

Born Again John 3:1-8

We are right in the middle of a series where I am unfolding the vision for East Lincoln that God has helped the elders see over the past 2½ years – a vision that provides a framework for us to know where we're going as a church family and how to get there. We've talked about what our unifying goal is, that individually and as a church we are following Jesus and becoming like him in every way: in our thoughts, character, behavior, and mission. This is how we glorify God and make disciples as a church.

We've also talked about the shared process for pursuing that goal: that each of us needs to go through several different stages of spiritual growth. 2 Cor. 3:18 says that we "*are being transformed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another.*" When we first become a Christian we don't look like Christ at all; we have to grow one step at a time through several important and necessary stages. We go from being spiritually "unborn," to the spiritual "infant" stage, then to the spiritual "child" stage, then the spiritual "young adult" stage, and finally the spiritual "parent" stage.

There are two reasons it's important for us to be familiar with these stages: first of all for our own personal assessment and growth – so you can know accurately where you're at and know appropriate steps to grow. This helps prevent either an inflated or deflated view of your spiritual maturity. Second, for your assessment of where others are at. We're all in this together and have been called by Christ to help one another. And by understanding these different stages you will know how to rightly relate with and have appropriate expectations for other people and be able to encourage them to grow in realistic ways. We don't expect children to act like adults and we don't expect adults to act like children... very important for small group leaders, mentors, Recharge and Discovery Land volunteers, parents, ministry team leaders, accountability partners, and so on...

This morning we are going to look in more detail at the first two of these stages – the "unborn" and "infant" stages. I want to talk about the difference between these two, some characteristics of each stage, and some "next steps" you can take if you're in one of them.

I have three objects here to help us understand the key difference between those who are spiritually “unborn” and those who are spiritual “infants.” Those who are spiritual “infants” are represented by a flashlight. Only one of these objects is truly a flashlight. Two are not.

Who thinks this is a flashlight? (hold up the Thermocell) This one is obviously not a flashlight. It has a similar size and material and it has a button, but it’s not a flashlight. It’s a Thermocell. Sometimes it’s easy to tell if someone is spiritually unborn – the characteristics are obvious: they might follow a religion other than Christianity, or deny the existence of God and follow a secular humanistic worldview. They might live a blatantly immoral life without any restraint, or oppose Christianity – these are things that make it clear a person is spiritually unborn. They are not a Christian any more than a Thermocell is a flashlight.

But sometimes it isn’t very clear. Sometimes a person looks like a Christian and thinks they’re a Christian yet remains spiritually “unborn.” I have two more objects up here and only one is truly a flashlight, but it’s kind of hard to tell the difference. They both look like flashlights, have similar materials, have a lightbulb and a button. But one isn’t truly a flashlight. So again, sometimes a person looks like a Christian yet remains spiritually “unborn.” They may not demonstrate any of the obvious things I mentioned earlier – they may believe in God and claim to be a Christian, they may go to church and identify as having Christian beliefs, they may live a moral lifestyle and do good things. Yet in spite of this this, they may remain spiritually unborn.

How is that possible? There are a couple of big factors that can lead people to believe they are Christians when they’re actually not. We live in a society that has been historically Christian. Many people follow Christian traditions, morals and beliefs because that’s how they grew up. So they can look like a Christian even though they may be spiritually unborn.

Another factor is an approach to evangelism that uses persuasive ways to bring people to a point where they make a decision to become a Christian. Oftentimes the horrors of hell are contrasted with the glories of heaven, and the fear that you could tragically die before becoming a Christian convinces many people to say a certain prayer they’re told will get them into heaven. So they make a cognitive and emotional decision to say a certain prayer, thinking that will make them a Christian even though they may remain spiritually unborn. The apostle Paul says

in 1 Cor. 2:1-5 that he actually refused to preach that way because he didn't want that very thing to happen.

So how do you know if you or someone else who looks like a Christian might actually not be? There is really only one primary difference between someone who is spiritually "unborn" and one who is a spiritual "infant" just like there's only one primary difference between these two objects – one spiritual reality that makes all the difference, and Jesus tells us what that is in John 3. He is having a conversation with a man much like I just described. This man believed in God and the teachings of the Bible, he followed biblical traditions and was even a religious leader and teacher. He had the right religion and he looked very much like he was on the right path. But Jesus revealed something of critical importance to him that was missing in his life.

Read John 3:1-8.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The difference between someone who is truly a Christian and someone who may just look like one is that the one who is truly a Christian has been born again by the Holy Spirit. You can't be a true Christian unless you are born again. And that's the big difference between these first two stages. One who is spiritually "unborn" has not been born again, and one who is a spiritual "infant" has.

But how do you know if it's happened to you? A lot of people in modern Christianity will say that: "In order to be born again you have to..." and then they follow it up with something like: "put your faith in Jesus," "repent," or "ask Jesus into your heart." But you will never find anything like that in the Bible when it

comes to being born again. In fact, if you look at the story we just read and the other passages that have to do with a person being born again, you will find that it's not something we do at all that makes it happen. Don't get me wrong – I'm not saying these things aren't important, I'm just saying they don't cause anyone to be born again. We can't say a certain kind of prayer or make a certain kind of decision to become born again. It doesn't happen through baptism either, like some churches believe. And when people teach those things, you end up with a lot of people who think they're born again, but may not be.

The Bible says that only God can make someone born again and he does so through the power of the Holy Spirit – like we just saw in John 3. And he doesn't do it in response to anything we do; he does it in response to his mercy. Look carefully at what it says in these passages of Scripture:

- In 1 Peter 1:3 it says: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”*
- In Ephesians 2:4-5 it says: *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”* Being born again doesn't depend on us and anything we can do, it depends on God's power and mercy.
- Paul makes it even more clear in Titus 3:3-6: *“For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”*

So a person can look like a Christian and think they're a Christian because of an emotional decision they made or a prayer they prayed, but unless they've been born again by the Spirit of God they remain spiritually “unborn.”

Well how do you know if you've been born again? There are several passages in the NT that tell us that you have to look for evidence, and it's more than just having the right religion, morals, and beliefs. It's about transformation from the inside out. When a person is born again, the Holy Spirit does something deep

inside you that is irreversible, uncontainable, and undeniable. He creates spiritual life where there was none. He makes you alive to God in your spirit and because of that, stuff starts to happen. God describes this in Ezekiel 36:26-27: *“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”* ²⁷ *And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”*

This is what it means to be born again, and it begins when God turns the lights on in your spirit. Paul describes that in 2 Corinthians 4:3-6: *“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”*

So the first thing that happens when a person is born again by the Spirit is the lights turn on in their spirit and they see Jesus Christ in a whole new way. They come alive to God. They hear the gospel like they've never heard it before and believe it with full conviction.

That happened to me when I was 14 years old. I heard the gospel a hundred times before and prayed a prayer multiple times that I thought would get me into heaven, but I remained spiritually unborn until a Sunday morning in January 1992 when by God's power and mercy, he opened my eyes so I could see. Something changed deep inside me that I didn't do, and I was never the same. The lights came on and the message I had heard so many times came to life.

That's the first evidence to look for to see if you've been born again. But there's more. Some people don't remember an experience like I just described. It may have happened when they were too young to remember, or it might have come about with a more gradual process and not as much of an obvious point of change. Are there other evidences we can look for to know if we've been born again? Absolutely, because when the lights turn on, that's only the beginning of the transforming work that the Holy Spirit does in a person's life.

In writing to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul talks about some of the things he saw in them that were evidence to him that they had been born again.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

There are several evidences of regeneration that Paul mentions in these verses. He first speaks of when they were born again in verse 5, and they received the gospel with full conviction. That's when the lights turned on and they started to see and believe. In verse 6 he mentions how they continued to receive the word in spite of persecution. So they kept gathering to hear more of Paul's teaching even though that put their lives in danger. That shows that they had a hunger to know God's Word, which is another evidence of regeneration. Also in verse 6 he speaks of a unique kind of joy they had – they experienced the joy of the Holy Spirit in spite of the affliction they were going through. That's another evidence. In verse 8 he says that their faith in God had gone forth everywhere. People knew they were Christians because the Holy Spirit had changed how they lived their lives. And verses 9-10 talk about some of those changes – how they joyfully welcomed Paul and his team among them, how they turned from idols to worship and serve the one true God, and how they were waiting for Christ to return.

All these things were evidence that there was a new life – a new power at work inside them. They didn't just have the right religion, morals, and beliefs, there was something alive inside them, something that was working in them changing them from who they were into something new.

Which one of these objects is truly a flashlight? Both of them look and feel like a flashlight, but only one of them truly is. How can we tell the difference? Well, only one of them has batteries inside – only one of them has power and life. And how

do we know which one that is? Because only one actually shines a light... (Turn them both "on") Can a flashlight be a flashlight if it doesn't actually flash any light? No. It looks like one, but if the power isn't there to make it shine, it really isn't a flashlight.

So in order for you to determine if you're spiritually "unborn" or not you have to look for the power at work in your life. You have to look for the evidence. If you don't see the evidence of a new life inside you, you might have the right religion, morals, and beliefs but you might also be spiritually "unborn."

To help us be able to see where we're at, I've put together a list of possible characteristics of someone who is spiritually "unborn":

- May have a secular, atheistic worldview
- May follow a religion other than Christianity
- May live a blatantly immoral life without restraint
- May oppose Christianity
- May claim to be a Christian, but it's just a tradition
- Doesn't see spiritual transformation in their life
- Is not pursuing a personal relationship with Christ
- Has no hunger to know God's Word
- Lives for themselves, not Christ

And if I was to have a list of characteristics for those who are spiritual "infants," I would have these:

- Is trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation
- Has a new love for Jesus and desire to know and please him
- Deep appreciation for forgiveness and Jesus' death on the cross
- Has a new hunger to know God's Word
- Has a new desire to turn away from sin
- Likely knows very little or nothing about God, the Bible, Christianity
- Has many questions about Christian beliefs and practices
- Has not yet overcome sinful habits
- Still has a self-centered, secular worldview

What stage are you at? Are you at one of these stages? Knowing where you're at is the first step, but it's also important to know what's next. If you look at your life and realize you're spiritually "unborn," this could be a pivotal day for you. God

makes people spiritually alive in response to his mercy. In fact, it was out of his mercy that he sent Jesus to die for our sins in the first place. It is not his will that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. He may be doing a spiritual work deep in your heart this morning, bringing you to the point where this is all starting to make sense to you and it's like you're hearing it for the first time. I encourage you to cry out to him for mercy and forgiveness. Trust that Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins. Embrace him as your savior and rejoice that you have been born again! If that's happening to you right now, I want you to take the next step and tell someone about it. Tell me or the person you came with this morning, so we can begin to help you to grow.

Some of you might look at your life right now and you can see that the way I described a spiritual "infant" is where you're at. If that's the case, I encourage you to take the next step of getting into the habit of daily Scripture reading and prayer. I also encourage you to get connected with a spiritual mentor who can meet together with you to help you begin to learn the basics of the Christian life. Talk to me if you need help finding a mentor. Next week we will have some resources available for daily Bible reading and learning Christian basics.

Now, you may be here this morning and think, "Neither of these stages really describes me." There are three more stages to go that are probably more fitting for many people in this room and we will cover them in greater detail next week: spiritual "child," "young adult" and "parent."

And remember, this isn't just for you, it's also to help you see where other people are at so, like I said last week, you don't expect someone who's spiritually "unborn" to act like a Christian, and you don't expect a spiritual "infant" to act like a spiritual "adult." You need to know where people are at so you can learn to have the appropriate expectation of them and how to rightly encourage them to grow.