

A CLEAR GOSPEL MESSAGE

- Zac Poonen

In this article, I want to explain what it means to be “*born again*” – or to be “*saved*”.

Repentance is the first step to this experience. But in order to repent (turn from sin) you must first know what sin is. There is a lot of false understanding of repentance among Christians today, because there is a lot of false understanding of sin.

The standards in Christianity have come down greatly in these past few decades. The “*gospel*” being preached today by most preachers is a highly diluted version of the truth. People are being told only to believe in Jesus. But believing in Jesus alone will not save anyone, *if they do not repent*.

Being *born again* is the foundation of the Christian life. If you live a good life, without laying this foundation, then your Christianity will be just like all the other religions in the world – that also teach people to live a good life. We must certainly live a good life. But that is the *superstructure* of Christianity – *not its foundation*. The foundation is *being born again*. We must all begin there.

Jesus used the expression “*born again*” in *John 3:3*, when speaking to Nicodemus who was a religious leader and a God-fearing man who lived uprightly. Yet Jesus told him, “*Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God*” (*John 3:3*). So we see that to enter God’s kingdom you need to have a spiritual birth, even if you are a very good man! Jesus then told him that He (Jesus) would be lifted up on a cross to die and that those who believed in Him would receive eternal life (*John 3:14,16*).

Jesus went on to tell him that men loved darkness more than light, because their deeds were evil (*John 3:19*). But those who are honest would come into the light and be saved (*John 3:21*). To be born again, you must come into the light. That means being honest with God and confessing your sins to Him. Obviously, you cannot remember all the sins that you have committed. But you must acknowledge that you are a sinner and tell God whatever sins you remember.

Sin is a very big thing and you can see only a very small part of it in your life, at first. That is something like your living in a large country of which you have seen only a very small part. But as you turn from the sins that you know, you will gradually see more and more of this “*country of sin*” in your own life. As you walk in the light, you will see more of your sin – and you can then cleanse yourself more and more from it. So you must *walk* in honesty before God all the time.

To use another illustration: You are living in a house that has many dirty rooms. You want the Lord Jesus to come and live in your house. But He cannot live in dirty rooms. So He helps you to clean up each room – one by one. Little by little, the whole house is cleaned up. That is how we grow in holiness in the Christian life.

The apostle Paul once said that everywhere he went, he preached the same message to everyone: *Repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:20)*. These are the two requirements to lay a good foundation in your life and to be born again. God has joined *repentance*

and *faith* together. But most Christian preachers have separated them. Repentance has been left out from most of today's gospel-preaching. Only *faith* is being preached by most preachers.

But if you have only *faith*, you *cannot* be born again. That is like saying that a woman cannot have a child, all by herself, no matter how hard she tries. A man also cannot have a child all by himself. A man and a woman have to come together for a child can be born. Even so, it is when *repentance* and *faith* come together that a spiritual child is born – that the *new birth* can take place in your spirit. This spiritual birth is just as real as physical birth – and it also takes place *in a moment*. It is not gradual.

There may be months of preparation for the new birth – just as there are months of preparation for physical birth. But the new birth itself (just like physical birth) takes place in a moment. Some Christians do not know the date of their new birth. I do not know the date of my own new birth. But that is just like *not* knowing the date of one's physical birth. That is not a serious matter – if one is alive!! In the same way, the important thing is to know for certain that you *are* alive in Christ today.

Are we being narrow-minded when we say that Jesus is the only way to God?

Let me answer that with an illustration: Someone who has never seen my father (or even a picture of my father), cannot know what my father looks like. In the same way, we who have never seen God cannot know anything about Him or the way to Him. Jesus Christ however, came from God. And so He alone can show us the way to God.” He said “*I am the way. No one can come to the Father except through Me*” (John 14:6).

When we think about Jesus' claim to be the *ONLY WAY* to God the Father, we have to say that either what He said was *true* or He was a *liar* and a *deceiver*. Who would dare to say that He was a liar and a deceiver? It is not enough to say that Jesus was just a good man or a prophet. No. He is God Himself – and not just a good man. He couldn't possibly be a good man if He were a liar or a deceiver! So we conclude that Jesus was indeed God in human form.

All truth is narrow-minded. In mathematics, $2 + 2$ is always 4. We cannot be broadminded and accept 3 or 5 also as possible answers. We cannot even accept 3.9999. If we accept such variations of the truth, our mathematical calculations will go wrong. In the same way, we know that the earth revolves around the sun. If we decide to be “*broadminded*” and accept some theory that says that the sun also revolves around the earth, our astronomical calculations will go wrong. Likewise, in chemistry, H_2O is water. We cannot be broadminded and say that H_2O is also salt!! So we see that truth is absolute in every area and very narrow-minded. It is so, even in the matter of God. Broadmindedness can bring serious errors in mathematics, in astronomy and in chemistry – and also in knowing the truth about God.

The Bible teaches that all human beings are sinners – and Jesus died for *sinners*. So, if you come to Jesus as a “*Christian*”, He will not forgive your sins, because He did *not* die for Christians! He died for *sinners*. The only person who can be forgiven is the one who comes to Jesus and says “Lord, I am a *sinner*”. You cannot come to Jesus as a member of any religion and be forgiven, because He died for *sinners*. If you come to Him as a sinner, then your sins can be forgiven immediately.

It's easy for all of us to know that we are sinners – because God has given us all a conscience. Children have a very sensitive conscience, that makes them aware of wrong very quickly. But as they grow up, that conscience can become hard and insensitive. When a 3-year old child tells a lie, his face looks guilty because his conscience is guilty. But 15 years later, he can tell a lie with a straight face, because he killed his conscience by repeatedly ignoring its voice. The soles of a baby's foot are so soft that it can feel even the stroking of a feather. But the soles of the feet of

adults are so hard that they don't feel even the poke of a pin until it is pressed in hard. This is what happens to their conscience too, as they grow up.

Conscience is a voice that God has placed within us, that tells us that we are moral beings. It gives us an elementary understanding of right and wrong. And so it is a wonderful gift of God. Jesus called it "*the eye of the heart*" (Lk.11:34). If we don't preserve this "eye" with care, we will become spiritually blind one day. Ignoring the pricks of conscience can be as dangerous as ignoring the particles of dust that enter your eye - one day you will become totally blind, spiritually.

When babies are born, none of them have any religion. They are all the same. Two years later, they are still the same – selfish and quarrelsome. But as time goes on, their parents indoctrinate them into different religions – and that is how they end up in different religions. In more than 90% of cases, a person's religion is what his parents chose for him.

But God doesn't look at us as people of different religions. He sees us all as sinners. Jesus came from heaven to earth to die for the sins of all humanity. He didn't come for those who consider themselves good enough to enter God's presence, but for those who acknowledge that they are sinners and *unfit* to enter God's presence. Your conscience tells you that you are a sinner. So why should it be difficult to come to Jesus and say, "Lord, I am a sinner, I have done many wrong things in my life"?

A question that some may ask is, "Can't a good God overlook our sins and forgive us, just like a father would forgive?" If a son broke (or lost) something valuable, and was sorry for it and apologised to his father, his father would forgive him. But these matters are not *moral* issues. If all our sins were just like these matters, then God would forgive us immediately. But sin is *not* like these matters. *Sin is a crime.*

If a man were a judge in a court and his own son was standing in front of him, accused of some crime, can he tell his son, "Son, I love you. I forgive you. I won't punish you"? Any earthly judge with the slightest sense of justice, would never do such a thing. That sense of justice that we all have is a small part of the perfect justice of Almighty God, in whose likeness we have been made. So when we have done something seriously wrong, God as a judge, has to say to us, "I love you very much but you have committed a crime – and so I have to punish you." In that court, however much the son may be sorry for his crime, his father still has to punish him, as a judge. Let us suppose that the boy had robbed a bank. The father fines him the full penalty of the law – say, one million rupees. Since the boy does not have the money to pay the fine, he has to go to jail! The father then steps down from the judge's chair, takes off his judge's robe and comes down. He takes out his personal check-book and writes a check for one million rupees (his entire life's savings) and gives it to his son to pay the fine. Can his son accuse him now of not loving him? No! At the same time, no-one can accuse him of not being a just judge either, because he gave his son the full punishment that the law demanded. That is exactly what God did for us too. As a Judge He declared that we must all die for our sins. Then He came down as a Man and took that punishment Himself.

The Bible teaches us that even though God is *One*, He exists in Three Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If God were just One Person, He could not possibly have vacated His throne in heaven and come down to earth as a man in the person of Jesus. Who would run the universe then? But because God exists as Three Persons, the Son could come to earth and die for our sins before the Father in heaven Who was the Judge. Some Christians baptize people in the name of "*Jesus only*" saying that there is only One Person in the Godhead – Jesus. This is a serious error. *1 John 2:22* says that anyone who denies the Father and the Son has the spirit of the antichrist. Because he then denies that God the Son came in human form as Jesus Christ, and denied his own human will and did the Father's will and then took the punishment for our sins, before God the Father (*1 Jn.4:2,3*).

Jesus was fully God and fully man when He came to earth. When He died on the cross, He took the punishment for the sins of all humanity. The punishment for our sin is to be separated from God for

eternity. And when Jesus hung on the cross, He was separated from His Father in heaven. Such separation is the most terrible suffering that any human being can ever suffer.

Hell is the only *God-forsaken place* in the universe. God is not there. And so in hell, all the evil in the devil manifests itself fully. That evil is what makes things so miserable for all who go to hell. Jesus experienced that punishment when He hung on the cross. He hung on the cross for 6 hours. But in the last 3 hours He was forsaken by God. The sun became dark and the earth shook. His connection with His Father in heaven was cut off. The Father is the head of Christ (*1 Cor.11:3*) – and when Christ was forsaken, it was like having His head wrenched off. We cannot understand fully what an agony that was for Him.

If Jesus were merely a created being, He could not possibly have taken the punishment for the billions of human beings who have lived since Adam! For one man cannot be hanged in place of *one billion* murderers! But Jesus *could* take that punishment because He is the Infinite God.

Further, because He is infinite, He could also take an *eternal* punishment within three hours.

If Jesus Christ were *not* God, and God the Father had punished Him for our sin, that would have been a great injustice. God cannot punish one person for the crime of another, even if the person is willing to take the punishment. Your friend cannot take your punishment and be hanged in your place. That would be unjust. So if Jesus were merely a created being, and He was punished for our sins, that would have been the greatest injustice.

So it is clear that no created being could possibly have taken the punishment for our sins. God alone could take that punishment, because He is the Judge of the universe. He has the right to punish us – and He has the right to take our punishment Himself. And that is what He did, when He came to earth in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The foundation of the Christian faith lies in two great truths: *First*, that Christ died for the sins of humanity. *Secondly*, that He rose from the dead after three days.

If Christ did not rise from the dead, there would have been no proof that He was God. His rising from the dead was proof that all that He had said was true. No religious leader has ever claimed that he would die for the sins of the world. And no religious leader has ever risen from the dead. These two facts alone make Jesus Christ unique.

All religions may teach us to do good to others and to live in peace. But the Christian faith has a unique foundation: *Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead*. If these two truths are removed from Christianity, then Christianity becomes just like any other religion. These two truths are what make Christianity unique.

We were all created by God to live for Him. But we have all lived for ourselves. So, when we come to God, we must come as repentant *thieves* who have stolen for many years, what belonged to God. We must come to Him with thankfulness for Christ dying for us, and believing that He rose from the dead and is alive today. We could not possibly pray to Jesus if He were not alive today – for you cannot pray to a dead person. But because Jesus rose from the dead, we can converse with Him.

After Christ rose from the dead, He ascended and returned to heaven. Then the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Godhead came down to earth. The Holy Spirit is a real Person like Jesus Himself. He has come to earth to fill our lives with His presence. If we yield ourselves to the Holy Spirit, He can make us holy. When the Holy Spirit fills you, you will be enabled to live a life of victory over sin. No-one could live like that before the Holy Spirit came to indwell man – on the day of Pentecost. Before that, people could only improve their *external* lives. Their inner lives

remained defeated by sin and unchanged. When the Holy Spirit fills you, God Himself lives inside you and He can enable you to live a godly life inwardly too.

The wonderful message of the gospel is that your heart can become totally clean when God forgives you and then Christ can live in you through His Spirit making your body the house of God.

I was speaking to a Christian once who was smoking cigarettes. I asked him if he would ever smoke a cigarette inside a church building? He said he would never do that because a church building was the house of God. I told him that it was his body that was the house of God and not some church-building. You would not commit adultery inside a church-building, would you? You would not watch internet pornography inside a church either. Your body is the house of God, when Christ lives within. So be careful what you do with the members of your body. Habits like smoking, drinking, taking harmful drugs and allowing impure thoughts to enter your mind will gradually destroy your body and your mind.

The Christian life is like a race. When we turn our back to sin and are born again, we come to the starting line of this race. Then begins a marathon race – until the end of our life. We run and run and run. And thus we get closer and closer to the finishing line each day. *But we must never stop running.*

Or to use another illustration: When we are born again, we lay the foundation for our house. After that we slowly build the superstructure – and this consists of many floors.

This is the best life you can ever live, because you gradually eliminate everything bad from your life and become more and more like God as each year goes by.

So what must you do to be born again?

First of all, *acknowledge* that you are a sinner. Don't compare yourself with others and find any comfort in imagining that you are better than them. Sin is like a deadly poison. Whether you drink one drop or a hundred drops of poison, you still die. So, if you want to make a good start in your Christian life, acknowledge that you are no better than the worst sinner in the world. Then decide to *turn from* all known sin in your life.

Then *believe* in Christ. That means to commit yourself to Christ – and not just to believe something about Him in your mind. You can believe in someone without committing yourself to him. A bride is asked at her wedding, “Are you willing to commit yourself to this man?” Supposing she replied saying, “I believe he is a very good man. But I am not sure whether I want to commit my whole life and future to him”. Then she cannot be married to him, because *she does not have faith in him*. When a woman gets married, her whole life's direction changes. She changes her last name to the man's last name. She leaves her parents' home and goes to live with her husband. She may not know where he will live, but she trusts her entire future to him. She has *faith* in him. That is a picture of what it means to have faith in Christ.

The word “Christian” (to put it reverently) means “*Mrs. Christ*”! My wife could take my name only after she married me. In the same way, you can take Christ's name and call yourself a “*Christian*” only if you are married to Him. If some lady took my name without being married to me and called herself “*Mrs. Zac Poonen*”, that would be a lie. In the same way, anyone who calls himself a Christian, without being married to Christ is also telling a lie.

A marriage is forever and not just for a few days. In the same way, being a Christian also is a lifetime commitment. Total commitment to Christ, does not mean that you have become perfect. When a woman gets married, she does not promise that she will never make a mistake in her life. She will make many mistakes, but her husband will forgive her. But she promises that she is going to live with her husband forever. That is a picture of our union with Christ.

The next step you must take is water-baptism. Getting baptized is something like getting a marriage certificate. You cannot get married by just getting a marriage certificate. Neither can you become a Christian by getting baptized. It is only *after* you are married that you can get a marriage certificate. Even so, it is only after you have given yourself to Christ that you can take baptism. In baptism, you are testifying that you have finished with your old life and have made Jesus Christ Lord of your life. Good husbands and wives talk a lot to each other. So you too must talk to Jesus and listen to Him as He talks to you through the Bible, every day.

A good wife will never do anything that makes her husband unhappy. She will want to do everything in fellowship with him. A true Christian also will not do anything that displeases Christ – like watching a movie that Jesus would not watch. He would not do anything that he cannot do along with Jesus Christ

Can you be certain that you are born again? Yes. *Romans 8:16* says that when you are born again, the Holy Spirit of God will bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God.

This is a wonderful life – because we are living with the best Friend anyone can ever have. We will never be lonely, because Jesus will be with us always and everywhere. We can share our problems with Him and ask Him to help us solve them. It is a life full of joy and one that is freed from anxiety and fear – because Jesus holds our future in His hands.

If you want to be born again, say these words to the Lord in sincerity from your heart, right now:

“Lord Jesus, I believe that You are the Son of God. I am a sinner who deserves hell. Thank You for loving me and dying for my sins on the cross. I believe You rose from the dead and are living today. I want to turn from my sinful life right now. Please forgive me all my sins and give me a hatred for sin. I forgive everyone who has harmed me in any way. Come into my life Lord Jesus, and be the Lord of my life from today onwards. Make me a child of God right now.”

God’s Word says, “As many as received Christ, to them He gave the right to become the children of God” (*John 1:12*). The Lord Jesus says, “I will never reject anyone who comes to Me” (*John 6:37*).

So you can be certain that He has accepted you.

Then you can thank Him saying, *“Thank you Lord Jesus, for forgiving me and receiving me. Please fill me with your Holy Spirit and give me power to live for You. I want to please You alone from today onwards.”*

You should now read God’s Word every day and ask the Lord to fill you with His Holy Spirit daily. You also need to fellowship with other born-again Christians. Only thus will you grow in the Christian life and have the power to continue following the Lord. So ask the Lord to direct you to a good church.

May the Lord bless you richly.

A Clear Gospel Message - English

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