

Jesus was born at a time when there was great disagreement between about the resurrection. Some believed in it and some did not. And that was between the people who actually believed in God. As Christians, we believe Jesus was God in the flesh, so we believe in the resurrection because Jesus taught us to believe in the resurrection. But how did Jesus teach the Jewish people who disagreed about the resurrection? For one thing, Jesus taught that they must be born again.

What does it mean to be born again, and how is being born again connected to the idea of the resurrection?

When I was young the most familiar way to ask if someone was a committed Christian was to ask, “Are you born again?” Most Christians then were so familiar with the phrase that they would respond without really thinking about what the words meant and say, “Of course. I’m a ‘born again’ Christian.” The funny thing is that usually about as far as the conversation would go. If the conversation continued it usually concerned where you went to church, the name of your pastor, and what kind of Christian music you liked. Almost never, do I remember talking much about what it actually means to be born again.

I think most Christians understand that being “born again” means believing in Jesus Christ as your savior from sin. Because of the forgiveness that Jesus can give we can live free from a sense of guilt and be free to live for Him. Simply put, it means to stop what you were doing and begin your life over, made new by Jesus. But we don’t usually get to the root of what it really means.

## Is “Born Again” a New Idea?

The phrase “born again” was first used in a conversation that Jesus had with a Pharisee named Nicodemus (John 3:3). Nicodemus told Jesus that he knew Jesus was from God because of the miracles He did. Jesus’ response was, “You must be born again.” What is easy for us to miss in the story is that Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he wasn’t already right with God. That’s a little like someone who has no medical degree telling a medical expert to learn how to practice medicine correctly. Jesus was telling Nicodemus there was something more that He needed. He needed to be born again.

Nicodemus had a first class theological education. Even Jesus said, on many occasions, that His disciples should pay attention to the teaching of the Pharisees because their teaching was good. The problem wasn’t the quality of their teaching, it was the condition of their hearts. They hadn’t really given themselves to God. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that all his high quality learning wasn’t enough.

Nicodemus asked Jesus questions. Jesus answered His questions. Then, Jesus asked a question of Nicodemus, “**John 3:9–10 ESV** Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

Jesus was stunned that Nicodemus didn’t understand that he needed to be born again, and that Nicodemus didn’t understand what it meant to be born again.

First, Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again. Then, Jesus said that unless he was born of the water and the spirit he couldn’t enter the kingdom of God.

Pay attention because this is very important to understanding what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is amazed that Nicodemus doesn’t understand what Jesus means by saying a person must be born of the water and the spirit. Why would Jesus expect Nicodemus to understand what it means to be born of the water and the Spirit?

It was because Jesus wasn’t saying something new. He was borrowing the idea of being born of the water and the spirit from the prophet Ezekiel. Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand recognize His reference to the

words from Ezekiel's prophecy, but Nicodemus completely missed the connection. Jesus was upset that one of the greatest students of the Bible didn't understand the Bible.

What was Jesus quoting from the Bible?

Ezekiel 36:25-35 (ESV)

<sup>25</sup> 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**. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> And **I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules**. <sup>28</sup> You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. <sup>29</sup> And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. <sup>30</sup> I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. <sup>31</sup> Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations. <sup>32</sup> It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord God; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.

<sup>33</sup> "Thus says the Lord God: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. <sup>34</sup> And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. <sup>35</sup> And they will say, '**This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden**, and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited.'

Let me point out a few things. In the entire Old Testament, Ezekiel 36:25&26 is the only place where God tells His people that he will make them new by putting "water" and "spirit" on them. Jesus knew this. He was surprised Nicodemus didn't recognize the reference to water and spirit came from Ezekiel 36:25&26. Nicodemus had to have been familiar with the writings of Ezekiel. Jesus is basically, asking Nicodemus, "How come you don't get this? Why don't you understand immediately what I'm talking about? It's written in Ezekiel? You should know this."

Just to make it a little more convincing that Jesus is referring to Ezekiel 36, notice a little later Jesus says, 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." That's because Jesus is pointing out that to be "born again" a person must be born of the spirit. That's clear enough, but Ezekiel makes a similar point in Ezekiel 37:9 "Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.'" Reading these in English the connection may not be clear. In both Hebrew and Greek the same word is used for "breathe", "wind", and "spirit". If you think about it, a breath is a very, very small wind. And, when a person dies, and their spirit has left their body, they stop breathing. So, although we may not connect "wind", "breath" and "spirit" in the English language, we can see why other languages group them together because they are sort of connected to each other.

The point is that Jesus is developing the idea that Ezekiel's prophecy about "water" and "spirit" is being fulfilled in Jesus' ministry. Jesus is giving the process a new name. He is calling it being "born again." Ezekiel prophesied that new life would be given when the prophecy was fulfilled. Jesus was claiming to be the source of that new life. A person who believes in Him will receive that new life. In John 3:16, a little later in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus refers to this process as "believing" in Him and receiving "everlasting life."

When a person believes in Jesus, He is born again. He or she receives new life. That life makes a big difference here and now, but that life is very different than the life that person received when he or she was born. This new life is eternal life. It will continue even after the physical body dies.

You might ask, "So what's the big deal?" The thing you don't want to miss is that Jesus is saying this idea of being born again and receiving eternal life is not a new idea. He didn't invent it. This was God's plan for human beings from the very beginning. Ezekiel didn't invent the idea of the resurrection or eternal life either. Actually, we can see hints of the resurrection in the very beginning of the book of Genesis.

## The Idea of the Resurrection Is Older than You Think

Matthew 22:23-33 (ESV)

<sup>23</sup> The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, <sup>24</sup> saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’ <sup>25</sup> Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. <sup>26</sup> So too the second and third, down to the seventh. <sup>27</sup> After them all, the woman died. <sup>28</sup> In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.”

<sup>29</sup> But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because **you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.** <sup>30</sup> For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. <sup>31</sup> And as for the resurrection of the dead, **have you not read** what was said to you by God: <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ **He is not God of the dead, but of the living.**” <sup>33</sup> And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

The Sadducees, the group of Jewish believers who didn’t believe in the resurrection, were trying to catch Jesus in a trap. They wanted to prove that Jesus was a fool for teaching that there was a resurrection. Instead, Jesus’ answer silenced them.

They asked Jesus about a woman who had a husband who died, and then had several other husbands. Which husband would be her husband in the resurrection? First, Jesus says that there is no marriage when people are resurrected. Second, Jesus points out that in Exodus 3:6, one of the five books of Moses that the Sadducees considered to be part of God’s Word, God had declared to Moses that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were still alive when God spoke to Moses. God had identified Himself, when speaking from the burning bush, as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus points out, if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were no longer living wouldn’t God have said that He used to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? But instead, God said He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We have a record of the death of Abraham (Genesis 25:8), the death of Isaac (Genesis 35:29), and the death of Jacob (Genesis 50:1-14). Surely, they were dead long before Moses was born. Jesus is saying that the only way God could have referred to Himself as their God is if they were resurrected from the dead.

This is a Jewish way of thinking, and the Sadducees found it convincing enough that they were silenced (Matthew 22:34).

Let’s be clear that the resurrection is referring to the idea that when a person is a genuine believer God will cause that person to live forever. Jesus referred to this gift of eternal life as being born again. Being born isn’t something you do. It was done for you. You were the product of your birth, but you weren’t the cause of your birth. You can’t make yourself born again. Jesus, by the power of His resurrection, can cause you to be born again. You become part of the new creation that is coming as a result of Jesus’ resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Sadducees who didn’t believe in the resurrection might have appeared to be talking about something very different than being born again. But because we are born again by the power of Jesus’ resurrection, the two different concerns are not only connected, they are actually the very same thing. Christians can only be born again by the power of the resurrection of Jesus. Christians will also be resurrected by the power of Jesus’ resurrection.

What we find is that the Bible had been talking about the resurrection from the very beginning. Being born again was not a new idea at all. It was as old as the human race.

## In the Beginning

### Genesis 3:15 ESV

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.”

We don’t find it in this verse, but a little earlier God told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil they would die (Genesis 2:17 “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”). We know from reading the rest of the story in Genesis that Adam and Eve didn’t instantly die after eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. What

did happen is that Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24 “He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” ).

We do know that a long time later Adam died physically much later after 930 years (Genesis 5:5). What happened on the day that Adam and Eve sinned is that they were separated from God. God could not let them continue to live in the Garden of Eden because they could no longer share in His fellowship, or experience the kind of life He could give them. This is called “spiritual death.” It is different than physical death because a person’s body is still living, but they are separated from the one who gives the gift of life. They are separated from God, because of their sin.

The promise of Genesis 3:15 is that one day a person descended from Eve will overcome Satan, the serpent. Here’s the key to understanding this. The punishment for sin was death. But the defeat of Satan would reverse the punishment for sin. Because the punishment for sin was death, the reverse of death would be life, even eternal life, or a new kind of life that has no ending.

Jesus is definitely pointing to Ezekiel 36:25&26 when He tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. And, Ezekiel 36:25&26 points to the promise of Genesis 3:15, which tells us of a descendant of Eve who will overcome Satan, and reverse the effects caused by Satan. And, all the prophecies of the Old Testament, including Ezekiel 36:25&26, Exodus 3:6, and Genesis 3:15, all point to Jesus’ death on the cross and the resurrection. It’s not a new idea. It has been God’s idea from the beginning.

## Looking Forward and Backward – and at Yourself

Where does this leave us?

God’s plan from the beginning had been to make a way so that those who believed in Him would experience the power of resurrection. When Jesus came, He provided that power when He was crucified and rose from the tomb.

Some people have the idea that when a person believes in heaven it’s a bad thing.

In the biblical account, when Jesus ascended to heaven, he left his disciples with the promise that he was preparing a place for them. The disciples were overjoyed at the prospect of heaven. Their anticipation of heaven was so strong that it fueled their courage to spread the good news, even in the face of persecution.

In the medieval era, some people believed that heaven was a place of eternal boredom, where all you did was sit on clouds and play harps. However, the biblical idea of heaven is more like a vibrant city with meaningful work and joyful relationships.

Imagine if someone told you that believing in heaven is a bad thing because it means you'll miss out on all the fun in life. But the truth is, the biblical idea of heaven shows that God's promises are the most exciting and fulfilling things we can hope for.

Even in Jesus’ day, among people who believed in the God of Israel, there were some who didn’t believe in the resurrection. Why? Because it isn’t clearly spelled out in the books written by Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. These five books were considered to have the greatest authority as God’s Word. Other Jewish believers thought that the words of the prophets, the Psalms, and other writings that they believed were also a part of God’s Word, did clearly spell out a belief in the resurrection, so they believed in the resurrection.

Are you born again? Are you not sure? Would you like to be sure? Talk to me. Talk to Chap. Crossland. We will help you. We will help you to learn what you need to do to be baptized and receive assurance that you are indeed born again.