

# **GOD'S CALL**

## **Major themes in the Scriptures**

### **The Holy Spirit (3)**

#### **Born of the Spirit**

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The Lord willing, today we will consider the subject, “The Holy Spirit”, the third message, in seeking to appreciate major themes in the Scriptures.

A short summary of today's message:

All of us have gone astray and fallen short of the glory of God. How can we become accepted by God into His kingdom, and become a child of God? It is the Holy Spirit who helps each one of us to come to God to find forgiveness and new life and be born of the Spirit.

We will seek the Lord to appreciate more of what this means.

We know that God has created us with a very good and noble and high purpose that we may develop our being and become like Him, that we may enter into deep fellowship with Him. But all of us know that men have chosen to go their own way, each one of us, we have gone astray to our own way.

How can we then be acceptable to God? How can we enter into the kingdom of God, become a child of God, have a meaningful relationship with Him?

Over the centuries, many have sought to understand this issue and sought to bring the message of life and hope to all mankind. How does one become a Christian? How would one become acceptable to God? When will our sins be forgiven?

There are those who emphasize the importance of being a born again Christian. They know that many people are called Christian in name but they are not born again.

What then is the meaning of that - being born again?

There are those who say: "I am a Christian because I was born in a Christian family"; "I am a Christian because I have prayed a prayer to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour."

Do these things really bring about the change in us so that we become children of God?

It is important that we understand what it truly means from what God has revealed to us.

Let us turn to **John 3: 1-8**.

**John 3: 1-8**

- 1 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 have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."
- 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."
- 4 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?"
- 5 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.
- 6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
- 7 "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'
- 8 "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."

This is a very important passage for us to ponder over to understand the nature, the meaning, of being born again or being regenerated.

Notice, Nicodemus was a man of the Pharisees. He was educated; he was able to think about things of this world; he knew the Scriptures; he understood the laws of God; he was a ruler of the Jews. And when he came to the Lord Jesus, he acknowledged that the Lord Jesus was a teacher come from God.

The Lord Jesus responded to him straight to the point, right to the heart, to address the need of Nicodemus. He was not at that point going to give him a long lecture about the principles of God's kingdom or the Law that Moses had given. He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

So with all the knowledge that Nicodemus had, with all the experience, with all his practices in the Law of Moses, if Nicodemus were not born again, he would not see the kingdom of God. He would not be able to enter into the kingdom of God if he were not born again.

The Lord Jesus made it very clear: "...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

So let us recognize that this applies to every man. Whoever we are, wherever we may be, it applies to us. If we are not born again, we cannot see the kingdom of God.

But first, we must understand what the Lord Jesus meant by "the kingdom of God" in this context.

Do we not belong to God? Do we not belong to the kingdom of God?

In one sense, we can say, "Yes." All of us belong to the kingdom of God. Why? God is the King over all creation. He is the Ruler, the absolute Ruler of all creation. He is the almighty God. So, we all belong to His kingdom by creation. God is the Ruler over the whole universe. In that sense, we all belong to the kingdom of God.

But here, the Lord Jesus is not referring to that. He is referring to the kingdom of God where men have chosen to respond to God in submission, in worship, in love, with gratitude, seeking to identify with Him, to serve Him, to honour Him, to live according to His ways – where God can rule over us because we welcome Him as our King; where God can be close to us, appreciate us, relate with us with love and with kindness as His people.

So this "kingdom of God" applies only to those who have specifically chosen to respond to God in that way: to submit to Him, to walk in His ways. God will not compel you to enter the kingdom of God and He cannot do so because the kingdom of God in this sense has to be something voluntary and willing on our part.

So the Lord Jesus said, "...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." That means all of us who are born once, born into this world, as it stands, we cannot enter into the kingdom of God. We must be born again. It applies to everyone.

So what does that mean?

Nicodemus did not understand. He 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?" Nicodemus thought that the Lord Jesus was referring to physical birth: "You have been born once. You must be born another time, physically." So he said, "How can it be?"

The Lord 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."

So here, the Lord Jesus explained what is the meaning of what He said. From the context, as far as I can appreciate it, it seems reasonably clear the Lord Jesus here was referring to two kinds of birth: Born of water, born of the Spirit.

"...unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." We have all been born of water. We now must be born of the Spirit. This seems to be a reasonable explanation, and if we look at the context, it is supported.

"Born of water" could very well refer to a baby being sustained in the mother's womb in a bag of water and he comes out when the water bag is burst: he is born of water.

But that is a physical birth. We must be born of the Spirit then we can enter into the kingdom of God.

In **verse 6**, the Lord Jesus explained further: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit".

So the first kind of birth is being born of the flesh: physical birth, born of water. The second kind is that which is born of the Spirit. So we are born of the flesh when we first came into this world but we must be born of the Spirit – we must be born again in order to enter into the kingdom of God.

"Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' So notice the way the Lord Jesus emphasized this aspect is very strong. He said, "...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"; "...unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"; 'You must be born again'. So it is important for us first to recognize that this applies to all mankind.

So what does it mean to be born of the Spirit, to be born again?

This tells us that being born of the flesh cannot bring us into the kingdom of God; and the "flesh" includes our brain, our knowledge of the things of this world, our physical abilities and all the things that we can do in this body – all that cannot bring us into the kingdom of God.

It is in the realm of the spirit. There must come about a change in our spirit, our heart. Something must happen there. We must be born of the Spirit: The Holy Spirit must do something in our heart to bring about a new birth.

The Lord Jesus made it very clear. He told the Jews: "...you have no life in yourselves..." Unless we are born again – we are born of the Spirit – we will have no spiritual life. When God created us, when we were born physically, we have a body but we also have a spirit. The spirit exists within this body, but there is no spiritual life in that spirit.

The Lord Jesus said: "The words that I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life."

So we need to receive life from God; we need to come to Him to receive that life. If we do not do that, then we are just born of the flesh.

But many people throughout the world, even Christians today, try to seek for the spiritual by the natural, and we may also try to bring the gospel to other people with all the techniques and cleverness that we know, in order to help people to become a Christian. But unless they are born again, they will not see the kingdom of God.

So we need to appreciate what this means, both for our own good as well as for the good of others that we seek to help.

The Lord Jesus said, "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."

It is not something so easy to understand. It is not something so easy to recognize, something that we can say, "It is like this or like that" as we look around us. We need to appreciate behind the outward appearance of things, the spiritual meaning and reality.

Ultimately, being born again has to do with moral and spiritual meaning; it has to do with the work of the Holy Spirit; it has to do with spiritual life from God. If these aspects are not present, then there is no true spiritual life and spiritual birth. So to be in the kingdom of God, we must be born again.

What does this mean?

Which group of people can be born again? Is there a difference if you live many thousands of years ago and you live today? Is there a change in the way in which we are born again? Is "born again" meant for all of us in all generations, in all groups of people? Under what circumstances can we be born again?

**Romans 10: 8-15**

- 8 But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART"--that is, the word of faith which we are preaching,  
 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;  
 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.  
 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."  
 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him;  
 13 for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."  
 14 How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?  
 15 How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!"

Various people have referred to this passage again and again, and there are those who believe that if the gospel is not preached to people where they recognize the Lord Jesus is the Saviour of the world and they accept Him as the Saviour, they cannot be saved. They quote this passage and they say, "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED. How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" So there must be a preacher and there must be the preaching of the Lord Jesus as the Saviour of the world; and the people must hear, and they must believe, and they must call on Him. Then, they can be saved.

Is this what God means? Is this what the apostle Paul was trying to communicate?

He says, "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART--that is, the word of faith which we are preaching". Yes, the apostle Paul preached. The apostle Paul preached about the Lord Jesus Christ and His death on the cross, that He is the Saviour of the world; and many people responded and they were saved. That is true. So it is important to preach the gospel, it is important to help people recognize who the Lord Jesus is, to help them to call on the name of the Lord and be saved.



So we may ask the question: Does it always have to be this way? If there is no preacher, if the people in a certain situation have never heard about the Lord Jesus Christ, does it mean that they cannot enter into the kingdom of God? Is there a procedure we must go through in order to be saved, to be born again?

There are some people who think: "In order to be a Christian, you must pray the sinner's prayer. You must confess your sins; you must acknowledge that you need a Saviour; you must acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ died for you, and you pray a prayer to receive Him or to accept Him as your Saviour. Then, you can be saved."

But the reality is that there are many people who have prayed such a prayer who may not be saved; and there are many people who have never prayed such a prayer who are saved. Why is that so? What is the meaning of this? How do we understand what God is seeking to tell us?

So let us look at examples in the Scriptures of men who entered the kingdom of God, who were accepted by God, or who were pleasing to God. From there, it may help us to appreciate the meaning of being born of the Spirit. Let us look at the Jews after Pentecost.

#### **Acts 2: 36-42**

- 36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ--this Jesus whom you crucified."
- 37 Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"
- 38 Peter *said* to them "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- 39 "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."
- 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!"
- 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.
- 42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

So this would be an example of what we may say the apostle Paul was talking about. You have a preacher, he preaches and the people hear the gospel, they know what the Lord Jesus has done, and they repent, they receive Him, they respond to Him, and they are saved. The apostle Peter said to them: "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

So this tells us that this is one way in which people can be born again. This is one situation where people can receive the message of the gospel and respond to God and be saved from this perverse generation.

But some people may then quote: The apostle Peter said: "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." So we must not only repent, but we must also be baptized. So those who are not baptized by water will not be forgiven. So they link these things together and they say that water baptism is necessary for you to be a Christian.

Is this what is meant? The answer obviously is "No". When we look at the totality of the Scriptures, it is not the meaning.

But the apostle Peter said, "Repent, and each of you be baptized": is correct. That is the direction: We should repent; we should get baptized.

But becoming a Christian has to do with being born of the Spirit, and being born of the Spirit is something that takes place in the heart: that is the reality.

When you are born of the Spirit, something has taken place within your heart: you are a Christian; you are a child of God.

And the baptism is meant to be a testimony of that reality, to profess that you belong the Lord Jesus Christ and you will follow Him.

Let us look at the apostle Paul:

**Acts 9: 1-6**

- 1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,
- 2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.
- 3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;
- 4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?**"
- 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He *said*, "**I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,**
- 6 **but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.**"

The apostle Paul did not hear any preacher preaching to him. There was no message of the gospel about the Lord Jesus Christ dying on the cross. Yes, he heard Christians talking but nobody was helping him at this point of time.

He had a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ – risen from the dead – and the Lord Jesus spoke to him: "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?**" And when Saul recognized that the Lord Jesus was indeed the Lord, he submitted to Him. He was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. He repented; he turned to the Lord; he acknowledged Him as his Lord and he followed Him.

So if we look at this passage, then some may say: "In order to be born again, in order to enter into the kingdom of God, I must hear from the Lord personally like this. I must have this kind of encounter then I can be saved." But that is not so. That is for Paul. For him, that was appropriate. God saw fit to speak to Paul in that way, but God may not do so for others.

God works in many different ways to bring people to the kingdom of God. How does He do that? What is the meaning of it all?

Let us look at Moses:

**Hebrews 11: 24-26**

- 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,
- 25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,
- 26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

Will we say Moses entered the kingdom of God? Obviously, he must have. He was called a faithful servant of God. Was he born again? He must be. Otherwise, he could not enter the kingdom of God. All who enter the kingdom of God must be born again, must be born of the Spirit. So we can say Moses was born of the Spirit; he was born again.

But how did this take place? He did not hear a preacher preaching to him. Nobody told him the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross. Then how did Moses respond to God? How was he born again?

We are told: "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter". "By faith" – what does that mean? That means Moses recognized who God was, Moses recognized the almighty morally perfect God. And when we respond to the gospel, first and foremost and ultimately, we are responding to the God who created us, we are responding to the God of moral perfection. And Moses recognized this God.

This is the God who created all of us and all of us know Him. We were created in the image of God. We have no excuse. We do not know God because we have chosen to go our own way – we do not want to face the consequences of having to answer to God.

So by faith Moses... refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin.

We can see the critical nature of his moral choice. It was a choice to reject the pleasures of this world – the passing pleasures of sin. It was to reject what the world could offer to him. It was to choose to go through the path that is pleasing to God, that is right in the eyes of God – including ill-treatment, suffering and pain.

And **verse 26** is very interesting. It says: “...considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt”.

The Lord Jesus Christ had not come in the time of Moses. There is no indication that anybody taught him about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then how is it he could consider the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt?

I see in this context two possibilities, and both may be true.

The first possibility is that Moses did not know about the Lord Jesus Christ but he knew the path of God’s calling, that is, to follow God, to obey Him wherever it led; to live a life of righteousness, a life that is pleasing to God and in so doing, to be prepared to suffer, and to be ridiculed, and to be ill-treated.

So if this were the explanation, then Moses did not know about the Lord Jesus Christ but the writer in the **Book of Hebrews** explains to us that the meaning was his identification with the reproach of Christ. It is the meaning that is important. Though he did not know, the reality was such. He was identifying with the reproach of Christ.

The other possibility is that God revealed this to him, helped him to recognize, whether directly or through others: that God helped him to understand that in the future, Christ will come.

The Lord Jesus referred to Abraham and said, "Abraham saw My day and was glad"; but again, we are not told: was Abraham specifically told about the Lord Jesus Christ? Maybe... maybe not... It is the meaning that is important. Abraham recognized the direction, what God was going to do; there is a meaning there that he could appreciate.

So too, Moses could recognize that this path is the path of reproach of Christ, whether he knew Christ specifically or not. And that is important.

Ultimately, being born again has to do with meaning: it has to do with the direction of our heart, the quality of our being.

Let us consider Abel:

**Genesis 4: 4**

Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering;

We are told God accepted Abel and his offering. So we can say that in this context, the description of Abel is that Abel was born again. But how was he born again? How did he come to know what was appropriate, what was meaningful, what was right?

For Moses, some people may say, "Well, Moses was specifically called by God to be the giver of the Law, so he understood various of these aspects, including the coming of the Messiah."

But Abel was very, very early in history.

Adam and Eve had sinned and now, they had two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain offered his offering to God but God had no regard for his offering and for Cain. But God had regard for Abel and for his offering. Why?

**Hebrews 11: 4** tells us the reason.

**Hebrews 11: 4**

By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain because of faith, “faith” meaning he recognized who God was, he submitted to Him, he trusted Him, he was prepared to obey Him, to walk in His ways.

It is not just a belief that God exists. That kind of belief, that kind of faith does not save us.

The kind of faith that makes us righteous is the kind of faith where we recognize God in His moral perfection and we choose to obey Him, we choose to identify with Him, to follow His ways, to honour Him, to worship Him, to live our lives on the basis of His instructions and not to continue to go our own way.

So by faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous; and the Lord Jesus also referred to Abel as “righteous Abel”. So we are told that God regarded Abel as righteous, meaning he was born of the Spirit. And this happened long, long ago – long before the Lord Jesus came into this world and long before He died on the cross.

So we see that the forgiveness that we can receive as a result of the Lord Jesus’ death on the cross is applicable and available to all mankind of all ages.

It is true the Lord Jesus Christ died at a certain point in time in history, but His death on the cross, the effectiveness of that death on the cross for all mankind applied for all time. It applied to all generations before the event of the cross and all generations after that.

It is the meaning of the cross; it is the spiritual reality of what happened at the cross: When the Lord Jesus died on the cross, He took upon Himself the sins of all mankind so that if we are repentant and we are prepared to obey God and His ways, we can be forgiven on the basis of His death on the cross, even though we may not even know that He died on the cross. That is the spiritual meaning and reality applicable to all people throughout the world.

Cain, on the other hand, we know he was not living by faith. When God told him, "If you do well, you will be accepted", Cain refused to obey God. He was angry and he murdered Abel. So that tells us that his lack of faith in God was associated with his self-centredness, his evil ways and a sinful life. He refused to submit to God's ways. So it is a moral decision; it is a moral direction. Repentance is a moral issue in the heart.

We go on to consider Enoch.

**Genesis 5: 24**

Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.

A very short verse but so very intense in meaning: Enoch walked with God. What does that mean? It is a very, very rich sentence or phrase. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. The meaning, we can say basically, is Enoch was raptured. God took him while he was alive.

So how did Enoch know how to walk with God? Who preached to him the gospel?

**Hebrews 11: 5**

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.



So **Hebrews 11: 5** explains **Genesis 5: 24**. HE WAS NOT for GOD TOOK HIM. GOD TOOK HIM UP; he was raptured. And we are told that: By faith Enoch was taken up. So Enoch walked with God in faith and he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. So he must be born again. He belonged to God; he was in the kingdom of God.

Enoch was not only in the kingdom of God. He is an example of a man pleasing to God. God specially highlighted that, to the extent that He was prepared to take him up while he was still alive.

Job:

**Job 1: 1**

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.

Job was not amongst the people in Israel. He was in the land of Uz but we are told that he was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. So this tells us that he was in the kingdom of God, he must have been born again, born of the Spirit. He was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. There was a moral direction in his life. He chose to turn away from evil. He sought to obey God. He feared God in that he worshipped God, he wanted to follow Him; he would obey Him and do His will. And so, Job was blameless and upright. But there is no indication of anybody preaching the gospel to him.

The criminal on the cross:

**Luke 23: 39-43**

39 One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"

40 But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

41 "And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

42 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"

43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

In the record of the gospels, we know that there were two criminals who were crucified together with the Lord Jesus, and we are also told that in the earlier stage, both of the criminals made negative remarks about the Lord Jesus.

But at a certain point in time, one of them repented and he said: "...we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." Likely, this man observed the Lord Jesus and he could recognize that the Lord Jesus was innocent, was holy, was righteous – that He was indeed the Son of God.

Then he said to Him: "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" So he came to recognize who the Lord Jesus was, he repented, and the Lord Jesus said to him: "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." He was accepted by God. His sins were forgiven. He was born of the Spirit, he entered the kingdom of God.

So as we look at all these examples, we can see many variations in the situations and the ways they entered the kingdom of God. It is important for us to recognize this. Many of us may want to standardise it: "This is the way to become a Christian. You must say these things, you must pray this prayer, you must go to a rally, you must go forward..." There are various things that people specify how a person becomes a Christian.

Let us beware. While it is true that God can work in these ways – God can speak to people through rallies, through messages being preached, through personal witness, through people praying the sinner's prayer – God can work in that way and people can be saved, but it is also true that there are many people who have gone through this process who are not saved.

What makes the difference?

We see the wide range of the variations of the situations and the ways that people become born of the Spirit.

But there is one thing that is common to all and this one thing must be present. If this one thing is not present, then a person cannot be born again, cannot enter the kingdom of God.

There are different ways you can describe this one thing. I will put it in this form: Something happened in their heart. They had gone astray but they decided to submit to God and His ways, in a spirit of repentance, and faith in God. They chose to follow Him not because it was easy or pleasant but because it was good and right. And this led to their being accepted by God, being forgiven and becoming a child of God – that is, they were born again and they entered the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit helped them to come to God and they were forgiven on the basis of what the Lord Jesus did on the cross, whether they lived before or after the event of the cross. And they were born of the Spirit.

So although there are many different ways in which we can see people becoming Christians, we must recognize that there must be this spiritual reality.

If you help others and ask them to pray the prayer, but if there is not this change in their heart, if there is not that genuine response of repentance and faith, then it is of no use. There has to be that reality of the response to God, of genuine repentance, and faith in Him. The Holy Spirit must be at work to help the person recognize and respond in a way that is appropriate.

Otherwise, people can just simply pray the prayer: "I accept Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord"; but we must recognize that even when we pray that prayer, though we say we accept the Lord Jesus, He may not accept us. He can accept us only when there is a genuine moral response that is correct, that is right, that is good.

So we see that this is in line with what the Lord Jesus said in **John 3: 8**:

"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."

Many people have entered the kingdom of God without our recognizing it. They have not subscribed to all the traditional or standard procedures that we think of, but they have entered the kingdom of God. On the other hand, there are many who have complied with all these instructions, followed all these procedures and yet never enter into the kingdom of God.

"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..." The Holy Spirit works in many different ways, in many different situations. Everyone who is born of the Spirit is described in that way.

But it does not mean that there are no principles involved – the Holy Spirit works in any way He wishes and people are just born of the Spirit. No, it is not true.

There is a meaning behind all this. The Holy Spirit will always bring men to true repentance and faith before they can genuinely be born of the Spirit. If the person is not prepared to repent, to submit to God and His ways, he cannot be born again.

So the Holy Spirit will bring us to recognize our need of forgiveness, our need to submit to God and His ways. And where the gospel is now being preached after the event of the cross, the Holy Spirit will also help us to recognize the Lord Jesus Christ, His death on the cross, and how we must acknowledge Him as our Saviour.

So for the apostle Paul to tell us to go forth, to help other people to recognize the message of the gospel is correct. But let us not think that whenever we go and preach the gospel, we are doing the right thing. If we do so without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, if we do so in the flesh, then the message will not get through to them. If they respond merely at the intellectual level and there is no heart change in the direction of life, it is of no use.

Likewise, there are many who may not quite understand all the words that you are saying, but they understand the moral direction and they respond to God in their heart; they can be saved. It is the meaning, the spiritual reality. Is there a genuine response of the heart to the message of the gospel, which is: Repent and believe in God and what He has done for us at the cross, so that we can know the forgiveness? The Lord Jesus made this very clear when He told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

**Luke 18: 9-14**

- 9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:
- 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.
- 11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.
- 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'
- 13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'
- 14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Lord Jesus told this parable to help us understand what is the critical issue.

The Pharisee was knowledgeable. He knew the Law, he read the Scriptures; he did many things that were prescribed in the Old Testament. He seemed to be doing the right things; he followed rules and regulations. But he was rejected. He was not born again; he would not enter the kingdom of God. Why? Because: something was wrong in his heart. He was not responding to the message of the gospel: the meaning that men must repent, submit to God; we must choose the path of holiness, we must choose God's way.

The tax collector – what did he do? He did many wrong things and yet, he entered the kingdom of God. Why? Because: he was repentant. He trusted in God for forgiveness. And what did he say? Did he pray a long prayer, a very accurate, specific prayer? No. He just said, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" God saw his heart, God saw the meaning of what he was saying, and the meaning was: "God, I know I have sinned. I deserve judgment but please forgive me. I will change, I will follow you. Have mercy on me! I will follow Your ways."

And when God sees such a heart of repentance and faith, He forgives us on the basis of the cross, on the basis of what the Lord Jesus has done for us.

The Lord Jesus told this parable while He was still walking on earth. He had not yet died on the cross. But even then, the meaning of the cross, the power of the cross was already in operation and has always been.

So, "this man went to his house justified rather than the other". Why? "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." It is the meaning of the heart.

Are you proud? Are you arrogant? Are you self-righteous? Are you depending on your own “goodness”?

Some people think that entering into the kingdom of God is to do many “good things”.

Doing many “good things” cannot bring us into the kingdom of God unless we are born again. When we go our own way and we do the “good things” without the power of God, there is a self-life direction that is present, and that is sinful. We are not subjecting ourselves to the God of moral perfection.

But God wants us to do good things. Good works are important, but only when it comes from a heart that is truly repentant, submitted to God, a heart that depends on God, and the Holy Spirit is at work.

And so when God called Peter to speak to Cornelius, Peter initially was hesitant and reluctant. But after God helped him to recognize that it was right for him to go to the Gentiles and to preach to them, the apostle Peter said to Cornelius and the people gathered there, he said, “...in every nation, the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.” That is in **Acts 10: 35**. The apostle Peter told Cornelius this is how God treats all mankind.

What is important is the meaning in the heart: The man who fears God and does what is right is welcome to Him – does what is right not by his own self ability, self-righteousness; does what is right in the context of submission to God, of obeying Him, of depending on Him. This is what brings about acceptance before God.

So what we need to recognize is that God’s ways are very meaningful and they are always based on what is really good, meaningful in the moral and spiritual realm.

If we concentrate on that, we will understand many, many passages in the Scriptures which may at times be quite difficult to appreciate. If we concentrate on the moral meaning and the moral perfection of God, we will understand what God is seeking to do.

Why do we need to be born again?

It is because we have no life in ourselves and when we choose to go our own way, we are cutting ourselves from the Source of Life, we are moving in a direction that is morally negative. We must come to God so as to receive, to partake of, His life. In so doing, we receive the character, the life of God, the life of Christ. So Christ will be formed in us.

So it is the Holy Spirit who speaks to us, leads us in that direction, guides us, encourages us, to respond.

Yes, we may say the Lord Jesus is calling us to repentance. He is waiting for us, calling us to respond. But the Lord Jesus is calling us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts to speak to us, to draw us to the Lord Jesus Christ, to tell us there is hope, there is forgiveness, but we must repent.

So if we want to live our lives well and fulfil God's call in our lives, we must ensure that we turn away from our self-centred way of life and come to God for His forgiveness through what the Lord Jesus has done for us, being led by the Holy Spirit to become a faithful child of God.

So, God's kingdom is a moral and spiritual kingdom as far as His relationship with us is concerned. Yes, it is expressed in the physical realm in many ways, but the meaning is in the moral and spiritual realm.



If we do not take care of that, then all the things that we do will be useless, and not only useless, it can be seriously negative.

But if we take care of that, we concentrate on a proper moral response to God first in our own hearts, then the things that we do will bear spiritual fruit. The Holy Spirit will have the freedom to guide us, to teach us what to do, what to say, how to communicate to others, how to be a good witness.

So I see it is important for us to recognize the meaning of being born of the Spirit, what is the meaning of being born again; and I would say that it is quite likely that there are many people who call themselves “born-again Christians”, who may not actually be born again.

So let us not be presumptuous, neither do we need to be so uncertain. There are clear principles by which we can ensure that we are born of the Spirit, but we must not take for granted God’s grace. There must be a genuine response in our heart to God. It must not be a pretence. It must not be just words. It must not be just outward forms. There must be a reality in our hearts.

So too, when we help others, we must seek to ensure that. And in many instances, it is very hard for us to know for sure whether a person has properly responded or not. God sees accurately but we may not recognize it.

However, when the response is deep enough, it will become evident. When the person follows God in a significantly positive way, it will become evident. It will become clear to us. So in many situations, people may have responded to God, may not have responded to God; we may make the wrong judgment if we want to pronounce them as Christian or non-Christian.

That is an area which we need to take care. We may not at times know what is the actual situation.

However, what we can say for sure is that this is the right path. If we follow this path, we encourage others to move in this direction, yes, we are moving in the right direction and when this is properly developed, it will become evident.

The wheat and the tares may look alike in the early stages, but when they grow up, they will become evident which is the weed and which is the wheat, and it will separate them.

The Lord will separate us on the Judgment Day. Things will be clear; things will be made evident by the light of God.

On our part, let us concentrate on what is right and good, what He has emphasized and made clear to us; be faithful to Him. And we can then rejoice and be glad.

Let us then come before the Lord and ask Him to help us to understand these issues more deeply, to see how important it is for us to respond deeply to Him, to seek His grace and forgiveness, His enabling, to be humble, walking with Him, seeking to obey Him and honour Him, thankful for what the Lord Jesus has done for us, looking to the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us and strengthen us, enable us, to live righteously, godly and soberly in this present world.