

Basic Biblical Christianity Series



Volume Two:

What does it mean to be *called* by God?

Just what *is* salvation?

What does it mean to “walk in the Spirit”?

**What does it mean to be “born again”
or “born of God”?**

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What does it mean to be *called* by God?

ONE OF THE LEAST UNDERSTOOD passages in the New Testament is John 6:44. Protestants *ignore* the verse because it doesn't fit into their God-is-trying-to-save-the-world theology. Jesus says: "No one can come to Me unless the Father, Who sent Me, draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." If you *believe* that verse—and believing Jesus' own words is paramount—then you have to admit the following: *you* cannot come to Christ; *you* cannot find Jesus; *you* cannot choose God. Rather, God the Father comes to you; *He* finds you; *He* chooses you. God must *draw* you and lead you to Christ. And this happens completely at His discretion.

Shocking? This is what your Bible says. To drive the point home, Jesus repeats Himself: " 'But there are some of you [standing here] who do not believe [My teachings].' For Jesus knew from the beginning who were the ones that did not believe, and who would betray Him. [So] He said, 'For this reason, I have said to you [that] no one can come to Me unless it has been given to him from My Father' " (verses 54-65). Why did some of the Jews standing there not believe Jesus? Because God had not drawn them, not opened their minds. It was simply not "given" to them.

Protestantism teaches that God is *now* trying, rather desperately it seems, to save as many people as He can from eternal damnation. But Jesus had just the opposite approach—He was never on a soul-willing mission. He cared deeply about people's lives and their ultimate salvation, but He did not come to "save the world" in the way so many Christians have been led to believe. Yes, His life, death, and resurrection are all key elements in

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God's plan of salvation for mankind; but Jesus' ministry only laid the foundation for God's plan to ultimately "save the world." To be sure, God is not willing that anyone should perish (II Pet. 3:9), and Jesus did say that He came so that the whole world could ultimately have salvation (John 3:17). But as we will see, it's all about *timing*.

This is why Jesus frequently taught using parables. Many mistakenly believe that parables were used to make some point of teaching clear or plain. But just the opposite is true. Jesus used parables to *hide* the truth. Shocking? Read it for yourself. In Matthew 13, a large group of people had gathered around Jesus to hear Him teach—and He "spoke many things to them in parables" (verse 3). What followed was the "Parable of the Sower." Later, in private, Jesus' disciples asked Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" His answer contradicts Protestant theology: "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (verse 11). Sounds a lot like John 6—"not been given." Jesus typically explained the parables to His disciples, because He *wanted* them to understand (verse 18). But for the crowds, the truth behind His parables would often remain hidden. He added: "For whoever has [been given] understanding, to him [even] more shall be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever [has not been given] understanding, even what [little] he has shall be taken away from him. For this reason I speak to them in parables, because seeing, they see not; and hearing, they hear not; neither do they understand" (verses 12-13). In other words, they were *spiritually* blind—spiritually unable to take what they had seen and heard and make real sense of it. Verse 9 is key: "Whoever has ears, let them hear." They all had ears, and they all could hear. But did they have *spiritual* ears?

Jesus continued by quoting a passage from the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 6:9-10). In Isaiah's time, the people of Israel were extraordinarily rebellious. His ministry and preaching were used by God to expose the depths of Israel's hardheartedness. In referenc-

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ing Isaiah, Jesus was appealing to the same principle: had He taught plainly (e.g., without using parables and without at times being enigmatic), the Jews of that day would *still* have rejected Him—exposing just how hardhearted they were. Again, as John 6 shows, it was simply *not given to them*. They were spiritually blinded by the “god of this present age” (II Cor. 4:4). And Jesus had no intention of changing the situation—not at *that* time.

Jesus ended the discussion in Matthew 13 by saying, “But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear” (verse 16). The disciples *had been given understanding*, their eyes had been opened—yet even they had trouble understanding some aspects of Jesus’ mission, at least initially. Recall Jesus’ interaction with two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus, where He *opened their eyes* not only to His identity but to the understanding that the Scriptures had indeed foretold of His death and resurrection (Luke 24:13-33; note verse 31).

Only God can truly remove spiritual blindness—and He will begin to do so on a *worldwide* scale following Jesus’ return. That is when Jesus will powerfully set His hand to “save the world.”

Calling and election

God works with mankind in various ways, one of which is through the idea of *election*. This simply means that certain individuals—or even entire nations—are specially *called* or *chosen* by God for a specific purpose. By default, this also means that the overwhelming majority are *not* similarly called or chosen. This may seem unfair, but God has a plan that He is working out in stages. And while God’s ultimate goal is to bring all of humankind into His kingdom, not everyone is offered that opportunity *at the same time*. But please understand, *everyone* will have their opportunity.

This idea runs counter to the Protestant teaching that God is actively trying to “save” everyone right now—before they are eternally “lost.” But this teaching annuls the biblical reality of

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election. For example, the patriarch Abraham was specially chosen by God for a profound purpose. There will never be another Abraham. Likewise, there will never be another David, or another Paul, etc. And there will never be another *chosen nation* like Israel. Moreover, a very small group of people are identified in the New Testament as God's "elect." Indeed, Jesus said, "I will build My church." The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, stemming from a verb that means "to be called out." Thus, the Church of God is composed of those who have been called and chosen by God—drawn by God (John 6:44)—called *out of this world* and called *to* God. On the day of Pentecost, Peter gave an impassioned call to repentance to those gathered with the disciples. He said God would grant remission of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit to "as many as the Lord our God may call" (Acts 2:37-39).

It is indeed an *invitation*. As noted earlier, this happens completely at God's discretion.

Protestants deny the concept of election. To them, *everyone* is called. Everyone is being offered salvation *today*—if they would only "receive Jesus." But if everyone is called, then no one is called. If everyone makes up the elect, then there is no elect. The whole idea of being God's *elect* means that only a relatively small subset of humanity is presently being offered this opportunity. The rest—indeed, the overwhelming majority—are simply not offered the same opportunity *at this time*.

Thus we see numerous biblical passages that refer to God's *elect*. Usually, these passages are referring to those who make up the true Church of God—the spiritual Body of Christ; but sometimes the term refers to Israel—such as in Isaiah 45:4, where God calls Israel His *elect*. The Church is referred to as the "elect lady" in II John 1:1 (KJV)—or, the "chosen lady." Peter addressed his first epistle to those who were the "the elect ... chosen according to the the foreknowledge of God" (I Pet. 1:1-2). Peter adds, "But you are a chosen stock [generation], a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for a [special] possession of

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God, [with the intent] that you might proclaim His excellent virtues, who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (I Pet. 2:9).

Paul explains that God has, at this time, chosen His elect from among those who are considered to be the least among men: “For you see your calling [election], brethren, that there are not many [among you] who are wise according to the [world’s estimation], not many who are powerful, not many who are high-born among you. Rather, God has chosen the foolish [ones] of the world, so that He might put to shame those who [think they] are wise; and God has chosen the weak [ones] of the world so that He might put to shame [those who are humanly] strong.... [He has chosen] the low-born of the world, [those who are] despised ... even [those who] are counted as nothing” (I Cor. 1:26-28). This is done to confound the world and its unjust perspective—and to magnify God’s power in the lives of His elect (verse 29).

It is important to understand that the special calling given to the elect is not primarily about salvation—that is, salvation itself is not God’s key objective. Rather, those drawn and called by the Father—now, at this time—are brought into a relationship with God and Christ for the express *purpose* of being prepared and qualified to *rule* with Christ in the coming Kingdom of God. Paul refers to those who have been *called* according to God’s *purpose*, or plan (Rom. 8:28). As a key part of His plan, a small group of called individuals—the elect—will be used by God to help Jesus rule in the messianic age to come. The apostle John wrote about this unique calling: “Blessed and holy is the one who has [been called by God and subsequently has a] part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power. But they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him [on the earth (Rev. 5:10)] a thousand years” (Rev. 20:6; also verse 4).

This kingdom is the key to the salvation of all the rest of mankind! Indeed, God has left no one out; all will have an opportunity for salvation—but only in the context of the kingdom age.

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So the *elect* are called and chosen *well ahead of the rest of mankind* in order to assist Christ in fulfilling God's glorious plan of salvation.

How does God call?

You cannot “join” God's church. But if God is calling you—and if you properly respond to His call—He will *put you into* His church. In Acts 2:47 we see that God added to the church daily—those “who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Indeed, we love God because He *first* loved us (I John 4:19).

How does this work? Every calling is different, yet similar. God draws us to Him through circumstances—which often include trials and difficulties designed to help us see our need for God. He begins to show us our sins, convicting us of the reality that we not only *have* sinned, but that we *are* sinners (I John 1:8-10). We come to see that we have a *carnal nature* that is at odds with God and His way of life (Rom. 8:7). And we eventually realize that we need God's salvation through Christ.

But typically, God begins to get our attention by opening our minds (Eph. 1:18) to some point of truth or doctrine that grabs our interest. For some it has been the Sabbath issue; for others the question of whether to keep popular non-biblical holidays such as Christmas. For others it may be the question of what happens at death. You will see things you have never seen before—right in the pages of your own Bible. These things will “ring true”—they will make sense. Importantly, you come to realize that God will hold you accountable for what you have come to know. *Acting* on what God reveals to you will move the process along; but failing to act can halt the process.

As you learn more and more and begin to seek God through prayer and reading the Bible, it will become apparent that God is indeed calling you. You will realize that you are being set free from false religious ideas and errors of the past; from the massive deceptions foisted on this world; from your own doubts

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and fears and wrong ways of living. For the first time in your life, you will have hope! As your understanding grows, your conviction deepens. At some point in this process, you become convinced of the need to *act*. Conviction has set in. Your conscience and your heart will demand that you respond to this calling!

You will come to know that you cannot go on living the way you have been living. You will want to *change*, you will want to please God with all your being. This is the essence of *repentance*, where you experience a burning desire for a changed heart and mind—a complete change of direction to a God-centered life oriented to His purposes. You will understand that you must “repent and be converted in order that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19)—and you will soon seek *baptism* (Acts 2:38).

In the next part of this series, we will cover these vital steps in detail—repentance, forgiveness of sin, baptism, growing in God’s way of life. Plus, you will learn that salvation itself is actually a *process*—ultimately aimed at “making your calling and election sure” (see II Pet. 1:10).

Recommended reading:

God’s Plan for Mankind Revealed by His Sabbath and Holy Days



Just what is salvation?

BEING RAISED A BAPTIST, every summer I looked forward to VBS—Vacation Bible School. As a kid it was all fun and games—all that religious stuff was only a minor inconvenience. Later, as a young teenager, I realized it was all a set-up to get us kids *saved*. So there I was on the last day of VBS and Brother Jim, the pastor, started talking about making some “commitment” for Jesus. What did I know about commitment? I was only 13.

Head bowed, surrounded by peers who were starting to whimper, I was being asked in a hushed but urgent tone to “let Jesus into my life.” The preacher said, “Every eye closed, every head bowed. Raise your hand if you know without a doubt in your heart that you’re bound for heaven.”

Without a doubt? Really? Something began to churn inside my gut. *Maybe if I just raise my hand they’ll leave me alone.* Brother Jim went on and on about going to heaven and how we all needed to “get saved.” Sobbing kids—those lost souls like me who didn’t raise their hands—were starting to make their way down to the front where they were led in a quiet prayer. “Are you ready to make a commitment to Jesus today—to let Him into your life as Lord and Master?” one kid was asked. The youngster blubbered in the affirmative.

I was near the back, trying to be invisible. But the preacher’s words—and his *tone*—were having an inexplicable effect on my young mind. “You need to be sure about your salvation. Won’t you come now—come now, before it’s too late.” Soon the emotional tug was too much. *I should go.* I started crying. I saw my best friend heading to the front. *Maybe I should go.* Suddenly, I found myself moving to the front too—unable to resist the urge to “come to Jesus.”

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And so, a group of us kids were baptized the next Sunday. But it was, according to Brother Jim, only a formality: I was “saved” the very moment I “accepted Jesus”—whatever that meant. From there it was back to business as usual—being a typical, worldly teenager. But, hey, at least now I was *saved*.

Years later—after getting pretty good at faking Christianity—I began to take a serious look at following the Bible. I eventually began attending a new church—one that actually met on the biblical Sabbath. After some serious Bible study, I was baptized again. But this time I got sound counseling: there was no pressure, no fear tactics, no emotional element (except for what I was already feeling about my own sordid condition). I was confronted with a simple, yet profound, proposition: would I be willing to *do*, literally, whatever it took to be a disciple of Jesus and attain the Kingdom of God? In short, I was taught to “count the cost” of *really* following Christ.

Turns out, genuine “salvation” is not something entered into lightly, based on emotion or peer pressure. It involves a deliberate, heartfelt decision made after much thought and introspection. And one of the most important things I learned is that “salvation” is not an instantaneous thing—not at all like it was presented to me as a kid. If anything, it is a *process*. It has a clear starting point where one comes to the place of genuine repentance; then one is to grow and overcome throughout their lifetime. Only at the *end* of that process does one actually attain salvation—entry into the Kingdom of God. And while the process is fundamentally the same for everyone, it is also quite different for each of us. After all, we are each unique; we each work out our personal salvation with God in our own way.

So let's look at *biblical* “salvation”—step by step.

In Part 5 of this series, we looked at the idea of God *calling* or inviting one to enter into a relationship with Him. As previously stated, one cannot just come to God. *He* comes to us. *He* invites us to become a part of His “elect.” How do you know if that is happening in your life? For starters, you will begin to have a real interest in what God has to say about your life. Perhaps you

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previously gave little thought about the idea of *sin*. But you suddenly find yourself desiring a relationship with God, and you realize that sin hinders such a relationship. You learn that sin is, essentially, trying to live *outside of* God's laws, commandments, and teachings (I John 3:4). Sin is breaking or violating God's *Torah*—a Hebrew word that is usually translated *law* but means so much more: instruction, teaching, a way of life. Soon you begin to feel a deep sense of conviction that you have lived your whole life contrary to God's way—and now you want to begin living in harmony with God's teachings.

Repentance and reconciliation with God

Typically, you find that the Bible is beginning to make more and more sense to you—because God is now opening your mind to understanding. As Jesus said, you will know the *truth* and the truth will make you *free* (John 8:32). Free from what? From error, from confusion; free from the devastation of sin, because sin *always* has consequences. All of this means that God, in His goodness, is leading you to *repentance* (Rom 2:4). Repentance is the first key step toward salvation. To “repent” means to change one's mind in respect to sin—to turn around and go the other way—to begin *obeying* God!

You will realize that sin is what has separated you from God (Isa. 59:2), and has brought the death penalty on you—because “the wages [what you have earned] of sin is *death*”—but “the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Indeed, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; but [you] are [now] being justified [reconciled to God] freely by His grace through the redemption that is [found] in Christ Jesus”—because “God has openly manifested [Jesus] to be a propitiation through faith in His blood ... in respect to the remission of [your] sins that are past...” (Rom. 3:23-25). The term *propitiation* simply means that Jesus' death has *paid the debt* of your sins—the death penalty required by the violation of God's Law. In other words, Jesus' death substitutes for ours—it satisfies the claim the Law held over us. Thus, His su-

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preme sacrifice allows us to become *reconciled* with God—put in *right standing* with God. Once under the “umbrella” of God’s grace, we can then begin to develop a real relationship with Him through Christ.

The new believer subsequently expresses his or her faith in Christ through the act of baptism—a complete immersion into a “watery grave.” Note Peter’s instructions: “Repent and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins”—and then, following the “laying on of hands,” the believer will “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Baptism symbolically depicts our death—the death of what the Bible calls the “old man” (Rom. 6:6). The “old man” is the former “carnal self”—which is now being replaced (a *process*) by the “new man in Christ.” Paul writes, “Concerning your former conduct, you [must now] put off the old man, which is corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and you [must] be renewed in the spirit of your mind—that is, put on the new man, which according to God is created in righteousness and the holiness of the truth” (see Eph. 4:22-24).

Salvation a process

Paul is emphatic that repentance and baptism represent an *initial* step—achieving “right standing” with God. This “right standing” is often referred to as “righteousness.” But it is vital to understand that this “righteousness” is a *status*—being justified, reconciled—conferred on us because of Jesus’ death and His role as mediator. Actual “righteousness” is a quality that we must actively develop—with the help of the Holy Spirit. It results from habitually *doing* what is right and good. Thus Paul can declare: “Therefore, having been justified now by His blood, we shall [yet] be [finally] saved from wrath [the death penalty] through Him [Jesus’ work in our lives]. For if, when we were [once] enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His own Son, much more then, having been reconciled, we shall [yet] be saved by His life [by Jesus living in us]” (Rom. 5:9-10).

This “new man” that is being developed in us is pictured

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by our coming up out of the “watery grave” of baptism—wherein we begin to walk in “newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4). Notice what Paul wrote to the Colossians: “Therefore, if you have been raised [through baptism] together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your affection on the things that are above, and not on the things that are on the earth. For you have died [as pictured by baptism], and your life has been hid together with Christ in God. When Christ, Who is our life, is manifested, then you also shall be manifested with Him in glory [at the first resurrection]. Therefore, put to death your [carnal] members which are on earth—sexual immorality, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil desires, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things, the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, among whom you also once walked, when you were living in these things. But now, you should also put off all these things: wrath, indignation, malice, blasphemy, and foul language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have [begun to] put off the old man together with his deeds, and have [begun to] put on the new man, who is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him Who created him” (Col. 3:1-10).

Indeed, salvation is a *process*. Ultimate or final salvation—being actually granted eternal life via the resurrection—comes as the end result of a lifelong process of becoming Christ-like, of becoming righteous. Thus, only the “doers of the Law” will ultimately be deemed righteous in God’s sight (Rom. 2:13). But “final salvation” is still a free gift predicated on the grace of God. This critical distinction between status-righteousness and behavioral-righteousness is sadly lost on Protestants.

Cost? What cost?

As a teenager, I was sold a popular “costless Christianity”—one that requires almost nothing in the way of obedience or works. No one said anything about “counting the cost.” But in Luke 14, those who would follow Jesus are admonished to “count the cost”

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before making such a commitment. The analogies presented in this passage—“building a tower” and “going to war”—appropriately imply a rather complex and protracted engagement. So what happened to just “accepting Jesus”?

How many kids (or adults) are asked to “come to Jesus” as the popular old hymn says, “*just as I am*”—without being properly prepared? Without bringing forth fruits (*evidence*) of repentance? How many are taught that real Christianity is a *life-long struggle* to be conformed to the very image of Christ? How many are warned that *sinfulness* does not simply disappear—that the true follower of Christ will to some degree grapple with sin throughout their life?

Peter says that “judgment” is *now* on the house of God, the church—those called at this time as part of His plan (I Pet. 4:17). God needs to know if those He has called and chosen are ready for His kingdom. He must be able to say, as He did of Abraham, “now I know” (Gen. 22:12). Thus, it is critical to understand what salvation *really is*—from the Bible.

Recommended reading:

God’s Plan for Mankind Revealed by His Sabbath and Holy Days

The Apostle Paul’s Teachings on God’s Laws

By Grace You Have Been Saved—Now What?

The True Meaning of Christian Baptism



What does it mean to “walk in the Spirit”?

I REMEMBER THE MOMENT WELL. It was my second year in Bible college, during Fundamentals of Theology class. I don’t remember the topic being covered, but our instructor made the offhanded statement: “*We sin because we want to.*” The whole class just stared, waiting for him to explain. He didn’t. And I remember thinking *That can’t be right. No Christian wants to sin.*

Strangely, no one talked about it. I thought *Maybe I’m the only one who doesn’t get it.* But as the years went by I began to understand—*why we sin.* I think I could always answer this question more or less academically, but really coming to grips with this issue took time and experience—and a fair amount of struggling with sin.

As it turns out, many young Christians are similarly stymied by the unexpected reality that the Christian walk is more difficult than anticipated—particularly in regards to sin. They quickly find that some of the sins they had genuinely repented of still plague them. They read where Hebrews refers to the “sin that so *easily* besets us” (Heb. 12:1). They see that even the spiritual giant David was so distraught over his sinfulness that he (rather hyperbolically) felt he was actually conceived in sin (Psa. 51:5). Then they read Paul’s eloquent but disheartening description of the *war* that can often rage in the life of even the most converted Christian (Rom. 7).

And it is here, in Romans 7, that we begin to see that the problem really isn’t *sin*—the problem is *sinfulness*. Paul speaks of our *inclination to sin* as a “law” or a force at work in our lives—always at odds with the “new man” in Christ (Eph. 4:24). Para-

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phrased, here’s what Paul wrote: “We know the Law ultimately works on a spiritual level, but I am habitually carnal, unspiritual—seemingly a captive to sin. Indeed, my behavior often makes no sense! Things I intend to be doing, I often fail to practice—and I sometimes do the very things I despise! But the fact that I despise such things—even though I end up doing them—shows that I acknowledge both the authority and goodness of the Law.

“But it’s not the ‘real me’ who does such things—it’s the *sinfulness* that still lives in me. No, there’s nothing good about my fleshly, sinful nature. So while in the ‘inward man’ I desire to do what is good and right, I am sometimes unable to make that happen. The good things I intend to do, I fail to do; and the sinful things I hope to avoid, I do them all too often! Now if I do things contrary to my heartfelt intentions, then the resultant sin is really an expression of my carnal nature—the sinful ‘old man’ that yet lives on in me even after baptism.

“It’s like there’s some kind of ‘unseen force’ at work: I want to do what is good and right, but ‘sinfulness’ is always there! In the repentant ‘inner man’ I fully delight in the Law of God. But sinfulness works in my flesh much like a ‘law’ itself—fighting against the working of the Law of God in my mind. At times I feel like I’m held captive by this ‘law of sin!’” (verses 14-23).

Every true Christian experiences this personal war against *sinfulness* to one degree or another. (If you don’t, maybe you need to ask yourself how serious you are about dealing with sin.)

So what is sinfulness?

In a telling illustration, Jesus shows us that the problem lies in the heart. We pick up the story in Matthew 15, where Jesus has just explained to His disciples that the Pharisees’ obsession with ritual washings was nothing but human tradition. As He often did, He used the occasion to make a profound spiritual point: “Do you not perceive that everything that enters [one’s] mouth goes into the belly, and is [harmlessly] expelled into the sewer? But [what really matters are] the things that go forth from [one’s] mouth”—the evil things we *say*. For these “come out of the heart,

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and these *defile* the man.” They reflect what’s going on inside, in your “carnal nature”—and, if allowed to be *expressed*, make you spiritually *unclean*. “For out of the [carnal] heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witnessing, and blasphemies” (verses 17-20).

But we must ask, *Where did all this bad stuff come from? How did it get into my heart?*

Every act of sin begins with a *thought*, typically accompanied by an uncontrolled emotion. As Jesus shows in Matthew 5, even the thought *itself* can be a sin. But Jesus’ point here in Matthew 15 is that we all have an *inclination* or proclivity towards evil—otherwise known as the “carnal man” or the “old man.” It is important to note here what Jesus did *not* say. He did not indicate that having a carnal inclination was, of itself, a sin; rather, sin only occurred when the “old man” was allowed to *have expression*—or as He put it, when such evils “come out of the heart.” *That* is when sin occurs and we become defiled.

The old man never really dies

At baptism, we symbolically put the “old man” to death in a watery grave. The “old man” is our former, carnal self with all of its sinful tendencies. “Knowing this, that our *old man* was co-crucified with Him [Jesus] in order that the body of sin [wherein our carnal, fleshly desires find expression] might be destroyed, so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom. 6:6; also verse 4). We are to “put off the old man, which is corrupt according to deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). Knowing we are to “be renewed” in the spirit of our minds, we begin earnestly *putting on* the “new man” created in righteousness (verses 23-24; also Col. 3:9-10).

But as already noted, we soon find out that the “old man” doesn’t really die after all. In fact, he rears his ugly head far too often, usually when we least expect it—revealing the sinfulness that still resides in our hearts. Again, *Where did all this bad stuff come from? How did it get into my heart?*

Let’s understand. We all know that Adam and Eve sinned first—not counting Satan’s “original sin.” But in many ways, the

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first real sinner was Cain. Why? Cain allowed a carnal, *self*-first mindset to develop in his life that ultimately led to murder. He didn't just sin, he had a problem with *sinfulness*. His offering of the field was *inferior* to Able's offering of the flock. Why? It is apparent that Cain did not honor God by bringing his very best; plus, he obviously brought his offering in a wrong spirit—begrudgingly, not joyfully. Thus it was rejected. God's admonishment to Cain is quite instructive. Paraphrased, God asked: “Why are you so angry, Cain? Why do you look so annoyed and downcast? If you do what is good and right, you know you too will be accepted. But if your attitude is wrong, sinfulness will be lurking around every corner! It wants to dominate you—but you must fight back and master your own carnality!”

Simply put, Cain had developed a fully carnal mind. Such an “evil inclination” begins to form early in one's life. After the flood of Noah's day, God lamented that the hearts of men were evil *even from their youth* (Gen. 8:21). Why? How does this happen?

Paul gives us part of the answer. Satan is the “god” of this present age—and has been since Adam sinned. Fundamental to his unchallenged influence over mankind is his ability to “broadcast” spiritually to all of humanity—wherein we as humans are negatively influenced by attitudes and moods that seemingly come “out of thin air.” Paul writes that, prior to our conversion, we too walked “according to the course of this world [society], according to the prince of the *power of the air*”—a “spiritual broadcasting” from the “*spirit that is now working within the children of disobedience*, among whom also we all once had our conduct in the lusts of our flesh, doing the things willed by the flesh and by the mind [the old man], and were by nature the children of wrath, even as the rest of the world” (Eph. 2:2-3). This “broadcasting” is also how Satan has been able to keep humanity blinded to God's truth: “But if our gospel is hidden, it is hidden to those who are perishing; in whom the god of this age has *blinded the minds* of those who do not believe” (II Cor. 4:3-4). This blindness is like a *veil* that covers the mind, and can only be removed

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by Christ (II Cor. 3:14-16).

Over time, starting early in life, one's mind and heart becomes self-centered. One unknowingly develops a "get" mindset—as opposed to a "give" mindset. Consequently, we "learn" all kinds of sinful attitudes and behaviors. Looking again at Matthew 15, Jesus says, "For out of the heart [the carnal mind] proceed evil thoughts, murders [hatred], adulteries [lust], fornications [lust], thefts [coveting], false witnessing, and blasphemies" (verse 19). These sinful ways of thinking develop slowly over time as repeated patterns of thinking become habitual—leading even to addictions. In effect, we learn to hate, to lust, to covet, etc. A carnal mindset takes root and essentially comes to define the "old man." Under the right circumstances, these attitudes trigger sinful actions. Thus, Jesus says that these attitudes—when expressed by action—"defile the man" (verse 20).

Learning to walk in the Spirit

No real Christian *wants* to sin. No Christian *wants* to please the flesh. Our heartfelt desire is to please God in every way possible. So why do we sin? We sin because we are *unable* say *no* to the flesh; we pathetically give in to the demands of our "carnal nature"—the "old man." He haunts us every single day. He doesn't care about what the "new man" wants; he only wants to be satisfied. Thus, a battle rages—wherein we ask, *I am most wretched! Who will save me from this body of death?* (Rom. 7:24).

Of course, *God will save us through Christ*. How? By our learning to "walk in intimacy with Christ." The *how-to* answer is found in Galatians 5, in a passage that tells us how to get the upper hand on the "old man." Paul writes, "Now this I say, walk *by* the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh" (verse 16). Living *by* the Spirit of God simply means to walk as *led* by the Spirit—for as many as are led by the Spirit are truly the sons of God (Rom. 8:14).

But being *led* by the Spirit requires that one be in an intimate relationship with Jesus the Messiah. Earlier, in Galatians 2, Paul says that "Christ lives in us" (verse 20). So it makes sense,

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in some contexts, to look at the *Spirit* as being Jesus Himself living *in* us and moving in our lives. Here’s how I would paraphrase Galatians 5:16: “Walk in intimacy with the Spirit; *then* you will not give in to the pulls of your carnal nature.” It’s a simple *if-then* proposition: intimacy with Jesus will yield spiritual strength in the inner man, making it possible to resist the “old man.” Importantly, Paul does not say that you will have no lusts to deal with, but that you will *not give in* to them.

As in Romans 7, Paul then notes the spiritual “tug of war” in the believer’s life: “For the flesh-driven old man desires what is contrary to the Spirit of Christ, and the Spirit desires what is contrary to the old man. They are opposed to each other, so you are unable at times to do things you know you should do” (verse 17). He gives us the key to victory in Galatians 6: “The one who sows in order to please the old man will reap corruption and death. But the one who sows in order to please the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (verse 8). The same idea is expressed in Romans 8: “For those who walk according to the flesh mind [are concerned with] the things of the flesh; but those who walk according to the Spirit mind [are concerned with] the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded [leads ultimately to] death, but to be spiritually minded [leads to] life and peace” (verse 5-6).

So it comes down to this: *Which field are you sowing in?* Sowing “to the Spirit” comes by diligent attention to prayer and Bible study—which leads to *intimacy with Christ*. And intimacy with Christ means you are walking “in the Spirit” (Rom. 8:9).

Recommended reading:

Why Were You Born?

The Holy Spirit, the Power of God

By Grace You Have Been Saved—Now What?

The True Meaning of Christian Baptism

You Are Complete in Jesus Christ



What does it mean to be “born again” or “born of God”?

ACCORDING TO MAINSTREAM Christianity, one is “born again” when he or she has “received Christ” and been “saved”—typically at baptism. Thus, being “born again” is seen as a *religious experience*. Yet most Christians have great difficulty explaining from Scripture what it means to be “born again” or “born of God.” Indeed, there is great confusion on this subject. The Bible, however, is quite straightforward on the topic.

In John 3:1-12, Jesus taught that to be “born again” literally means to be “born of the Spirit”—to *become* a spirit being. As we will see, other passages show that this “new birth” *to sprit life* will take place at the first resurrection when Christ returns. Thus, Jesus is the only one who has been “born again”—as He is the *firstborn from the dead*. No one else has yet been resurrected from the dead to eternal life—no one else has been “born again.”

The pagan origin of the popular “born again” doctrine

It may come as a surprise to many that the idea of a “second birth” *as a religious experience* is not unique to Christianity. In fact, the concept is quite ancient. In his epochal book *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop demonstrates that pagan religions, which had their roots in ancient Babylon, had a belief and practice of being “born again” or “twice born.” For example, Hislop wrote: “The Brahmins make it their distinguishing boast that they are ‘twice-born’ men, and that, as such, they are sure of eternal happiness. Now, the same was the case in [ancient] Babylon, and there **the new birth was conferred by baptism**” (p. 132, emphasis added). Note that the pagan teaching of being “born again” or

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“twice born” had nothing to do with being raised from the dead, and that it was linked to the rite of *baptism*. But how did this false teaching find its way into nominal Christianity?

Jesus repeatedly warned His followers about false messiahs, false apostles, and false teachers who would, if possible, deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:5, 11, 15, 24; see parallel accounts in Mark and Luke). The apostles likewise warned believers to be on guard against false apostles and teachers (II Cor. 4:11; I and II Timothy; Titus 1; II Pet. 2; I, II and III John; Jude; Rev. 2, 3, 13 and 17). The New Testament is replete with warnings about false apostles and teachers who would come in “sheep’s clothing” but would inwardly be “ravening wolves,” seeking to pervert and destroy the truth.

The apostle Paul warned the Thessalonians in 51 AD that an apostate religious system, which he called the “mystery of lawlessness,” was beginning to penetrate the Church (II Thess. 2:1-12). He warned, “Do not let anyone deceive you by any means because *that day* [of Christ’s return] *will not* come unless the apostasy shall come first, and the man of sin [the final anti-Christ] shall be revealed.... **For the mystery of lawlessness is already working**” (verses 2, 7).

Over time, this “mystery religion,” modeled after the ancient Babylonian “mysteries,” has developed into a great apostate “Christianity”—which Christ has identified in Scripture as **“Babylon the Great, the mother of the harlots and of the abominations of the earth”** (Rev. 17:5). The early leaders of this religious system established numerous false teachings, among them the doctrine that one is “born again” at conversion—or, in Protestant-speak, when one has “accepted Jesus.” Just as in ancient Babylon, this “new birth” is associated with baptism, but has nothing to do with being raised from the dead to spirit life.

Early Latin “church fathers” adopted the Babylonia idea that one is “born again” through baptism. *Justin Martyr*, for example, taught that converts to Christianity are to be “led ... to a place where there is **water**; and **there they are reborn** in the same kind of rebirth in which we ourselves were reborn” (*The*

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First Apology, 61). *Irenaeus* taught that Christians “are made clean, by means of the **sacred water** and the invocation of the Lord, from [their] old transgressions, being spiritually **regenerated as new-born babes...**” (*Fragment*, 34). Likewise, *Clement* wrote that, in this present life, Christians “are **regenerated and born again of water**” (*Recognitions*, 6:9). These statements reveal that the early “church fathers” believed that being “born again” was a *religious experience* tied to the rite of baptism.

A contributing factor that has obscured the true meaning of the phrase “born again” is the mistranslation of John 3:5 in the *Latin Vulgate*. Originally translated by Jerome in 383 AD, the *Vulgate* inserts the word “again” into verse five, making it read “born **again** of water.” Yet no Greek manuscript includes the word “again” in the passage. By contrast, Erasmus’ Latin translation from the Greek correctly renders the verse as simply “born of water.”

Is probable that the Latin church leaders—such as those quoted above—were influenced by an early, pre-*Vulgate* translation of the Scriptures with a corrupt rendering of John 3:5. At the very least, Jerome’s translation perpetuated the false “born again” teaching with its corruption of John 3:5. The faulty rendering has remained a part of the *Latin Vulgate* and is the basis of the Catholic “sacrament of baptism”—typically given to infants or children.

Biblical scholar William Tyndale, the first to translate the New Testament from the Greek into English, translated John 3:3, 5 correctly. However, in other writings he taught that when one is converted and receives the Holy Spirit, one has been “born again.” It is likely that Tyndale’s theology contributed to the Protestant “born again” teaching.

The true meaning of “born again”

In order to fully comprehend the scriptural meaning of when one is “born again,” Jesus’ teachings in John 3:1-12 must be examined. The context of these verses proves that being “born again” does *not* mean a conversion or baptismal experience. Rather, it means a literal *transformation from flesh to spirit*: “Now there

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was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus by name, a ruler of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher *Who* has come from God; because no one is able to do the miracles that You are doing, unless God is with him.’

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, **unless anyone is born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man who is old be born? Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, **unless anyone has been born of water and of Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which has been **born of the flesh is flesh**; and that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit**. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “It is necessary for you to be born again.” **The wind blows where it will**, and you hear its sound, but you do not know *the place* from which it comes and *the place* to which it goes; **so also is everyone who has been born of the Spirit**.’

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘You are a teacher of Israel, and you do not know these things? Truly, truly I say to you, We speak that which We know, and We testify of that which We have seen; but you do not receive Our testimony. If I have told you earthly things, and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?’ ” (John 3:1-12).

It is clear that Jesus was not talking about a conversion or baptismal experience in this dialogue. Rather, he was comparing one’s physical birth—a fleshly existence—to that of being “born anew” or “born again”—to an actual spiritual existence. Jesus describes two births: one of water and one of the spirit—“unless anyone has been **born of water and of Spirit**” (John 3:5). Jesus then contrasts a birth of the flesh with a birth of the Spirit: “That which has been **born of the flesh is flesh**; and that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit**” (verse 6).

When a human being is born, he or she is *born of flesh*—a physical being. Further, every human being has been “born of wa-

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ter” from the womb—referring to the amniotic fluid of human birth. One who has been *born of water* (via the womb) **has been born of the flesh—and is flesh** (John 3:5-6).

But Nicodemus missed the point when Jesus referred to a new or second birth of the Spirit—“**unless anyone has been born ... of Spirit.**” What kind of *existence* does one have who has been “born of the Spirit”? Jesus answered that question when He said “that which has been **born of the Spirit is spirit.**” Jesus clearly meant that anyone who has been born of the Spirit is, in fact, **a spirit being**. The new, spiritual birth means that one who has been “born again” *is* a spirit being, no longer composed of human flesh. Since one who has been “born of the flesh is flesh,” it follows, as Jesus said, that one who has been “born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

Every human is limited by fleshly existence and physical environment. However, as a spirit being, one is not bound by the flesh or limited by the physical realm. Jesus stated that one who has been “born of the Spirit” cannot necessarily be seen, just as the wind cannot be seen: “**The wind blows where it wills**, and you hear its sound, but you do not know *the place* from which it comes and *the place* to which it goes; **so also is everyone who has been born of the Spirit**” (verse 8). Therefore, one who has been “born again”—“born of the Spirit”—must be invisible to the human eye, having the ability to come and go as the wind. That is hardly the case of one who has been baptized and converted—for he or she is *still* in the flesh and is limited by the flesh, and subject to death.

Jesus also said that a fleshly human being “cannot see” or “enter into” the Kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). Paul reiterated this when he emphatically stated: “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit *the kingdom of God*” (I Cor. 15:50).

When is one actually born again?

When, then, is one literally “born again” or “born anew”? Mat-

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threw wrote that Jesus was the “firstborn” of the virgin Mary (Matt. 1:25). Jesus’ human birth was by water. He was flesh (I John 4:1-2), as any other human being. When Jesus was resurrected from the dead *as a spirit being*, He became, in Paul’s words, the “**firstborn from among the dead**” (Col. 1:18). John verified this when he wrote that Jesus was the “**firstborn from the dead**” (Rev. 1:5). Therefore, Jesus was “born again”—“born of the Spirit”—at the time He was *resurrected*. It was exactly as He had told Nicodemus, “That which has been born of the Spirit is **spirit**.”

As a spirit being, Jesus was not limited by the physical realm. In fact, He walked through doors and walls, suddenly appearing to the apostles and disciples (Luke 24:33-43). Though spirit, Jesus was able to manifest Himself as a man, with the appearance of flesh and bone.

Not only is Jesus the firstborn from the dead, He is also the “**firstborn among many brethren**” (Rom. 8:29). If Jesus is the *firstborn*, this means there are others who are yet to be “born again.” The true body of believers is called the “church of the firstborn,” as Paul wrote: “But you have come to Mount Sion, and to *the* city of *the* living God, heavenly Jerusalem; and to an innumerable company of angels; *to the* joyous festival gathering; and to **the church of the firstborn**, registered in *the book of life* in heaven; and to God, *the* Judge of all” (Heb. 12:22-23). It is called the “church of the firstborn” because believers will be “born again”—“born of the Spirit”—in the first resurrection when Jesus returns (Rev. 20:4-6).

The Bible reveals that at the resurrection believers will be “born again” of the Spirit and receive a glorious spirit body, shining as the sun. Paul explains: “It [the body] is sown [in death] **a natural body** [that which has been born of the flesh *is flesh*]; it is raised [in the first resurrection] **a spiritual body** [that which has been born of the spirit *is spirit*]. **There is a natural body**, and **there is a spiritual body**; accordingly, it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul; the last Adam *became* an ever-

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living Spirit.’ However, the spiritual *was* not first, but the natural—then the spiritual.

“The first man *is* of the earth—made of dust. The second man *is* the Lord from heaven. As *is* the one made of dust, so also *are all* those who are made of dust; and as *is* the heavenly *one*, so also *are all* those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the *one* made of dust, **we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one** [at the resurrection].

“Now this I say, brethren, that **flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God**, nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I show you a mystery: we shall not all fall asleep, but **we shall all be changed** [born again of the Spirit], in an instant, in *the* twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for *the* trumpet shall sound, and **the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed**. For this corruptible must put on incorruptibility, and this mortal must put on immortality. Now when this **corruptible shall have put on incorruptibility**, and this **mortal shall have put on immortality**, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’ ” (I Cor. 15:44-55; also see I Thess. 4:14-18).

In summary, the scriptural evidence clearly reveals that one is not “born again” or “born of the Spirit” until the resurrection at the return of Christ. Being “born again” has nothing directly to do with baptism or conversion. When one has been “born again,” he or she will be a spirit being—composed of spirit. This is the true meaning of “born again.”

What does it mean to be “born of God”?

Contributing to the confusion on this subject is the “born of God” passage in I John 3:9, a verse that has been grossly mistranslated. Unfortunately, this mistranslation has led many to mistakenly assume that Christians who are “born of God” (or “born again”) *cannot sin*. But as we have seen, no Christian has yet been “born again” or “born of God.” Moreover, the idea that Christians are *immune* from sinning is obviously false.

The *KJV* reads: “Whosoever is **born of God doth not**

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commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and **he cannot sin**, because he is **born** of God.” As translated, this verse contradicts other verses in I John, as well as the rest of the New Testament.

Contrary to this incorrect translation, John wrote that even Christians who have the Holy Spirit *do indeed sin* at times—and that they need to confess their sins for forgiveness (I John 1:7-10; 2:1-2). Frankly, it would be completely incongruous for John to write the passages above about how converted believers *do* sometimes sin and, at the same time, write in I John 3:9 that one who has been “born of God” (or “born again”) “does not commit sin”—and that such a person “cannot sin.” Since the Scriptures do not contradict one another, what is the solution?

It is apparent that I John 3 cannot be referring to those “born again” to spirit existence by a resurrection; as shown above, *only* Jesus has been “born again” as spirit by being resurrected from the dead. No one else has been or will be “born again” by a resurrection until Christ’s return. Thus, I John 3:9 can *only* apply to Christians *still alive*.

The problem with this passage comes from two mistranslated words or phrases. First, the word “born” is translated from the Greek verb *gennao*. In the *KJV*, *gennao* has been translated as “beget, begat” or “begotten” 55 times; as “born” 37 times; and as “conceive, bear, brought forth, deliver, or gender” four times. The context determines whether *gennao* should be translated “begotten” or “born” (Wigram, *Englishman’s Greek Concordance of the New Testament*).

With this understanding, the first part of I John 3:9 can be corrected by simply translating *gennao* as “begotten” instead of “born.” As a result, the correct rendering should read: “Everyone who has been **begotten** by God....”

The second phrase in I John 3:9 that has not been accurately translated in the *KJV* is “doth not commit sin.” There is no question that a converted person *does*, at times, commit sin; but upon true repentance, through the grace of God and by the blood of Christ, those sins can be forgiven. The key to understanding this phrase is an accurate translation of the Greek verb *poiei*,

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translated “commit.” As many of the better Bible translations bring out, the meaning is simply that one who is begotten of God—who has been “converted” and begun his or her Christian journey—does not *practice* sin, or *live in* sin. This is also verified by numerous Bible helps, such as Berry’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*—which says that the Greek wording of this passage has the meaning of “*to do, generally, i.e., habitually, to perform, to execute, to exercise, to practice, i.e., to pursue a course of action, to be active, to work...*” (p. 81).

The context of John’s epistle is not about a Christian’s inability to commit sin. Therefore, *poiei* in this context means **practicing sin as a way of life**. When verse 9 is rendered “does not *practice* sin,” the contradiction created by the *KJV* is removed. The correct translation of this portion of verse 9 reads: **“Everyone who has been begotten by God does not practice sin.”**

Furthermore, this meaning of *poiei* is retained in the second part of verse 9 with reference to “cannot sin,” which should read “cannot *practice* sin.” Thus, the entire verse correctly translated should read: “Everyone who has been begotten by God does not practice sin because His seed *of begettal* is dwelling within him, and he is not able to *practice* sin because he has been begotten by God.” This rendering harmonizes with the rest of John’s epistle (and the entire New Testament) and removes all contradictions.

One of the reasons for confusion on this subject is that many fail to understand that conversion is an *ongoing process*. In one sense, a person is “converted” when they have repented, been baptized for the remission of their sins, and received the Holy Spirit (by which they are actually *begotten*). In another sense, however, their conversion has only *just begun*. As a *process* of change and growth, conversion takes place over one’s lifetime. Thus, sin still sometime occurs—but *not* as a way of life or practice. Only at the end of that period of growth, change, and overcoming is the Christian finally “born again” at the resurrection as

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a spirit-composed immortal member of God’s family.

Recommended reading:

What Do You Mean—Born Again and Born of God?

Notes

Notes

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