

First Baptist Church Powell 12 6 2015

Sermon Title: Jesus Was Born That We Might Be Born Again An Ongoing Series: *Connecting Bethlehem and Calvary*

John 3:1-7

We started this series in 2011, and it will continue for a while longer. Every Christmas season, I rant and rave about what the world and even professing Christians have done to Christmas. Christmas has been commercialized, dramatized, and mythologized. Sometimes it sounds like we have combined the biblical account of Christ's birth with Aesop's fables. We have stories of little donkeys talking and little drummer boys rum-a-tum, tumming. There are many children (and even adults for that matter) who can't separate the historical facts from the myths that have been added to the story. That kind of thing, from the world, shouldn't surprise us; in fact it ought to motivate us to respond passionately and lovingly with the biblical truth about His birth and how His birth fits in to God's eternal plans. My desire for this series is to take us back to the Bible and see that the birth of Christ, by itself, is not the event of the greatest importance.

What is of ultimate importance is, that after being conceived in a virgin's womb and born in a Bethlehem stable, this child who was God in human flesh lived for thirty-three years a perfect life without sin. He was then nailed to an old rugged cross that He might bear the sins of all who would believe on Him, suffer the wrath of God in our place, be buried, rise from the dead, ascend back to the Father's right hand until the appointed time for Him to return.

The burden of this lengthy Christmas series is to connect His birth to what He accomplished on Calvary's cross. A few of the messages in this series have been,

He Was Born that He Might Bring Us to God,

He Was Born to Show God's Love for Sinners

He Was Born to Give Life to the Dead

He Was Born to Ransom the Many

He Was Born to Give Us Righteousness

He Was Born to Reign as Lord

That is not all of the messages, but that's enough to help you see the emphasis of this series. Today, we are going to see that "Jesus Was Born That We Might Be Born Again."

The phrase, "born again" has gone from relative obscurity fifty years ago, to being very popular. Even businesses have borrowed that phrase from the Bible, and it is being used by corporations that have rebounded after being on the verge of bankruptcy. It is said that these businesses have been *born again*. Movie stars have had their careers *born again*. But there has also been an upsurge in people who openly say that they have been spiritually *born again*.

However numerous studies by George Barna, and others, show that, in America, claiming to be born again seems to make little difference in daily attitudes, values and behavior. I want to say as clearly as I can that when a person is truly born again, there will be a huge difference in their values, attitudes, and behavior compared to those who have not been born again. We read in 1 John 3:5-6 (ESV): "You know that He appeared in order to take away sins, and in Him there is no

sin. No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen Him or known Him.”

Today, I want us to go back to some basic truths to discover, or be reminded of, what it truly means to be born again.

In verses 1-2 we see the context of Jesus’ words concerning the necessity of being born again. Nicodemus was no doubt seen as the ultimate Jew of Jesus’ day – “Captain Israel.” Allow me to share three important things we need to know about Nicodemus.

First, he was a Pharisee. In the first century, Judaism had degenerated into simply a legalistic religion that was almost completely emptied of joy and true fellowship with God. The chief legalists were the Pharisees. They were guilty of externalizing religion and focusing more on the rituals of Judaism than on the truth that the rituals were supposed to communicate and point to. The Pharisees were poster children for 2 Timothy 3:5a (ESV): “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” They had elevated the oral traditions passed down from generation to generation to the same level as the written inspired Word of God. From tradition, they had come up with over 600 rules detailing how to keep the Ten Commandments. Some of the rules were so detailed that they were ridiculous. Even though the Pharisees were Jesus’ greatest enemies, Nicodemus was somehow drawn to Jesus.

Second, Nicodemus was almost certainly a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. That’s almost certain what it means when he is described as “a ruler of the Jews” in verse one. Though in the first century, the Sanhedrin had to yield ultimate power to Rome, it was still a powerful body. The Sanhedrin was made up of seventy-one men and was presided over by the High Priest. Under ultimate Roman authority, the Sanhedrin had the authority to make arrests and hold trials. They dealt with civil, criminal, and religious matters. The point I want you to get is that the Sanhedrin was a powerful body and Nicodemus was one of the seventy-one men who comprised this body.

Third, Nicodemus was known as the leading teacher among the Jews. We learn that in verse 10 when Jesus calls him “the teacher of Israel.” The NIV translates it “You are Israel’s teacher.” Nicodemus is described this way by Warren Weirsbe, “He was a man of high moral character, deep religious hunger, and yet profound spiritual blindness” [Warren Weirsbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, page 295]

Nicodemus was the best that religion, education and culture can produce, and yet it was not enough.

I. The Mandate for the New Birth (v3)

To understand what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to us, we must understand two things. First, we must understand what the kingdom of God is. As it is used in this context, the kingdom of God is made up of those who belong to God and are surrendered to His sovereign rule. This kingdom is described in Romans 14:17: “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” The kingdom of God as it is used in Romans 14:17 is living in surrender to the rule of God and experiencing righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. The hope of every Jew was they might be somehow acceptable to God and be let in to this kingdom, that is characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy. Yet Jesus tells this man, who was head and shoulders above the rest of the world then and now, that he didn’t measure up and was not going to even see the kingdom of God. The word translated “see” includes the idea of knowing or becoming acquainted with. Jesus was saying, “Nicodemus, you are not going to experientially know or become acquainted with the kingdom of God unless

something happens that has not yet happened to you.” I believe Jesus is speaking to many that are listening to this message: “You may be religious, moral, and ethical, but you are not even going to see the kingdom of God which is the only place now and in eternity you can have righteousness (acceptance by God), peace, and genuine joy that comes only from the Holy Spirit.”

The second thing we must understand is what it means to be born again. If we cannot work our way into the kingdom of God, how do we get in? We *get in* only by being born again. Jesus makes it clear that being born again is not one of many ways into the kingdom; it is the only way!

From God’s perspective, all humanity is divided into two groups: Group one is those who have not been born again. Group two is made up of those from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation that have been born again. Group one, as long as they stay in this state, will never come into God’s kingdom, be accepted by him, and experience his peace and joy.

Group two is even now in the kingdom of God, submitted to His rule, and yet accepted by him, and they are experiencing, to some extent, His peace and joy. The great thing is that there is coming a day when those in the kingdom of God will experience that peace and joy in its fullness without the distractions and pulls of the flesh and the pull of this world system in which we live. What is this new birth that Jesus mandates? I will define it and then expound on it more in the next point.

The new birth is a work of God whereby he gives life to the dead spirit of a lost person, gives him spiritual sight, and hearing so that he hears and understands the Gospel, and then responds by repenting of sin, believing on Jesus alone and His finished work on Calvary’s cross. As a result, the one who was a sinner is justified (declared righteous because Christ’s righteous is imparted to him), made a new creation, given a new nature and becomes a partaker of Christ’s life which is eternal life.

The theologians also call this “regeneration.” There is a lot more that I could add to that, but that includes the essentials. This was absolutely radical to Nicodemus. Everything he had built upon was shifting sand and Jesus is saying that he has to start over if he is even going to see the kingdom of God.

I remind you that this is a mandate from the Lord Jesus. Until we are certain we have been born again, we cannot move on. If you would be in the kingdom of God, accepted by God (righteousness), and have joy and peace, you must be born again! There is no alternative path; there are no exceptions.

II. The Mystery of the New Birth (v4-5)

Theologians often speak of the new birth as being a mystery in the sense that we don’t know the details of how it is brought about. What Jesus said certainly seemed to be a mystery to Nicodemus with the response he made in verse 4. What Nicodemus could not comprehend was that Jesus was asking for something that was not humanly possible (being born again). Jesus made seeing the kingdom of God contingent on something that was not connected to human works. For Nicodemus what Jesus said meant that all of his life and works were useless and had not gotten him one inch closer to righteousness – being accepted by God.

Jesus’ teaching on the new birth is also troubling to people today. Jesus says that the new birth is something done to us, not something we initiate, earn, or accomplish. It kills all possibility for

human pride. Listen carefully to 1 Peter 1:3 (ESV): “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.”

This is a part of the mystery. We do not cause the new birth. God causes the new birth! Any spiritually good thing that we do is the result of the new birth, not the cause of the new birth. We cannot see the kingdom of God unless we are born again, and we cannot make ourselves be born again. The new birth is a work of God.

In Verse 5, Jesus expounds on what it means to be born again. The phrase “born of water and the Spirit” is one of the more controversial verses in John. Many scholars (all Roman Catholic scholars) interpret “water” as baptism. They teach that at the time of baptism (which is during infancy for most Catholics) the person is regenerated (re-birthed). I believe without a doubt that this is a wrong, a dangerously wrong interpretation of this passage. My heart aches as I think of the millions of people around the world who have been taught this lie called “baptismal regeneration.”

Let me briefly explain why I am absolutely certain that this is a wrong interpretation of this verse. First, it is totally out of sync with its context. John 3:6-21 tells us how eternal life is received and it always has to do with believing, not being baptized. The second reason I reject this interpretation as false is that Jesus rebukes Nicodemus for not understanding this in verse 10. As we will see, Nicodemus should understand because this was taught in the Old Testament. Christian baptism came later and Nicodemus could not have known about it. The baptism Jesus refers to later in John 3 is the baptism unto repentance that John the Baptist was known for, not Christian baptism.

What does the phrase “born of water and the Spirit” refer to? We often say that the best commentary on Scripture is Scripture. When Jesus rebukes Nicodemus for not understanding what He is saying, it is safe to say that it is in the Old Testament, and Nicodemus should have known about it since he is called “the teacher of Israel” in verse 10.

The primary Old Testament passages that Nicodemus should have known are those referring to the new covenant such as Ezekiel 36:24-28:

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.

The water pictures cleansing, then the Spirit gives a new heart (nature), followed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which enables a walk of obedience. The Scriptures are presented in the New Testament as the instrument of cleansing. We read in Ephesians 5:26: “that He [Christ] might sanctify and cleanse her [the church] with the washing of water by the word.” Notice again that this is something that God does. We can’t cleanse ourselves and we certainly cannot take out our old heart of stone and replace it with a soft heart of flesh. We can’t put the Spirit within ourselves and also we can’t walk in His statutes and keep His judgments; that is something that only the Holy Spirit can enable us to do.

Do you see how radical and extreme that is in light of the widely held belief that we work our own way to the kingdom of God? When we see the condition of natural man in Adam we see that it has to be of God because we were spiritually dead, blind, and deaf. It has to be God who

initiates and carries out this new birth which involves spiritual cleansing and the giving of a new nature or heart. Our called for response is simply to repent and savingly believe on Jesus. We see a picture of how this works when Paul led Lydia to Christ in Acts 16:14: “Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.”

Dr. Tony Evans has a good summary of what we have been talking about:

Regeneration [the new birth] occurs by a sovereign work of God in the heart of the believing sinner. It could not be any other way, for salvation is God’s initiative from beginning to end. In fact, the entire Trinity is involved in the work of regeneration. According to James 1:18, God the Father brought us forth to new life through His Word, while John 5:21 says that God the Son gives life to whomever He wishes. Regeneration is also attributed to the Holy Spirit, whose work in salvation is to renew us to the point of salvation (see Titus 3:5).
[Tony Evans, *Totally Saved*, page 100]

III. The Means of the New Birth (v6-7)

There is a principle in the natural realm that like produces like. When cats reproduce, they have cats. When a tree grows from an apple seed, it is an apple tree. In the same way, that which is born from the flesh is flesh, and that which is born from the Spirit is spirit. The flesh is what we are naturally – what we were in Adam from our physical birth. In our natural state we were spiritually dead with the sinful nature of Adam and totally incapable of changing our nature. Our ancestors, all the way from Adam, brought forth children in the image of Adam (Genesis 5:3).

If there is to be a new nature, God must do it. Good news; He does do it! Titus 3:5: “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration [re-birth] and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” Like produces like. When we are born in the flesh, our nature is like our first parent, Adam. When God re-births us by the Spirit, we become a partaker of the divine nature: 2 Peter 1:4 : “by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature...” When we were born of the flesh, we were spiritually dead. The Holy Spirit when He births us unites us to Christ who is eternal life and we who were dead are now alive in Christ.

Conclusion

The great poet, Tennyson wrote these words that resonate with the desires of some listening today:

Oh for a man to rise in me
That the man I am
Might cease to be
-Alfred Tennyson

That is a great description of the new birth. Have you been born again?