

Born Again: What must I do?

By Steve Pruitt

As a child growing up in church it was common to hear sermons expounding on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus as recorded in the gospel of John. The theme of those sermons was the answer to the question “What must a person do to be born again?” And the popular answer to that question was “To be born again you must believe upon Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” The preacher emphasized that being born again is a choice that a person makes to follow Christ. In other words, upon being convicted of their sins by the Holy Spirit, a person decides whether or not they want to be born again. That is, a person has free will to accept or reject the new birth being offered to them; they have control over their eternal destination. Some may understand this as the doctrine of self-determination.

Many times this example was given to lend clarity as to man’s responsibility in being born again: God is like a captain standing on the edge of a boat throwing life preservers to drowning people, but it is left up to those who are drowning to take hold of the life preserver and be saved. Even if this illustration is remotely true, it begs the question “Why do some take hold of the life preserver and some do not?”

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus gave Nicodemus two pre-requisites to entering the kingdom of God (John 3:5), being born of water and being born of the Spirit. Jesus did not give any pre-requisites to being born again and never did Jesus tell Nicodemus that a person must believe in the Son to be born again, only that whoever believes in the Son will have eternal life (John 3:16).

Jesus told Nicodemus that the work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth (born again) is like the wind. Jesus said, *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.* (John 3:8 ESV) In other words, you may hear the wind blow, but you have no control over it, it blows where it wills. In the same way the Holy Spirit gives new birth as he wills and is not influenced by the will of man. Man has no more control over being born again than he does the wind.

John’s writings concur that one who is born of God, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18), does not do so merely by an act of free will apart from divine influence (John 6:44). Speaking of Jesus, John wrote, *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.* (John 1:11-13 ESV) A person does not acquire new birth (is not born again) because of his nationality or race (born of blood), or because of some righteous act (will of the flesh) or because it is granted to him by a human mediator (will of man). It is God, by his Spirit, who alone gives new birth according to the sovereign purpose and counsel of his will and the riches of his grace (Ephesians 1:5, 7, 9, 11).

Peter wrote, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.* (1 Peter 1:3 ESV) So, God causes a person to be born again. Or as the King James Version of the Bible states, God “hath begotten” us. God does the begetting. There is no action on the part of the begotten. This is due to the fact that the begotten is not capable of any action that could bring about their new birth.

R.C. Sproul sheds light on the question, “Why do some people take hold of the life preserver and some do not?” He wrote, “God just doesn’t throw a life preserver to a drowning person. He goes to the bottom of the sea, and pulls a corpse from the bottom of the sea, takes him up on the bank, breathes into him the breath of life and makes him alive.” In other words, there are no drowning people to which life preservers are thrown. There are those who have been given life and those who are dead. To assume that there are drowning people you must assume that there are people who have enough life in them to make the choice and by their own effort take hold of the life preserver. Scripture gives us another picture all together.

Every person is under sin because all have sinned (Romans 3:9; 7:14). Since all have sinned death has spread to all for the wages of sin is death (Romans 5:12; 6:23). Scripture also says that there are none righteous, none who seek God and none who understand God, they have all turned aside and together become worthless (Romans 3:10-12). God did not send Jesus to die on the cross because he saw something in man that was worth saving. God sent Jesus to the cross to bestow the riches of his grace on a people who had together become worthless (Ephesians 1:1-13); that is to all who believe on his name.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.* (1 Corinthians 2:14 ESV) Prior to the new birth experience no one has the ability to understand spiritual things much less make a righteous decision to believe in Christ; they are spiritually dead. Jesus made this clear when he said, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have **no life in you.*** (John 6:53 ESV) And to the Romans Paul wrote, *For while we were still weak, (strengthless, impotent) at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.* (Romans 5:6 ESV)

Two times in Ephesians chapter two Paul wrote that every person is dead in their trespasses and sins (vs. 1, 5). He said, *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved.* (Ephesians 2:4-5 ESV) He also wrote to the Colossians, *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.* (Colossians 2:13 ESV) Again we see that it is God who makes alive. It must be so for it is not possible for a dead person to make any decisions nor can they make themselves alive. Likewise, spiritually dead people can neither make a righteous decision nor make themselves spiritually alive. *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.* (Romans 9:16 ESV) Of God's own will he brings a person forth to new life (James 1:18).

In the new birth the Holy Spirit causes new life to happen. Jesus said, *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.* (John 6:63 ESV) It isn't until a person is born again, given new life, that they have the ability to "make a decision" for Christ and thus be saved. Yes, a decision or choice is made on the part of the person who desires to be saved. However, no one in his or her natural state can make a decision to be saved and follow Christ. In fact, if God did not make a person willing to be saved no one would be saved because all are hostile toward God by nature (Romans 8:7; Colossians 1:21; Ephesians 2:3). So, all who come to God seeking salvation do so because God causes them to be willing by giving them a new nature (Ezekiel 36:27). A person is not born again because they freely choose to "take God up" on his offer. The only thing a person is "free" to do before new birth is sin. They are born again because God chooses to make them a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 1:4).

Consequently, God doesn't cause a person to be willing to be saved only to have that person reject his call. A person may reject the gospel call of a witness, but he or she will not reject the sovereign call of God (Acts 13:48). Paul testified, *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.* (Romans 8:30 ESV) Everyone whom God calls and causes to be born again, he justifies or saves. There are no exceptions. That said; God does not coerce an unwilling person to be saved nor is God sitting in heaven refusing to save people who are willing to come to him for salvation. When the Holy Spirit gives new life to a dead spirit the dead spirit is made alive and spontaneously becomes willing. And since God's sole purpose for giving new life is for a person to become willing to be saved, he saves all who come to him. Jesus said that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:15). He said, *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.* (John 6:37 ESV) Peter and Paul concurred that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13). All willing souls who come to Christ will be saved, but only God can make a soul willing to come (Acts 16:14).

Paul wrote to Titus, . . . *he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.* (Titus 3:5 ESV) Grace is the free and undeserved love or favor of God exercised toward undeserving sinners. If God grants new birth based on a person's endeavor to be saved then the new birth is a reward for the endeavor and not a free work of grace. In other words, if a person must do the "work" of believing to be born again then the new birth comes by works and grace would no longer be grace (Romans 11:6). And if God grants grace or chooses to give new birth to a person only because he foreknew in eternity that the person would one day choose to believe, he is a mere responder not the author or causer of the new birth and grace would no longer be grace (Acts 3:15; Hebrews 5:9).

A person has no control over when they are physically born, who their parents are, the country in which they are born nor their gender. All of these are sovereign acts of God (Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11, 10:6). Likewise, neither does a person have control over when they are born again. Being born again is a sovereign act of God's will and grace. Paul wrote, *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV) To be saved a person must be born again. And the grace to be born again and

consequently be saved is a gift of God that cannot be earned by making a decision for Christ (2 Timothy 1:9). This is very important to understand, because if man can earn new birth by his own effort then he is worthy of the praise and glory for his conversion; he has something of which he can boast (he was smart enough to reach out and take hold of the life preserver). However, if God alone gives new birth he receives the praise and glory and all boasting is in God (1 Corinthians 1:27-31; Ephesians 1:5-6, 12, 14). And who receives the glory is paramount.

Jesus said that no one comes to him unless the Father draws them and grants them permission (John 6:44, 65). Salvation happens when God, by his sovereign grace (apart from any action on the part of the unbeliever), sends the Holy Spirit into the heart of a dead soul and breathes new life into it causing the unbeliever to be born again, then almost simultaneously, gives faith as a free gift to a willing heart enabling the unbeliever to believe in Jesus.

William Temple once said, "The only thing of our very own which we contribute to our salvation is the sin that makes it necessary." A person does not have to believe on Jesus Christ to be born again. **A person does have to believe on Jesus for the forgiveness of sins to be saved (Acts 16:31), but he must first be born again before he can believe to be saved.** And the born again experience is a sovereign act of God that comes from outside a person. Though they happen practically simultaneous, regeneration or new birth precedes salvation and makes salvation possible. So, what must a person do to be born again? The answer is NOTHING.