there is a common element to every born again experience. Jesus identifies that element in the most famous verse in the Bible. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life." The key concept here – the common element – is believing in Jesus. In other words, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who shows us the way to God.
- a. Colossians 2:9 says, "In Jesus dwells all the fullness of God bodily; and you are complete in him." What do you think that verse means?
  - b. Jeff said, "It's like God has equipped our spirit – the soul inside each of us – with receptors. It's like our soul has a satellite dish or antenna that intuitively recognize the frequency of God's Spirit. And when we are in the presence of Jesus – when we hear his words, read his stories, feel him around us, or see him in creation – our souls react to his frequency and we have a recognition response. We sense that in Jesus we see God." What is it about Jesus that draws you?
  - c. People often ask, "What about those who never hear about Jesus?" The Bible tells us that creation itself is constantly speaking to us at an intuitive level telling us a whole lot about Jesus (Psalm 19:1, John 1:2). Jeff said, "Anybody who senses God through creation, and through life itself, is sensing Jesus. Even if they don't know his "proper" name, they can still sense him and awaken to him. Sure, it helps to know the full story – and we should be quick to share the full story of Jesus. But a person doesn't have to know the full story about Jesus to awaken to him. You can see him in a baby's smile, in a puffy white cloud, in a mountain stream, in budding rose – Jesus is everywhere. Your soul and mine senses the frequency. And when we start to tune into Jesus, something begins to awaken within us. The Spirit comes alive within us." What do you think about that way of seeing things? Do you like it? Why or why not?
5. As we've already discussed, the process of being born again (*i.e.*, spiritual awakening) is not the same for everyone. For some of us, it happens suddenly in a moment. For others, it happens gradually over time. How about you? Would you

say that you've been born again? If so, as you look back, when and how did that spiritual awakening happen for you?

### **John 3:1-16, selected verses**

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'

<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again. <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into a mother's womb and be born?' <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

<sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born again." <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

<sup>14</sup>Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.'