

# Can You Be Sure Where You Will Spend Eternity? – Part 4

## What does the Bible teach about being born again?

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Erwin Lutzer

**Dr. John Ankerberg:** We're talking about how you can be certain that you will spend eternity with God. And I think that is something that everybody wants to be certain about. The question is, "How can you be certain?" Last time we were talking about *justification by faith alone in Christ*. Now, those are fancy words. Erwin, give us a little rehash here. What were we talking about? Why is that crucial? Make that come alive.

**Dr. Erwin Lutzer:** Well, you know, as we learned last time, we have to be perfect to enter into Heaven. And that shocks people because we all know that in experience, we're not perfect, of course. We're all sinners. But the good news is that when we transfer our trust to Christ **alone**, He gets our sin and He gives us His righteousness, so that as far as God is concerned, we are perfect.

For example, let me just give you an illustration here using a book. I remember a man who died of AIDS. He had been a homosexual prostitute but he came to saving faith in Christ and was gloriously converted and had a marvelous testimony of God's saving and forgiving grace. Now, let's pretend that this book is *The Life and Times of Roger*. We look into it and all that we see is uncleanness and sin and deception and sexuality and disobedience. It's an ugly book, actually.

But let's suppose, John, we had another book here, if we can imagine it, that says, *The Life and Times of Jesus Christ*. We open the book. It's a life of beauty and obedience and perfection. Let's suppose Jesus were to take all of the contents, all of the pages of His book, and then let's go back over here to the book that is Roger's. And Jesus, in effect, says to Roger, "I'm going to take out all of the contents of your book. I'm going to rip out the pages. Just give me the covers." So Roger gives Jesus the covers. Jesus takes His pages and puts them into Roger's book.

Now what do we have? We have a book titled *The Life and Times of Roger*. We look in and what do we see? Nothing but beauty, perfection, obedience, holiness, the righteousness of God. In fact, the book is so beautiful that even God adores it. That is the Gospel – where Jesus Christ's obedience and sacrifice on the cross is a

substitute for us, and we're saved on the basis of His merit. And that's what justification by faith means. It means that we are declared righteous on the basis of what Jesus did. It is a declaration that God does outside of us in Heaven.

But today, John, we are going to speak about another aspect of salvation. We're going to talk about the work of God in the human heart that happens simultaneously when people trust Christ as Savior.

**Ankerberg:** People would say, okay, if justification is a legal pronouncement that God makes about me eternally, that because of Christ I am no longer guilty of my sins – or if you want, a transfer takes place – our sins are transferred to Christ, imputed to Christ, and He pays for them. He paid for them on the cross. The fact is, is it Christ's righteousness, His perfect life, His track record, if you want, that is legally given to you and to me? That's the declaration. Now I stand before God *in Christ*. So here's where the transfer is made in terms of *The Life and Times of Roger*. The contents of Christ's life were put inside the covers of Roger's book, and we are now standing in Christ, perfect before God. But people say, "Okay, that's a legal pronouncement that takes place." What they want to know is, does anything happen inside of you besides?

**Lutzer:** Absolutely.

**Ankerberg:** In other words, what is this *new birth* deal all about?

**Lutzer:** Well, listen to the words of Jesus. Of course, He's our authority on these matters. Nicodemus was actually a Pharisee. Now, the Pharisees were in many respects good people, but they loved regulations, regulations that even they couldn't keep. As a matter of fact, they put these burdens on people. They loved to saddle people with religion and nobody could keep all the explanations and all the laws. But there's one man who has a desire for God. He comes to Jesus by night. The hint there is he doesn't want anyone else to know that he's coming to Jesus. And he says, "You're a teacher, come from God." This is the third chapter of John. "Because we know that you couldn't do what you're doing unless God were with you." And Jesus, just out of the blue without even being asked about it says in verse 3, and this is important for everyone to hear: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

John, one day I was talking to a person and he said, "Oh, I'm a Christian, but I'm not born again." What I needed to point out was, you're not headed for the kingdom of God, because we have on the authority of Jesus: **unless** you are *born again*, you cannot see the kingdom of God.

Now, Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus is talking about. He immediately is thinking of obstetrics, so he says, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born." Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and of the Spirit."

Now, immediately when we read that there are some people who see the word baptism, but of course the word baptism isn't in the text. Could I be very respectful and say that I don't think Nicodemus in any sense would have thought of this as

baptism. Jesus expected him to know these things, so what would Nicodemus have been thinking when Jesus said to “be born of water and of Spirit?” He’d have thought of passages like Ezekiel 36 where God says, “I’m going to cleanse you. I’m going to sprinkle you with water, and I’m going to regenerate you and give you a new heart.” In the Bible, the washing of God, the cleansing of God, is oftentimes directly linked to the work of the Spirit. And I think indeed what Jesus is talking about is not being baptized by water. In fact, in the Old Testament people weren’t baptized. The priest would wash his hands and wash his feet but the average person wasn’t baptized, so there’s no way that Jesus would expect Nicodemus to know that he had to be baptized. But Nicodemus should have known that even in the Old Testament there was this change of heart that God gave people, and it was sometimes talked about as “the sprinkling of water,” the cleansing of God.

In fact, that’s why there are some translations that translate it this way: “Unless you are born of water, **even** the Spirit, you cannot enter into the kingdom of Heaven.” So what we’re saying today is that when a person is justified by God, as we explained, at the very same time something happens within him. He is “born again.” Another New Testament word is “regenerated.” I know that’s a \$50 word, but maybe I can explain it this way: Where God actually does a miracle within a human being and gives us a new nature that is like His. It is the bringing of God’s life and God’s nature into a person.

Now, I want to be very clear about this. After you were born again, John, there’s actually something within you that was not there before you were born again, because the Bible says, “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). So there is a new heart that is given to us. And this, by the way, is the answer to those who say, “Oh, you folks, you teach that you can accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and then you can live as you please.” Well, there is always that danger to be sure. But remember, we no longer want to live the way we please because we’ve been given a new heart with new desires. And Jesus said that “unless you are born again, you will not see the kingdom of God.” So people listening today who are not born again ought to listen very, very carefully, because this is Jesus talking.

**Ankerberg:** Why is the new birth, being born again, a miracle that we can’t contribute to?

**Lutzer:** We can’t contribute to any of God’s miracles. You know, when God decided to create the world, even if you and I had been around, He wouldn’t say, “Well, you know this business of creating all of these stars and everything, this is work. Would you help me?” There isn’t a scientist who can go into a laboratory and spend an afternoon and create so much as one single molecule. And so when God creates something new within us, we do not contribute to that. Now, we believe on Christ and so we’re very thankful in that sense that we give Him permission, as it were, to do it. But, at the end of the day, it’s a miracle of God. It’s an instantaneous miracle. It happens at a point in time.

**Ankerberg:** Let’s go back to the fact of when we have a human birth, there are

two elements that are involved in that, and interesting, in the Bible there are two elements that contribute to the new birth there. Explain that.

**Lutzer:** First of all, just like a father and a mother come together and the father contributes the sperm and the mother contributes the ovum, and that's what really forms a human being, in the very same way, when Jesus talks about the new birth, there are two elements that come together. One is the Word of God. It says that we are born of the Word because that's the truth of the Gospel; and the other is the Spirit of God. And so the Word of God and the Spirit of God work together to produce a miracle in our hearts, a miracle that we can't produce on our own. It has to be a God thing. In fact, when Jesus says that you have to be born again, really the Greek says, "You have to be born from above." So you need a miracle from God. It's a miracle that I've experienced. I know you've experienced it. But without it, the Bible says, *we will not see the kingdom of God* – and those are the words of Jesus [John 3:3].

**Ankerberg:** The human characteristics of a child are interesting to see. You see a little baby born and you say, "Oh, it looks like its mom. It looks like its dad." It has certain characteristics. And it's true. It's true. Is that also true spiritually?

**Lutzer:** Exactly. In fact, as a result of that, we should be God-like. You know, the Bible talks about being godly. It's like we should have some of the attributes of God, you know – love, joy, peace, and all of those works that the Holy Spirit of God births in our hearts.

**Ankerberg:** Moral attributes.

**Lutzer:** Those moral attributes of God. Now, that does not mean that we ever become God. You know, it's not as if somehow we all become little gods running around. No. We still will be human beings throughout all of eternity, but isn't it marvelous to know that God shares His nature with us so that we can have the opportunity even in this life, with all of our struggles and all of our continual struggles and sins, we have the opportunity to progress so that we become God-like.

**Ankerberg:** Jump to the next point and that is, you have some warnings for people. You say that some people have walked an aisle, put up their hand, prayed a prayer, but they never got saved.

**Lutzer:** That's right. Let's just hop into this. Let's talk about children. A child brought up in a Christian home. He's told he has to accept Christ as Savior. He prays a prayer. Maybe his age is five or six. And later on he grows up and he has no awareness that he's really saved, no sense of assurance. His parents tell him, "Oh, no, no. You accepted Christ at the age of five because you prayed a prayer." Now, I want to be very clear on this: I believe that children can be saved at the age of five or six. But, there are instances like this where wisdom on the part of the parents would say, "All right, if you're not sure, let's make it sure now. You transfer your trust to Christ, receive Him as your very own, and as a result, you can receive the assurance of faith."

Let me use my own testimony. Here I am. I'm brought up in a Christian home. I asked Jesus into my heart every single night and I don't feel anything different. I

don't act different. And I think to myself, "I can't be saved. Where do I go?" At the age of 14 my parents said to me, "You know, we're not sure whether or not you've ever trusted Christ." And I said, "Well, I've tried, but it hasn't worked." And they said, "You know what you need to do, this is actually the step of faith." And then I understood that the best terminology is not really "inviting Christ into your heart." It's used often but that's not the best terminology. You know, little children sometimes say, "Well, if He comes in, is He going to get wet with blood?" You know, they interpret it literally. The best terminology is to say that "Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for sinners. Why don't you accept Him and trust Him as the One who bore your sin? And when I did that at the age of 14, I have had the assurance of salvation.

So, one danger is that of children. The other danger is people going forward in a meeting. Now, this is very sensitive, okay? But somebody gives an invitation: "Come forward to be saved." Real problems; number one, what about the person who is like I was – too shy to go forward in a crowd of hundreds of people?

**Ankerberg:** Because you felt you couldn't do that, you'd rather go to hell than to walk forward.

**Lutzer:** John, you're giving my testimony exactly. That's the way I felt at about the age of 10 or 11. I said, "You know, if I have to go forward to be saved, I guess I'll go to hell." I mean, I was so shy that my sisters had to pull me out from under the bed when we had company, you know.

The second thing is that we give the impression that just because you've gone forward, you're saved. That's another wrong impression.

**Ankerberg:** And the reason it's wrong is because people are trusting their action of walking down the aisle or of saying a prayer. It's something they did; it's not trusting Christ.

**Lutzer:** I like to shock people and say flat-out: Prayer doesn't save you. It never has and never will. That usually gets their attention. It is faith in Christ. It is that transfer of trust to Christ. You know, not even the thief on the cross actually prayed when he said, "Remember me..." Well, I guess that was a prayer. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). But it was the faith that that thief had in Christ. And it's possible for you to say the right words, to sign a decision card, and yet faith has not yet been birthed in the human heart. This is a good point at which I need to tell you a true story.

In Canada, there were some guys who came along and offered everyone who lived on this street, "We'll plant you evergreens for so much money." So all the neighbors got together and said, "Let's do it." The guys came, took their money, planted the evergreens. Weeks later these things all began to turn brown. The neighbors watered them more. The more they watered them, the browner they became. Finally, somebody went over and thought, "What kind of a tree did they plant?" Pulled it up and discovered that what they had done was put branches into the ground. No roots. Nothing.

Jesus said, "Every tree that my Heavenly Father has not planted shall be torn up" (Matt. 15:13). Isn't that sobering? So I believe, even today, there may be many

people who may look like evergreens, to use an expression; they may look like other trees, but they have no root. God has never regenerated them, has never granted them the wonderful privilege of being born again because they have never – and I love this expression – they’ve never “savingly believed.” They may have assented; they may have signed their card. And so we need to be very, very careful.

**Ankerberg:** What is saving belief? Contrast that versus intellectual belief.

**Lutzer:** Well, you know, I think that even an example is right here at this desk where I’m sitting. You know, there’s a sense in which I could believe that this chair could hold me. That would be mental assent. But it’s not until I choose to sit down and to say, “Okay, I trust it now with myself.” And when I trust it with myself, thank God the chair held me. Okay? In the very same way, people can say, “I love Jesus. I trust Him. I believe that He’s the Savior.” They can have that intellectual belief, but if I might say, I think sometimes the greatest distance in the world is the distance between the head and the heart where there is that transfer of faith, where there’s the recognition of helpless sinfulness that says, “Jesus, you alone are the One. Be my Savior. I receive you as the One who died for me.”

**Ankerberg:** Go to the story of Moses and lifting up the serpent in the wilderness to explain this.

**Lutzer:** This is so exciting. In fact, it’s in the third chapter of John. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus and says, “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.” Do you remember the story? The people had a plague. They were cursed of God because of disobedience and God sent a plague. Moses said, “What do I do?” and God says, “You take a brass serpent” a snake, “you put in on a pole, and everybody who is going to look at this pole is going to live.”

Now, John, I can imagine that there were some scientists among them, some skeptics, “That does not make a bit of sense! What possible connection can there be between me looking at the pole with the serpent outside of me, how can that affect the disease of my body and stop the progress of the disease?” Scientifically, medically, rationally, no sense at all. But you know what, God says, “If you do that, I will do a miracle.”

And there are some people today who are saying, “You know, this business of Jesus dying so many years ago, what does His death 2,000 years ago have anything to do with me? What’s the connection?” God makes the connection. And today there are people who could be looking to Christ, who can look to Christ with that look of faith and as a result of seeing Jesus, not on a pole but as it were, on a cross, and then of course, dying and raising again and ascending into Heaven, who say, “I want to receive that.” What they will discover is not only that they will be justified, but something else will happen. There will be a miracle that will take place in their hearts and they will say, “I don’t understand it, but it has happened.” It’s called the new birth.