

## Module 4

### HOW TO BE BORN AGAIN

In the last module we dealt with sin and we have explored the concept of spiritual death as a consequence of sin which affects every person

In this presentation, we will be looking at the concept of being born again from the passages John 3:1-15 which is the solution to our universal dilemma of spiritual death.

We now start off in a segment of the Gospel of John where Jesus deals and uniquely meets the deepest needs of each individual

In chapter 4, he ministers with the Samaritan woman and outcast

In second part of chapter 4, a Gentile ruler who is not part of God's chosen people

In chapter 5, a man who is invalid at the pool whom no one holds in high esteem.

In this early part of chapter 3, Jesus deals with Nicodemus, a Pharisee leader.

Jesus is able to meet the deepest needs for the widest range of people across all levels of society as He is able to meet with our needs today

The issue that is at the heart of our spiritual lives today is the topic Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus the Pharisee leader. There are three questions which we need to seek answers for

**Why must we be born again?**

**What does being born again mean?**

**How can we be born again?**

#### **A. Why must we be born again?**

*John 3:1-3 (ESV) Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

To understand the passage we need to look into the background

There are three things we know about Nicodemus, He is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Pharisees and a teacher of Israel

#### **Who are the Pharisees?**

Pharisees were a select group of men who are set apart to live holy lives for God. There were only about 7000 of them in the whole nation of Israel and they were like holy people in a sense that they had been set apart to study God's word devote their lives to Him.

This gentleman's name was Nicodemus and you will notice he was not just one of the select 7000, he was more than that. He was the ruler of the Jews, which means he belongs to the Sanhedrin, which is a council of 70 religious and political Jews who actually rule the nation in terms of religious life. The Romans control much of the political life, but the religious life was actually controlled by this council of Sanhedrin of Jews and Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, which means he was part of this committee. Hence, he was a prominent politician. Not only that, if you look further down and look at verse 10, Jesus called him "the teacher of Israel". So this meant that not only was he a Pharisee a politician, very high ranking Jew and also "The Professor of Israel", which meant he knew the Mosaic Law. He knew his bible back to front. He of all people would have some knowledge that would get him close to God. This is a kind of person who comes to Jesus.

You notice he comes at night, not in broad daylight to be seen by his peers consulting with an itinerant preacher like Jesus with no theological qualifications no standing in the community. He wanted to consult with Jesus because he recognized Jesus has been performing miracles. He has recognized this by saying, no one can do these signs unless there was something special about him or God's hand was on him. He recognized that these miracles could only come from God, so this was a religious man. So he came to discuss theological issues with Jesus.

However, before he could even start the conversation, Jesus tells him that unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Which means this man thought he was already in the kingdom of God. He thought that of all people in Israel that he would be the one most likely to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus is telling him, hey! unless you are born again you cannot even encounter God, which is a bit of a shock for him.

Here is the irony, here is a man who is the top politician, belongs to that elite 7000 number of Pharisees who has been studying God's word, in fact he is a professor of the Bible as it were and Jesus turns and tells him, look you can't even see the kingdom of God, much less enter the kingdom of God. Why? Unless you are born again, which brings in this whole issue of needing to be born again.

**John 3:4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"**

Nicodemus like us completely misunderstands Jesus. He thought Jesus was asking him to go back into his mother's womb and go through childbirth again.

Jesus corrects Nicodemus, He is obviously not talking about a physical rebirth but something just as radical a spiritual rebirth.

John 3:5-6 (ESV) 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

What Jesus is saying is that this is not something that is within the realm of what Nicodemus or what we can actually do or accomplish on our own which is why Jesus said what is born of the flesh is flesh which translated means it is not physical rebirth.

which was what Nicodemus was referring to but something in another dimension it is spiritual rebirth not something you can feel or touch

Now why is that?

Lets revise of previous module where we looked at Apostle Paul's description of a sinner

*Ephesians 2: 1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience*

Paul is telling the Ephesian church, before they became Christians they were actually dead in their trespasses due to sin. This is the same condition which Nicodemus was found in. He came to Jesus, thinking he was alive, he was very-very much qualified to enter the kingdom of God, but Jesus is telling him, he is dead. He needs to be born again.

Sinners are just like brain dead patients

The patient can be unawake, which means he is unconscious and he is unaware and does not response to any external stimulation and he is actually brain dead but kept alive by machines and within a week or so despite the use of artificial means their heart will eventually stop they will be undergoing physical death .Same thing with spiritual death.

We are actually spiritually dead but it takes us 70 years to actually physically die for all eternity.

### **What is spiritual death?**

It is like physical brain death. We are nonresponsive to spiritual values. We have no ability to do so, we have no insight over our own death. So as far as our response to whether God exist, we will deny it. Whatever God wants us to do, we rebel and do the opposite. We have no inclination or desire to obey him and we have no inclination or even insight to the fact that we are spiritually dead. That's what spiritual death is that applied to Nicodemus.

Now Nicodemus thought, he was a spiritual elite. He was part of the 7000 special Pharisees; in fact, he was their leader. He was the professor of theology, he knew everything about God, but there is a difference between knowing everything about God and actually being spiritually alive and having a relationship with God and really knowing Him personally. He was nonresponsive to what God actually wanted him to do in his life. He was under the illusion that he knew God.

There is another useful illustration we can use in this matter

It might be useful to describe spiritual life as the fourth order of life in this world. Imagine having a beautiful concert and seated at the hall is an apple, a chimpanzee and two human beings. If you were an apple sitting in a hall, you would not be able to hear the music of the symphony being played. The apple plant would be responsive to the light, it grows towards the light and have photosynthesis but it feels no pain, is not happy with the music, it is never hungry, has no fear, has no concept of what music is. That's what plant life is. It is not very aware and it cannot take in much of the reality of its environment.

An animal or chimpanzee sitting at the concert hall will be able to take in a greater awareness of reality. Why? Because it has got more senses. It can hear, respond to

the light, feel the music, the mood of the music. It has got the rest of the feelings like hunger, fear, but it is not aware of the beauty of the music. It doesn't understand the concept of right or wrong or justice, so it is jumping all over the place. It doesn't behave. That's what animal life is.

The third order of life is human life. Human life is the rest of us sitting and listening to the music. We are impressed by the esthetics, we are impressed by the beauty and majesty of the music. Music may tell us the story of love, of justice and we can appreciate that. We can make plans to come back to the concert tomorrow. We have ambitions, we have feelings, so therefore we are able to take in much more of the reality that the world has got to give us

The fourth order of life is actually spiritual life. On top of everything that the human person does, a person who

is spiritually alive or born again will have on top of all those things described before an awareness of God, an awareness the existence of God, of being created by God and an awareness that God loves us and we need to reciprocate by love towards Him and if we disobey him there is a feeling of guilt and accountability to God. Those are spiritually alive people. Someone who is spiritually alive would be spiritually aware of God, whereas a person who is not aware is spiritually dead. As far as spiritual values are concerned, he will be uninterested. Take him to church for example and even the most riveting and best expounded sermon would be boring, look at the Bible study, it will be uninteresting. Why? Because he is not really responsive to real spiritual issues in his sight because he is spiritually dead.

Nicodemus was filled with all sorts of head knowledge and theology but in his heart, there was no real awareness of accountability to God, desire for God and deep inadequacy because of sin in his life and in that situation, he was spiritually dead.

This brings us with answer to the question, why must we be born again. It is because we are spiritually dead and it is not knowledge that would bring us to God, it is not our riches that would bring us to God, it is not position in the society that would bring us to God. We are going to look at what does it mean to be born again.

## **B. What does being born again mean?**

John 3:5-6 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

So the clue about how we are going to be born again, one must be born of water and the spirit. An average guy like us and the rest of us reading Bible have no idea of what Jesus is talking about because we are not aware of the history behind this passage. Nicodemus would be aware because Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel. He is the Professor of theology. When Jesus mentions the word, born of water and the spirit, immediately Nicodemus will remember the Old Testament Bible of which he is a teacher and he could have easily referred back to that.

Nicodemus should have remembered 500 years earlier there was a prophesy of Ezekiel, around BC 593-571 Israel was in exile and during that time it was Ezekiel's prophesy which had a mention of these elements.

Jerusalem fell at about 586 BC, 500 years beforehand and the Babylonians conquered the city. The people were taken into exile forcibly and resettled all the way in Babylon and they were in a terrible state.

Homesick, alone and suffering and the reason why God allowed that to happen was because they become idol worshippers and abandon their worship of the true God, and it would seem as if this was a time when that even though they were the chosen people that they were abandoned by God and they would die in a foreign land. It is in that context where God intervenes and God sends a message through his prophet, Ezekiel, telling them that they would not be in exile forever. There will be coming a day where God will intervene on their behalf.

The coming intervention of God was prophesized by Ezekiel

*Ezekiel 36:25-27 (ESV) I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.*

So this is the reason why the people of Israel or Judah had gone into exile, defeated by the Babylonians, were moved in exile to live forever in Babylon because of their rebellion against God, because of the idols they worship instead of the true God. So what God is saying to them, that in the future I will sprinkle clean water on you, you will be clean from your uncleanness and from all your idols I will forgive you, which means God will come and forgive their sins. The sprinkling of the water and cleansing is basically metaphorical. It is like as if you are cleaning dirt off. God is going to clean their sins. God is going to forgive their sins. Water symbolises the forgiveness of sins

*The second part of the passage reads*

*26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules I am going to give you a new heart, a new spirit I am going to put inside you.*

God is going to do something inside their souls. They are going to have a new heart. I am not talking about a heart transplant, we are talking about a new way of looking at things. A new spirit or nature within them.

*I will put my spirit*

Which means God's spirit himself will be inserted into their hearts.

### **What will this spirit do?**

This spirit will cause them to walk in my statutes and obey my rules, which means the Holy Spirit will come into their lives and will so open their spiritual eyes that they will be able to want to follow God and able to follow God and love God in return. There will be a spiritual reawakening. They would have a new nature.

So Jesus is saying that being born again of the water and the Spirit means that it is a process like Israel when we are forgiven for our sins (symbolised by water) and filled with the Spirit of God given a new spiritual nature reanimating us from our spiritual death

The new nature will be different. If you were to present a lion with the choice of a bowl of salad or some ribs, nature will dictate that he would obviously choose the ribs, he will never choose the salad, because that is how he is made, it is his carnivorous nature. Give a rabbit the same choice and he will choose the salad instead.

Confronted a child with the choice of an apple or a cake and most likely he is going to grab the cake, that's how he is made.

Confront a human being, and given the two choices of serving God or using God. Most of us will choose, I want to use God instead of serve God. The reason why most people are religious is because they are willing to give something to God in order to get something back in return. They are not serving God they are using God. That's human nature. The new spiritual nature is the total opposite serving God and not using God

Paul tells us that we are spiritually dead because we were following Satan and we were living according to the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. Now we have to understand, when Paul writes flesh.

### **What does flesh mean?**

Flesh does not mean our physical muscles that hang off our bones. The theological meaning of flesh, it is the aspect of our lives that wants to be God. The aspect of our lives that does not want to be ruled by anyone else. So therefore we will carry out the desires of our body and mind, but the focus is pleasing ourselves, not God.

### **What is flesh?**

We have natural desires. We have normal desires given to us by God. We want food, comfort, sex, we want to be competent in our work, we want love and affection and power. These are normal desires but they can be either used to honor God or they can be used as strategies of a life lived without God. We can seek for comfort, we can seek for satisfaction and sex, we can seek to be competent in our work or we can seek love and affection or we seek power, all to please ourselves or we could focus all these desires in order to please God. So therefore, the problem with spiritual death is that we are unaware of God and we do the things that we normally do in order to live a life without God which is how a spiritually dead person lives.

Here is an example of a movie star, Letitia Wright, who actually wrote these words, *"I was going through a lot, a very difficult time in my life and I just needed to take a break from acting because I really idolized it. So I came off from it and I went on a journey to discover God and my relationship with God and I became a Christian. It really just gave me so much love and light within myself. I felt secure and I felt like I didn't need validation from anyone else or from getting a part. My happiness wasn't dependent on that; it was dependent on my relationship with God."*

Here you can see that this actress used to idolize acting. The fact that she got great juicy roles and was paid a lot of money, build up her self-esteem and she used that as her idol.

So she came off that and she was confronted with the gospel and became born again with a subsequent change in attitude..because of her new spiritual nature "my happiness wasn't dependent on acting anymore. It was dependent on my relationship with God". With her new spiritual nature she could finally see those things which she could not see before.

The problem with alot of people, even in church, are basically wolves in sheep's clothing. They clothe themselves with this veneer of religiosity, but actually in their hearts they are living to please themselves. They are proud of their achievements. They are like Nicodemus, moral, hardworking, full of integrity and good works. They are very defensive when you try to criticize them and they look down on others. They tend to gossip or criticize because they believe others are not good enough, they are not hardworking enough, they are not successful enough. People like this

use their self-achievement as a method of self-esteem because it is a religious way of subconsciously avoiding God.

The irony is that the very “good” person who is chaste and honest and morally upright can be exactly in the same boat in the eyes of God as the immoral person who thumbs his nose at God and does whatever he wants. The former is spiritually dead and uses morality or chastity for self-esteem, to try to save himself, because by being very moral, he thinks that he can be his own God. The immoral prostitute on the other hand uses sex to be independent of God. They are both in the same boat, they are both spiritually lost.

How are we forgiven of our sins and have this new spiritual nature?

*John 3:8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, 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>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”*

Here it is an unpredictable process. You can’t control it. The spiritual nature is not under our control.

Here Jesus is using a wind metaphor. When you are standing out on the top of the hill, the wind blows where it wishes, you can’t control the wind, you can hear it. You can see its effects, but you don’t know where it comes from and where it is going to go. It is going to turn and twist and roll. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. So the wind metaphor tells us that the spiritual process is not under our control, it is actually under God’s control, it is spiritual. This is where Nicodemus and many of us get it very wrong. We believe it is us that makes the fateful decision to believe in Jesus and then the Spirit comes into our hearts to make us Christians. Spiritually dead people are like physically dead people they cannot on their own make any contribution towards being born again just like a baby contributes nothing towards this own birth. The time comes and the uterus contracts and the baby is thrust out

into the brave new world. The baby can make no signal nor make no movement towards the exit to compel his own birth. The baby is helpless till the birth this is why Jesus is using the birth metaphor and applying it to the spiritual rebirth process to emphasize our helplessness and His divine initiative. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives and regenerates us makes us born again. We don’t decide to be born again. The moment the Spirit regenerates us and we become spiritually alive we begin to be aware of God of His existence of our need for Him we begin to realise that we have sinned and we begin to see the need to turn to Him.

### **C. How can we be born again?**

In a sense this is an impossibility because being born again is something organized by God’s Spirit we cannot wake up one morning and decide we believe in God and be born again. When He decides and puts His spirit in us we are born again. We can’t control it. We can’t see the spirit, we can’t see God, we don’t know how He works. However, the born again process on the part of how we react in response to the Spirit working in us can be seen. This is the challenge to Nicodemus.

The answer lies in the next few verses

*John 3:14-16 (ESV) And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

So this is a crucial passage, but the crucial passage is a little bit difficult to understand for us in modern Malaysia, because Jesus is using again an example straight out of the Old Testament. We need understand the example from the Old Testament to

better understand what it means to be born again. The reason why Jesus using this example from Old Testament is because Nicodemus is an Old Testament professor. So therefore he goes back to an episode that happened in Israel's history many-many years ago.

Jesus is going back 1300-1400 years earlier to the time before the Babylonian exile, to the time where Israel was in slave, in the land of Egypt and God brought them out into the Sinai desert through his servant Moses. There was Israel in Exodus.

During that time the people of God rebelled. They weren't happy to be trudging through a barren desert. They didn't have enough trust in God and because of that God punished them and sent many-many serpents and the poisonous serpents bit the people and the people started dying off in the thousands and then they turned to Moses for help.

*Numbers 21:8-9 (ESV) And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

So here we have a situation where people were dying everywhere. They were dying from snake bites. They were in the process of dying, they could only crawl, the snake bite burns through their flesh and the solution was that Moses would actually make a serpent. The same serpent that killed them, he has to hang it on a pole and anyone who looked at the serpent, he would live.

This is very significant because in episode in the history of Israel depicts how people were saved from physical death. They were forced to look at the bronze image of the awful poisonous serpent. They were forced to look at the very thing that would have been their death and this symbolically made the people aware of their sin. The serpent reminded them of their own evil ungrateful rebellion towards God which for us is what in essence sin is. The second thing is that, in order to be healed, they didn't have to climb seven mountains or pay a huge sum of money, they just had to look. It was just as simple as that, they had to look and believe that by looking at this bronze serpent they would be saved. Even a dying man could manage a look and looking took just faith.

That is the historical situation, Jesus makes the connection.

*John 3:14-16 (ESV) And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, (which is the title Jesus took upon himself) 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

So here we have it, we have the parallel situation. For the people in the Sinai desert, they were dying of physical poison, bitten by snakes because of their disobedience to God and the solution for them was that Moses lifted up a bronze snake and those who looked at the bronze snake, they knew they were dying because of the snake, they were dying because of physical poison, because of their sin and all that they have to do was to look and believe that God will heal them through that serpent. In the same way, just as Moses have lifted up the snake, now Jesus said that he would be lifted up on the cross alike the bronze snake. The people who looked at him would know that they were dying because of the spiritual poison that was in them that is sin. That is the sin of man that put Jesus on the cross and this parallel situation of healing of that sin is just looking, just believing in Jesus.

So here we are at the end of Jesus teaching. We need to draw all the strands of his teachings together. How are we to be born again?

We start off with what Jesus said, we all have to be born again and we need to be born again of the water and the spirit and that reminds Nicodemus of the prophesy 500 years before Jesus by Ezekiel in chapter 36 that God would affect cleansing with



water, which means God will forgive his people for their rebellion and their sin and he will put a new nature into their hearts. A new spiritual nature to enable them become spiritually alive to feel the need for God to be aware of God be have the ability to believe in Him and to really walk in love with him. People like Nicodemus didn't understand that this would be a divine initiative. So, what they did was, they obeyed the law, tried as hard as they could with good works, gave charity to the poor in order to earn salvation. However, salvation and forgiveness of sin is not something that we could affect ourselves because we are indebted because of our sin we were spiritually dead.

The debt had to be paid and then Jesus reminded us of Moses in Numbers 21, time when people sinned and they were dying of sin because of the poison of snakes and all they had to do to be healed was to look at the bronze snake, which was put up on the pole and drawing these two pieces of scripture together, Jesus now points to himself in verse 14 and 15

*John 3:14-15 (ESV) And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*

So this was how God was going to affect spiritual new, spiritual rebirth, how he was going to forgive them of their sins, by offering his son to be lifted up on the cross as a sacrifice, so that the death of sin would be paid, so that they could be legitimately, we could be legitimately forgiven and once that was done and we have new righteous nature. God's Spirit would come into a person and he would be inwardly spiritually born again and outwardly this new nature would be seen as faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God who died for us. Only a spiritually alive born again person will be able to believe in Jesus and have eternal life.

#### **Now why did God do this?**

God did this because in verse 16 it is written

*John 3:16 (ESV) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

So God shows us his heart. He shows us how much he loves the world that was in rebellion against him and he initiated this move where he gave his only son, so that all we have to do is to give our lives to him, to believe in him, so that we will not perish but have eternal life. Just as the people who were actually healed from physical poison, by looking at the snake we can be healed of spiritual poison, our sin, by looking at Jesus.

However, just as in the Old Testament during Moses time, those who refused to look at the snake on the bronze serpent laid up on the pole would go to default mode. They would die.

*John 3:17-18 (ESV) For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

The bronze serpent placed a 1300 years ago was not placed to condemn the world. If they didn't look at the bronze serpent, the default mode would be that they would die of the physical poison. The same thing, God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but just as the bronze serpent, he was to provide healing, salvation and forgiveness of sins.

*18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God*

The default mode is condemnation. The default mode is to continue with the spiritual poison coursing through our veins, causing eternal death and spiritual death.

#### **LET'S SUMMARIZE:**

This is the born again process. It is a dual process. On one hand, it is on God's side. On the other hand, it is

our side. On God's side, he looks at us and we are spiritually dead. We can't respond to him and what he does is send someone to share the gospel with us and when that happens, the Holy Spirit moves and causes us to be born again. Looking on the human side, all we see is that when someone presents the gospel to us, we are able to see the spiritual truth, we are able to see that we are sinful, we are guilty, there is a need for salvation and Jesus is God, Jesus is the son of God, he did die on the cross for us and we have faith and when we have faith and we believe in the Son of God that shows that we are born again and this decision needs to happen for every single person in the world.

### **Questions on the Passage**

1. Why did Nicodemus think he was already qualified to go in to heaven more so than most people in Israel?
2. Why did Jesus tell Nicodemus that without being born again he could not even see the kingdom of God?
3. What did Paul mean by saying apart from Christ we are spiritually dead?
4. What did Jesus mean by saying that in order to be spiritually born again we have to be born of the water and the Spirit? Ezekiel 36:25-27
5. Why did Jesus say that being born again was like the wind blowing?
6. Why did Jesus refer to the time when Moses held up the bronze serpent for the Israelites in the Sinai desert and relate it to being born again?

### **Application Questions**

- What is the evidence that a person has been born again?
- What should you say to a person who says that he is not willing to make a commitment to become a Christian because he is not sure if he can actually be a genuine Christian?