

# What Did Jesus Mean By Being 'Born Again'?

## *Interviewing John About Jesus*

### **"The God Delusion"**

Until recently, Richard Dawkins was Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, at Oxford University. In 2006 he published a book called "The God Delusion", which was followed by a BBC Documentary series called "The Root of All Evil?" Both the book and the documentary have caused huge debate, for Dawkins is an atheist who has labelled as deluded anyone who believes in God, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim or whatever religion. Dawkins has become the guru for a whole bunch of atheists who have found someone who can popularize their arguments. When I read "The God Delusion", I expected it to be a rationally argued case for non belief in God. But I found much of it to be a rant against the worst excesses of religion, Christianity in particular, and a scathing dismissal of any belief that couldn't be proven by science.

### **"The Dawkins Letters – Challenging Atheistic Myths".**

When "The God Delusion" was first published, the Minister of St Peters Free Church In Dundee, Scotland, decided to write an open letter to Dawkins as a Christian response. David Robertson posted that blog on his church website. Each week, David would critique another chapter of Dawkins book on his church website. One of Dawkins followers read the critique of the first chapter and copied it on to Richard Dawkins website. The response was amazing. Over 900 comments were posted on Dawkins website concerning he first of David Robertson's critiques. Most of them were written by atheists, who strongly reacted to the idea that that it might be rational to have faith in God. David Robertson has since gone on to publish his letters in a book called "The Dawkins Letters – Challenging Atheistic Myths". And the good news is we are bringing David to speak at Westlake in June of this year.

I read through quite a number of the responses by atheists to David Robertson's letters. What struck me was the tone in which many of them were written. Many of them were abusive and derogatory. But there was also an assumption that only those things that could be proved by science were real, and that what couldn't be grasped by the intellect didn't exist. For them, the only real world is the world that can be weighed, measured and analysed. Any idea of a spiritual realm was scathingly dismissed. As I read those responses, I couldn't help wondering what these people would make of what Jesus said to Nicodemus. This is how John records a conversation between Jesus, and a very bright intellectual named Nicodemus, who was one of the religious elite of the day.

***"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He 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." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. "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!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The 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." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I 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. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.***

***"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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever 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. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But 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: 1-21 NIV)**

Now Nicodemus wasn't a Richard Dawkins. Nicodemus was a Jew who believed in God. He came from the high strata of society. He was one of the teachers of the scriptures. He used to lead worship in the synagogue and guide people spiritually. He thought he knew the ways of God as well as anyone. As far as he was concerned, anyone who faithfully kept the laws of God would someday enter the kingdom of God. But what Jesus was saying just blew all that apart.

### **Another Reality – The Kingdom Of God**

Jesus was saying that there is another reality – a spiritual reality called the Kingdom of God. He was saying that there is another world that is impossible to see without something happening to us that brings us in to this new reality. He was saying that there is a parallel universe that is already in operation, but keeping the laws of God doesn't get you in. Rational thinking or reasoning doesn't get you in. In fact, Jesus was claiming that this spiritual reality isn't even perceived by rational thinking. It's a spiritual kingdom that is perceived spiritually. It's the place where God rules and reigns. Many times in his public ministry Jesus referred to this Kingdom. He said he had come from there, and that he was going back to there.

That sort of talk leaves people like Richard Dawkins rolling their eyes and taking deep breaths, because none of this can be scientifically proven. As far as they are concerned, this is entering the world of fantasy and the flying spaghetti monster. But Nicodemus was not Richard Dawkins. Nicodemus wasn't so sceptical about the Kingdom of God, because he had seen Jesus do things that could only be explained by the fact that God was with him. Jesus had turned ordinary water into hundreds of litres of top quality wine. He was doing a whole lot of miraculous signs. The blind were receiving their sight. Cripples were throwing away their crutches and walking. Nicodemus was curious to know how this is happening and who this man Jesus was. Jesus responded by saying that what he was doing is what goes on in the Kingdom of God. But rather than debating with Nicodemus about the reality of the Kingdom of God, Jesus talked about how to get in to this reality. Jesus isn't interested in trying to prove to Nicodemus whether the Kingdom of God is real or not. He just tells him how he can join it. For Nicodemus, joining the Kingdom is even more puzzling than trying to understand it. Jesus says the way in, is to be born again.

### **Entering The Kingdom Of God – Being Born Again.**

By now, Nicodemus' mind is working overtime. How does a person get "born again?" How can a grown man get back in his mother's womb? The questions are flying thick and fast. Then Jesus said something that Nicodemus should have understood. Being born into this Kingdom is a work of the Spirit of God. It's something beyond our control, just in the same way that being born is something completely beyond the control of a baby.

Let me try and explain it a different way. Imagine what it's like for a baby to be in the womb of its mother. It's a confined and cramped world. Mothers know that it's cramped, because as space gets limited, they get more and more kicks in the ribs and elbows prodding them. It's a grey and wet world. It's like living underwater in the twilight, and when mummy wears dark clothing, it's really dark. For the baby there's nothing to see and nothing to do but suck their thumb. Now imagine I could talk to that baby in the womb. I would say to that baby something like this. There's a whole new world out here

that I live in that you haven't seen yet. It's a world of colour. The sky is blue. The grass is green. The colours of flowers are just beautiful – red, purple, orange, pink. There are the browns of the desert and the brightness of the white snow. This is the world I live in. But the baby doesn't understand, for it has never seen colours. It lives in its little confined dark world. So I tell the baby about the smell of freshly mown hay, and the scent of a rose, and the smell of freshly baked bread, and the saltiness of sea air. But the baby doesn't understand. It doesn't understand the sweetness of honey, the taste of Swiss chocolate, or the freshness of cool mountain spring water on a hot day. I can talk to the baby about the music of a symphony orchestra, or the sound of the birds singing on a spring morning, or the warmth of the sunshine, or the joy of being able to embrace someone you love. But none of these things make sense to the baby, for the baby lives in another world. It hasn't been born into my world yet.

The Kingdom of God that Jesus was talking about is so much bigger than this world. The Kingdom where God reigns is a world of hope and healing, of joy and peace, a world where we are loved and forgiven. In that world we live forever. It's a world where we spend time with the risen Jesus all the time. It's a world outside space and time. And the way into that world is through the work of the Spirit of God. I want to tell you a little of how the Spirit works in bringing us into this world called the Kingdom of God.

### **The Work Of The Spirit Of God**

First, the seed of new life is planted within us. It's the truth about God which is revealed to us by the Spirit. If our hearts are soft enough and open enough, that seed lodges within us and begins to grow. During that growth period, we begin to discover more and more about the ways and works of God. We discover that he sent his Son Jesus to die on a Cross for us so that we can be made right with God. More and more of the truth about God is revealed to us as the Spirit of God does his work in us, preparing us for the new birth. It's a bit like a pregnancy, where we are being shaped into the image of the one who gave us life. Then the time comes when the world we live in is too small for us. The Spirit of God begins to act in us in ways that we have no control over. We find ourselves being pushed and squeezed by a power that is too big for us. Being born again is a painful, and sometimes frightening process, where we leave the old world behind us and enter a new world that is far beyond anything we have known before. Many of us, like new born babies, cry when we first enter this world. It's like we are starting a whole new life, where everything is new. It's like being born all over again.

Many years ago Lyn and I had a woman living with us who was a drug addict, and alcoholic, and had been deeply involved in demonic activity for much of her adult life. Through a whole series of events, the Spirit of God was at work in her life, and eventually, she was born again. She told us that before she knew Jesus as her Saviour, everything used to be shades of grey. When she was born into the Kingdom of God, everything was in vivid colour. That's the difference Christ makes.

When Nicodemus said to Jesus, "How can this be?" Jesus talked to him about belief. Jesus is saying that we either believe what he said about this kingdom, or we don't. We either believe that he is the way to this parallel universe, or we don't. We either accept what he said was true, or we don't. He made it very clear, that only those who believe in him have eternal life. So what do you believe?

Today, Ameena Payne has publically declared that she believes that what Jesus said is true. Who will join her in saying "Yes, Jesus, I believe that you are my Saviour, and that through you, I can be born again to eternal life"

*David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland*