

# You Must Be Born Again Why This Series and Where Are We Going?

by John Piper

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*John Piper emphasizes the critical importance of understanding and experiencing the true meaning of being born again in the Christian faith.*

**Duration:** 41:41

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 36:26, John 3:8, Romans 8:30, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Ephesians 2:5, 1 Peter 1:23-25, 1 John 5:4

**Topics:** "Spiritual Regeneration", "Revival"

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## Description

This sermon emphasizes the necessity and transformative power of being born again by the Spirit of God. It challenges the worldly perception of 'born again' Christians and calls for a genuine experience of regeneration through the Word of God. The speaker highlights the need for true believers to live distinctively and seeks a revival of authentic faith in the church and society.

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## Transcript

The Spirit and the wind blow where He wills. You don't know where He's coming from, and you don't know where He's going. So are all those who are born of the Spirit.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Why do you marvel that I said to you, Nicodemus, O High Pharisee and Teacher of the Law, that even you, Pastor Nicodemus, must be born again? So Father, I pray that from the most manifestly religious to the most lecherous person, the Spirit would move in power in these days. Don't leave us to ourselves.

Man accomplishes what man can do, and God accomplishes what only God can do. And that's what we want done. The new birth.

So come. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. If you go online and look up, for example, the Barna Group. It's an organization that specializes in religious research, especially research among conservative Christians.

You'll read things like this, quote, quote, Same kind of statistics show up in Ron Sider's book, The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience. Why are Christians living just like the rest of the world? Published two years ago. Shows up again in Mark Regnerus' new book this year, Forbidden Fruit, Sex and Religion in

the Lives of American Teenagers.

Oxford University Press, 2007. What I'm picking up on from the Barna Group home is the phrase born again. The Barna Group in this particular case is reporting their research.

And they report again, quote, Born again Christians just as likely to divorce as are non-Christians. Sider doesn't use the term born again, but uses the term evangelical. And says this, quote, Only 9% of evangelicals tithe.

Of 12,000 teenagers who took the pledge to wait for marriage, 80% had sex outside marriage in the next seven years. 26% of traditional evangelicals do not think premarital sex is wrong. White evangelicals are more likely than Catholics and mainline Protestants to object to having black neighbors, close quote.

In other words, the evangelical church as a whole in America is apparently not very unlike the world. Goes to church on Sunday and has a veneer of religion, but its religion is basically an add-on to the same old way of life that the world lives, not a radically transforming power. Now, I want to say loud and clear, when the Barna Group uses the term born again to describe American churchgoers whose lives are indistinguishable from the world, who sin as much as the world, who sacrifice for others as little as the world, who embrace injustice as readily as the world, who covet things as greedily as the world, who enjoy God-ignoring entertainment as enthusiastically as the world, when the term born again is used to describe these professing Christians, the Barna Group is making a profound mistake.

It is using a biblical term born again in a way that would make it unrecognizable by Jesus Christ and the writers of the New Testament. Here's the way they define born again on that page. Born again Christians, the Barna Group says, were defined in these surveys, when they made the phone call, this is the definition, born again Christians were defined in these surveys as those who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today, and who also indicated they believe that when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus as their Savior.

Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as born again. Being classified as born again is not dependent on church or denominational affiliation or involvement. In other words, in this research, the term born again refers to people who say things on the telephone.

They say, I have a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. It is important to me. They say, I believe that I will go to heaven when I die.

I have confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior. Then the Barna Group takes their word for it, ascribes to them the infinitely important reality of the new birth, and then blasphemes that precious biblical reality by saying regenerate hearts have no more victory over sin than unregenerate hearts. That's blasphemy.

Now, I'm not saying their research is wrong. It appears to be appallingly right. I'm not saying that the church is not as worldly as they say it is.

I'm simply saying that the writers of the New Testament think in exactly the opposite direction from the Barna Group. Instead of moving from profession of faith, to the label born again, to observed worldliness of these so-called born again people, to the conclusion that the new birth does not radically change people, the New Testament turns it entirely around. The New Testament moves the other direction.

It moves from the absolute certainty that the new birth radically changes people, to the observation that many professing Christians are not radically changed, to the conclusion they're not born again. That's the direction that the New Testament moves, not the Barna Group. And thus bring reproach and blasphemy upon this glorious reality of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those whom He has born again, caused to be born again.

And thus defile the new birth with this claim to worldliness, the unregenerate professing American churchgoers. For example, let me illustrate what I mean from the New Testament going the other direction. We'll just take all these from the first epistle of John, and we'll be coming back to these significantly in the weeks to come.

1 John 2.29 If you know that He is righteous, you may be sure everyone who practices righteousness has been born of Him. 1 John 3.9 No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. 1 John 4.7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God.

Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 1 John 5.4 For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.

1 John 5.18 We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who has been born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. For a sample. Now, we'll come back to texts like that in the weeks to come as this series develops.

There are many questions to answer, are there not? And we will, in case you're wondering, distance ourselves significantly from perfectionism and deal realistically with the failures of born-again Christians. But for now, is it not true that these statements appear to be written with the very Barnett group in mind? And those kind of statements, to oppose them, to make sure that we do not believe them, that born-again people are morally indistinguishable from the world. That is not true.

The Bible is profoundly aware that there are, in the church, morally indistinguishable people from the world. The Bible is not surprised by that. Finding born-again people permeated with worldliness is not what the New Testament concludes.

Rather, the New Testament concludes the church is permeated by non-born-again people. Those are two different ways of viewing the world. One, born-again people must be permeated with sin and world and are indistinguishable.

Bible, the church is permeated by unregenerate people. Millions of them. Today begins a series of messages on the new birth.

I've been praying, talking to the elders, and dreaming about this for about two years. What does the Bible teach about being born again? There's another word for it. Regeneration.

And it's helpful from time to time to use that word. So may I ask you to add it to your vocabulary? If it's not there already. Regeneration.

I'd like to solicit the help of the children. Heads up. Listen up, children.

I would like the children to help their parents here. Because more than likely, your parents have not been using the word regeneration in your hearing very often. They may not know the word.

And so I would like all the children to go home and say to their parents, Mommy and Daddy, did you know that the word regeneration means being born again? I would like to solicit all the help of the children to make sure Mom and Dad get this word into the vocabulary of the family. And, by the way, it has another little form, regenerate. Regenerate.

Now that's the adjective. And so say to Mom and Dad, did you know that another way of describing people that are born again is that they are regenerate? And then make sure your Mom and Dad know that. So that when I use these words, not just children, but also Moms and Dads, we'll understand them.

You got that, young people? We're going to test Mom and Dad. Regeneration means being born again. Regenerate is the kind of people who have been born again.

So now we can all get together in our vocabulary in the coming weeks, and I won't have to stop every time and say that's a big religious word. Today's message is an introductory overview of where we're going and why we're doing this. Now you've already heard a big reason why we're doing this.

The term born again in our day is desecrated when it is used the way the Barna Group uses it. And of course, and I can't stop the world from doing this, I won't make any effort to, the world is full of the term born again. It generally means get a new lease on life.

And it applies to everything under the sun, even things that don't have any life at all. For example, I found all these on the web. Cisco Systems, the communication company, has been born again.

The Green Movement has been born again. The Davey Shipyard in Montreal has been born again. The West End of Boston has been born again.

Kosher foods for Orthodox Jews have been born again. And so on. So it's not surprising then that I should ask you to listen very carefully when someone says to you 45% of Americans are born again.

They say. The people say that. The term born again is very precious.

And we will not give it up. We won't say conservatively born again. Or something useless like that.

Born again is very precious, very crucial. And so, I hope to make sure that we know what God intends when He inspires writers in the New Testament to use it. What does being born again mean? He wants to know that in the weeks to come.

A second reason why we're doing this. I am eager to focus on the new birth to help you know what really happened to you. It is possible to be born again and never have heard the phrase born again.

Because there's so many different ways of describing the event in the New Testament. So that some of you who are really born again are sitting there trembling wondering if I've never heard of this, does that mean I'm not? Might, but that wouldn't be the reason you're not. I want to be a help to you.

To help those of you who are born again know what happened. It's a wonderful thing what happened to you. And if you don't know about it, you're going to live at a level that's probably pretty low.

From what God might want you to live. It's wonderful beyond all human comprehension. Not because it's so mysterious you can't understand it or the Bible has little to say about it.

But because when you've said everything there is to say, there's still more. When it's all comprehended, there's still more. So I hope when we're done with this series, you'll stand in awe of what has happened to you.

And what you have become as a born again child of the living God. If you don't walk through your days with a periodic wonder about who you are as a born again human being. You're missing it, just missing it.

You should be staggered with amazement that you are born again. A third reason why I want to linger on this for some weeks. I want to help people be born again.

If they've been in church all their lives, or if they're here for the first time tonight. And vaguely have heard of this stuff. I would like to be an instrument in the hands of the Almighty for their regeneration.

That means I would like those of you who are born again to pray with me for the next 5 or 6 or 10 or 12 or 13 weeks. I don't know how long this series is going to go. I told Chuck and Dan and Rick, at least through Christmas.

I suspect as I began to prepare yesterday, it would be a tad longer. I'll try not to drag it out beyond what it's worthy. Would you pray? Like you've never prayed before for this church? The wind blows where he wills.

We don't know where it comes from, where it goes. Such are all who are born of the Spirit. I cannot control the Holy Spirit.

He blows where he wills. I cannot make anybody be born again. Neither can you.

You can't make yourself be born again. This is the work of God. Therefore, we as a people should feel a kind of trembling readiness and dependence and expectation.

That in these weeks, God is going to do a thunderingly wonderful work. I don't make anybody be born again. So what did I mean when I said I would like to be a means of people being born again? What do you mean be a means? And I'll read you the verse from which I'm drawing out that mandate.

This is 1 Peter 1, 23 and 25. Since you have been born again, now watch this carefully. Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but imperishable through the living and abiding Word of God, this Word is the good news that was preached to you.

Whoa! John Piper, don't you take lightly what's about to happen here. People are born again, not by perishable seed like a husband could deposit in a wife, but by imperishable seed that the Word deposits in a soul. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God, and faith is the first cry of the newborn soul.

So, oh, how we should pray that not only will the term be clarified over against our culture, and not only will Christians fall in love with what has happened to them, and be amazed every day that they discover more about what God has done in their lives, but that also those who are dead in trespasses and sins will find the Word of God, and there's life. So God uses the instrument of His Word. He doesn't leave us without some sense of how does this happen in the world? It happens by the instrument of His Word.

My Word cannot make it happen, but when the Holy Spirit takes my Word, if my Word is faithful to this Word, then the Holy Spirit makes a rapier out of it. It goes right to the heart. People find themselves laid open, and life, and suddenly they see Christ in wholly new ways, and they cast themselves upon Him for mercy.

Now, there are three aims for why I would like to do those two things, have Christians understand better what's happened to them, and have unbelievers dead in trespasses and sins come alive. Why do I want those two things to happen? Three reasons. One, I want you to, as you grow in your knowledge of what's happened to you, I want you to enjoy your fellowship with God, and your assurance of salvation.

Those who know the dynamics of the new birth, who know what happened to them, you may not know when it happened to you. My guess is, in this room, most people don't know when it happened to them. We'll see more about that later.

But to know, because you're reading the Bible, and you see Him describe what happened to you, to know that raises your sweet communion with Him, and your deep, settled assurance that you're His child. And dozens of you in this room struggle with assurance. You get up in the morning, and you don't feel saved.

You don't feel new. You go to bed at night, and you've done some stupid thing with your mouth, and you don't feel new. We need to work with that.

We need to figure this out. How does knowing about what God has done in the new birth cause the tide of our soul assurance, so that all the little boats of doubt don't rule? The tide rises, the boats of doubt sink, and there's this beautiful calm in our souls. So that's my first reason for why I want to do this, for us, and for the folks who need to be born again.

Number two, if God would be pleased to bring about an awakening in this church and across these cities, if He would be pleased to do that, then the world would get the real deal, not the fake, go-to-church, evangelical, nominal, worldly Christian that makes the statistics. Don't you want the world to get the real deal? Wouldn't you like the church to have a reputation that is radically loving and sacrificial and committed to all the right, deep, glorious, biblical things like love and justice and faith and righteousness? Wouldn't you like people to think, when they see some horrible news thing like I saw on CNN, a web deal yesterday about the disabled people and the way they're cared for in Serbia? And I just sat there crying, God, that can't stay that way! Tying these children with their wrists into these cages year after year while they go, for years! It can't stay that way. Wouldn't you like it if the first thing that came into the world's mind is Christians go first? Instead of bigger houses, more boats, more stuff.

Why wouldn't we be known that way? It's because so many of us are not born again. Scary, right? We're just worldly. So that's number two.

I would like the world to get the real deal. Jesus told us, let your light so shine before men that they may see your what? Tell me. Good works.

What are those? It's Serbia. Or inner city Minneapolis. Or your neighbor, whose teenager is strung out on drugs while the dad makes \$300,000 a year, and you're the only person who seems to care.

That too. Let the world see your good deeds and give glory to your Father. That's what we're about.

Getting glory to God. And Jesus says, it'll happen when my people are spending their lives doing good works rather than getting richer and richer and richer more and more secure and more and more comfortable and more and more like the world in the way they think about retirement, the way they think about their house, the way they think about their neighborhood, the way they think about black and white and red and yellow people. That's number two.

I want the world to get the real deal. I want them to get it better from me. I want to validate my new birth with greater authenticity in my family, in my neighborhood, in this church, in this world.

Number three, the third reason, which is already implicit in number two, if you really know what happened to you in your new birth, you will treasure God and you will treasure His Spirit which caused you to be born again and you will treasure His Son who purchased it for you and you will treasure His Word like you never treasured it before. And when God and the Spirit and the Son and His Word are treasured, He's glorified. And so we want to live for the glory of God.

There are several crucial questions that we will be asking along the way. Now, let me mention a few more. One is, what is the new birth? Now, I'll try to tackle that probably next week.

Just what is it? What do we mean? What actually happened? What's it like? What does it change? What's there and not there, before and after? What comes into being? Here's the second question we'll deal with. How does it relate to the other things that the Bible says God does to bring us to Himself and save us? For example, how does it relate to God's effectual calling? Those whom He called, He justified. Where's new birth in there? Romans 8.30 Or, the new creation.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Or, God's drawing us to Christ. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

How does the drawing work of God relate to the new birth? Or, God's giving people to the Son. All that the Father gives me will come to me. So, what's this giving business? How does that relate to the new birth? Or, God's opening our hearts.

Last Sunday, the Lord opened her heart to give attention to what was said by Paul. What's that? Is that different or the same? The Lord opened her heart. Lydia.

Or, God's illumining our hearts. He sang about that. 2 Corinthians 4.6 God has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

How does that relate to the new birth? Or, God's taking the heart of stone out and putting the heart of flesh in. Ezekiel 36.26 And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh. Or, God's making us alive.

Ephesians 2.5 Even when we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ. Or, finally, God's adopting us into His family. You have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba, Father.

There's adoption and new birth the same. Two ways in. Same way in to the family.

Another question we will ask is, why is it necessary? Jesus said to Nicodemus, John 3.7 Sorry, I haven't done an exposition of this text. Some of you are real jealous about being faithful to the Word. Amen.

Come back, please. We will read that same text next week and I'll work on it with you. I hope.

One verse, seven. When Jesus says to Nicodemus, You must be born again. He is not saying, I suggest this for Pharisees.

Or, add it to your life. A little religious spirituality to help a Pharisee. No.

Verse three, he says, Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. He said that to the most religious man in his day. That's why I called him Pastor Nicodemus at the beginning.

So that's one of the things we'll be dealing with is, why do we need this? Why is this must there? Must be born again. It is remarkable how remedies for a disease sheds light on the nature of the disease. You might think it would kind of be the other way around, like, tell me, doctor, how bad my disease is and then we'll figure out the remedy.

Doesn't usually happen like that. Or it might, but consider this possibility. This is the way the sermon will work.

Because nobody knows how bad they are. Nobody knows our need. So you go to the doctor and you've got this sore on your ankle.

Kind of angry looking sore. And he looks at it and says, hmm, let me just take a little thing there and we'll do some tests and come back tomorrow. And you go back in tomorrow and he looks at you and he says, this is not going to be easy to hear, but we've got to take your leg off just below the knee.

It's just a sore! Well, I'm the doctor. We're taking your leg off or you'll die. That's what we should feel when we hear you must be born again.

Or you can imagine an academic. I'm a Pharisee! I know the Old Testament! Jesus doesn't think he knows the Old Testament. And you, unless the Holy Spirit is at work in your life, will hear me say to every person in this room, you must be born again.

And you will say, why? I mean, I'm as good as anybody. I pay my taxes. I haven't killed anybody.

I haven't shot anybody. I don't, you don't get it. He's going to take your leg off or you're going to die.

Or he's going to give you a whole new heart or you're going to die. So, we need to talk about the necessity of the new birth. And then the last question probably that we'll deal with is, how does new birth happen? How does it happen? If it's the work of God, which it is, how do you experience it? What did babies do to get born? Very important question to answer.

They didn't do anything to get born. And a final question which brings us back to where we started and I'm done. What effects are there of being born again? What effects in your life are there of being born again? What's it like to live as a born again person? So here we are now back at the Barna group.

Born again Christians are so worldly and so sinful that they are indistinguishable from the world on count after count. I don't think so. 1 John 5, 4 Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world.

This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. But my conviction, as you know, is not rosy for the church. It implies that there are millions of church attenders who are not born again.

So would those of you who are born again, those of you who have the Holy Spirit abiding in you, those of you who love God, those of you who care about lost people, be on your knees with me for the next 5 or 6 weeks that God would blow here. That God would blow at the north campus and blow at the south site and blow here downtown. Blow in your homes and blow in our neighborhoods and blow in other churches.

The church is desperately needy today. The world is not the least impressed with us. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, how thankful we are that by grace alone the Holy Spirit blew once upon a time and quickened us and awakened us to hate our sin and to see Christ as our all-sufficient treasure, Savior, Lord, King, Friend. Thank you. And now Lord, in these days, blow again.

Blow with reviving and blow with refreshing and blow with conviction and blow on your church and on this city. Oh, free wind of God, have mercy upon us, I pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

For more information, visit [www.fema.org](http://www.fema.org)

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