

What Does It Mean To Be "Saved"?

What does it mean to be "saved" or "born again" as some people say within the Christian faith? This kind of language is usually used to define whether someone is "in" (a Christian) or "out" (a non-Christian). How do we understand that in light of our desire to be inclusive?

To address this we will briefly study some of Jesus' words about it in the gospel of John:

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

³In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

⁴"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

⁵Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

⁹"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

John 3:1-19 (New International Version)

Let's look at some of the important issues related to this passage.

John's Gospel

John's account of Jesus' life is full of rich imagery, poetry and metaphor. It has a deep serious tone as he addresses profound cosmic issues. He embraces mystery and talks about heavenly, cosmic issues becoming earthly and coming into our reality. He starts his account off in such a way to describe Jesus:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1-5 & 14 (New International Version)

John loved to use the metaphors of light and darkness to describe spiritual reality, and in particular a theme of his is that Jesus is the Light, come to free humanity from darkness, but that humans struggled to understand this Light. Through this misunderstanding, further investigation results in humans being more illumined by the Light and gaining deeper understanding. John recognized spirituality as a journey.

Nicodemus

This account of Nicodemus exhibits these themes. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night (v2), perhaps because he is afraid of being seen with Jesus but John also seems to be inferring that Nicodemus is "in the dark" and he is coming to Jesus the Light. He is a very important religious person (v1): a Jew, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin (the highest legal, legislative and judicial body of the Jews). Jesus even refers to him as "Israel's teacher" (v10); a high accolade indeed. He seems to have a certain amount of respect and admiration for Jesus (v2) and Jesus meets him on his level and shares some challenging concepts. As the narrative moves on it seems that Nicodemus fades from the story (perhaps retreating back into the night). It's not clear whether Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus in the latter verses or whether John is narrating. Either way what Jesus shares is very important for us.

Born again

Jesus rocks Nicodemus back on his heels by saying that one has to be "born again" to see the Kingdom of God (v3). Nicodemus misunderstands, thinking Jesus is referring to physical birth (v4). But Jesus is speaking in heavenly terms rather than earthly. The term "born again" literally means "born from above" (*anothen* in the original Greek). Jesus is talking about becoming a child of God and defining that as having nothing to do with physical birth but rather on a more mystical birth from above, from the heavenly realm, related to the Kingdom of God. This is an incredibly surprising and inclusive statement because at that point the prevailing view (and certainly the view of the religious establishment of which Nicodemus was a part) was that being a child of God was dependent on one's ethnicity: Jewish people were the children of God. Jesus is throwing the door wide open by saying that anyone can be a child of God, no matter their birth, pedigree or place of privilege. This would likely have been most troubling to Nicodemus because he is of the exact kind of pedigree that was supposed to qualify one as a child of God. It's important to see that the term "born again" has often been used in exclusive ways (to

determine who is in and who is out) but the context and overarching message of the passage from which the term comes is distinctly inclusive.

Salvation

Jesus seems to be defining salvation as being “born of the Spirit” (v5). Jesus comes into the world to bring God’s very life to us and this is explained in verses 16 and 17:

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Greek word used for “save” here is *sozo*. It means “healing” and “wholeness” and is also used when Jesus heals people of sickness. It is related to the Hebrew concept of *Shalom* meaning “holistic peace” or “life the way it should be” which in many ways correlates to the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced. The term “eternal life” in verse 17 might perhaps be better translated “life eternal” or “life without beginning or end”, another connection to *Shalom* or the Kingdom of God. So the term “saved” seems to have more to do with being healed and made whole, rather than fulfilling some judicial requirement that lets us off the hook for all the bad things we do. The emphasis is on what we are *being saved to* (healing, wholeness, shalom, the Kingdom of God, living meaningfully and well) rather than on what we are *being saved from*, because

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (v17).

It’s not hard to see that without the Light of God, we are perishing in the dark. Left to our own devices we do not seem to move towards health and wholeness. If that were the case, we would all be wonderful people and the world would be heaven. The fact is we are in a desperate state of perishing! But the message from Jesus is that God wants to save us from our perishing so that we can have real life. Salvation is about God not wanting us to perish in our own darkness. This message of unconditional love and great hope has been distorted—it’s not “come to Jesus or he will cause you to perish!”

Belief

The word for “believe” in verse 16 is the Greek *pisteuo*. The fuller meaning of this word is much more than assent to a proposition or intellectual acknowledgment of a fact. It means willingness to commit to, trust in, or follow someone. It’s associated with obedience (which implies followership). John uses the word around 100 times and always as a verb. It’s a dynamic, active, relational word set in the present, not the past. When Jesus (or John) says “whoever believes in Him” it does not imply a static acceptance of certain facts about Jesus that then qualify you for salvation. Rather it implies a process of trust, followership and commitment in the present moment through which we are being saved (healed and made whole).

Mystery

John’s theme of mystery is present in this passage. In all these matters of new birth, salvation and belief, John emphasizes mystery. In verses 6, 7 and 8 Jesus cautions us about evaluating who is in and

who is out. If spirituality was a matter of physical birth (i.e. externally obvious issues) then it would be easy to determine who is in and who is out. But since spirituality is of another world - of the Spirit - we cannot make such easy determinations, just as we cannot predict which way the wind will blow (v8). It's not for us to judge someone's salvation. That is God's business.

So what can we conclude from this passage?

- 1) We are not called to be gatekeepers of who is saved and who is not. This passage is about breaking down barriers, about letting people in, not keeping people out. The Pharisees saw themselves as gatekeepers and Jesus is resolutely challenging that role. It would be tragically ironic if we were to take these concepts of being "born again" and "saved" and use them as barriers to exclude people.
- 2) We do not know the real spiritual state of anyone for sure. Only God knows.
- 3) What we can do is address our own need for salvation every day.
 - Are we living in the light?
 - In what sense are we perishing? Being saved?
 - Are we following Jesus?
- 4) We can always encourage people to come to the light and point them towards Jesus.
- 5) Belief is not a statement; it's an active response to Jesus and a process of commitment and followership.
- 6) Likewise, salvation is not instant; it's a process of transformation (a journey) from darkness to light, from death to life, from perishing to life everlasting.

Different Christian traditions have varying views about the meaning of salvation. For some sacramental traditions (e.g., Roman Catholic) it happens through and at the time of baptism. For some Protestant traditions it happens through having the right beliefs about Jesus. For some traditions such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals it happens at a specific moment of divine revelation often pinpointed as a moment of conversion.

At Cedar Ridge, we believe salvation is what is happening to us when we follow Jesus, let the Light in and allow healing to take place. We see it as an ongoing journey, a process over time with many ups and downs. There are often many noticeable and important milestones on that journey such as when we submit to baptism as a symbol of our followership or times of deepening understanding about Jesus or even overwhelming moments of divine revelation, but we see all of them as part of a long journey of conversion to the Way of Jesus. We don't have altar calls at Cedar Ridge, we don't try to pressure or guilt people into "getting saved" but we do call everyone, all the time to follow Jesus, no matter where they are on their spiritual journey; not just to admire or even agree with Jesus, but to follow. In that sense, every moment of every day we call ourselves and the whole world to be saved.