

“You Must Be Born Again”

Why?

How?

What for?

¹Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.^[a]”

⁴“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^[a] must be born again.’ ⁸The 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.”⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.^[c] ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,^[d] ¹⁵that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him

Just for a minute, I want you to imagine that you are having a conversation with someone about “the afterlife.” He says, “I hope I’ll be in a better place someday. I mean, if there is a heaven, I don’t know why I wouldn’t end up there. I’ve always lived a good life, tried my best to be kind to other people, to be honest, to live by the Golden rule. That’s what God wants, right? That should be my ticket through the pearly gates, right?” Right?

Tell me, what do you say to him? Before you answer that, maybe it would be helpful to think about what Jesus said to a man who came to Jesus with a similar sentiment, a man who thought that his good behavior would earn him a place in heaven. Jesus told the man exactly what he needed to hear. It’s what we all need to hear. In fact, it’s our theme for today. Jesus said,

“You Must Be Born Again”

In our study of God’s word today, we’re going to seek to answer three questions about that statement:

I. Why? (Why is it necessary to be born again to be saved?)

II. How? (Exactly how does a person become born again?)

III. And finally, What for? (In other words, what benefit do we get from a second birth?)

Jesus answers all those questions in a conversation that he had with a man named Nicodemus. Here in John chapter 3, we learn that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, that is, he belonged to a Jewish sect that had a very high regard for Old Testament ceremonial law. In fact, they believed that by keeping all of the laws of Moses, plus a few hundred extra ones they threw in for good measure, they had certainly earned God's favor. They figured that if anyone had an inside track into the kingdom of God, they did. But Nicodemus wanted to make sure of his good standing with God, so he comes to Jesus at night. He tells Jesus that he knows that Jesus was sent from God. His miracles attest to that. But Nicodemus wants to know how he too can enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus' answer to Nicodemus is rather blunt. *"Very truly, I tell you, no one will see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."* Born again? How does that work? Nicodemus asks, *"How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"* In other words, Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus can't be talking about some kind of second physical birth. It's impossible for a human to come down the birth canal twice. So why would Jesus say that a person needs to be born again to enter the kingdom of God?

Jesus answers that question with a little fuller explanation. Jesus tells Nicodemus, *"Very truly I tell you (that's how Jesus emphasizes that this is an important point), no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."* (John 3:5-6)

With those words, Jesus is telling us, first of all, (I.) Why a person must be born again. It's because, by nature, we were all born spiritually dead. Yes, we came out of our mother's room physically alive, at some point we started breathing air. But spiritually speaking, we had no life. You might say that we were all spiritual stillborns. We were all spiritually dead. Why? Because, as Jesus says, *"Flesh gives birth to flesh."* The Greek word translated as flesh means more than that we have skin and bone just like our parents did. No, the Greek word "Sarx", especially when it's used in contrast with the spirit, is always a reference to our sinful nature. Just as surely as we inherited from our parents the color of our eyes or the shape of our nose, we also inherited our sinful nature—already from the moment of our conception. How did the psalmist put it? *Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* (Psalm 51:5) You realize what that means? It means that sin is not simply something that you or I do on occasion. It's something that we are, by nature. It's a condition that we were born with. And in that condition, the Bible says, we are spiritually dead. St. Paul comes right out and says to the Ephesians, *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.* (Ephesians 2:1)

In light of that fact, do you see why Jesus told Nicodemus he could not enter the kingdom of God unless he was born again, that is, unless he received a new, a spiritual birth? Nicodemus thought that he could get into heaven by trying a little harder to be a good person. But that wasn't going to cut it. That would be like walking through a cemetery and saying to all the bodies there, "C'mon, you have to shape up. Start behaving!" But that wouldn't work. Why not? Because all those people are dead. They're all corpses. They don't need encouragement. They need a resurrection. So it is with every human being who came into this world spiritually dead. We don't have the ability to raise ourselves from a spiritual state of deadness. No, if we're going to experience spiritual life, someone else is going to have to do all the work. Think about how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Did Lazarus just decide to come back to life? Did Lazarus work his way out of the tomb? No, Jesus did all the work. Jesus gave Lazarus the gift of life.

So it is with all those who are spiritually dead. If we're going to experience spiritual life,

somebody else is going to have to do the work. And who is that “Somebody?” Jesus tells us here in our text when he says *“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”* The Holy Spirit does the work. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us new life. The question is, “how?” How does the Spirit give people spiritual life? Or to put another way, II. Exactly how is a person born again?

Well, actually, Jesus gave us the answer to that question when he said to Nicodemus, *“No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”* What Jesus referring to there, “being born of water in the Spirit?” Doesn't that have to be a reference to baptism, when the Holy Spirit uses water and the word of God to work saving faith in the heart of human beings? How does the Bible describe baptism? In his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul calls baptism *“the washing with water through the word.”* (Ephesians 5:26) Or as Paul said to Titus. *God saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.* That “washing of rebirth” is a reference to baptism.

But now someone might say, “Wait a minute. Is it really accurate to say that God saves people by having them get baptized? I thought God saves people by having Jesus come and live a perfect life in their place and then die for their sins on a cross. Are people saved by Jesus or are they saved by baptism?” Actually, they're saved by both. We're more accurately, they're saved by Jesus, through baptism. Remember Saint Paul says, *God saved us through the washing of rebirth.*

What does that mean? Well, think about it this way. When Jesus offered up his life on the cross, whose sins did he pay for? The sins of believers? Yes. The sins of unbelievers? Yes. The sins of the most wicked people in the world? Yes. What did Jesus say? *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son...”* But who gets to enjoy the benefit of what Jesus did? Who gets to enjoy the eternal life that Jesus won? The answer: only those who believe it. Faith is like the hand that reaches out and lays hold on the gift that Jesus has won for all mankind. Faith is looking up to Jesus and trusting that his blood is our righteousness. Faith is trusting that Jesus is the only cure for what ails us. In fact, isn't that the parallel that Jesus draws between himself and the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the desert? In both cases, the cure was right there on that wooden pole, right there on that wooden cross. Faith is what applied that cure to the sin-sick bodies and souls. How did Jesus put it? *“Just as the Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the son of man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”* God saves sinners through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

The question is, how does God work that saving faith in a person's heart? Am I born with saving faith? No. Do I need to work up faith in my own heart? No. So where does our faith come from? St Paul tells us in Romans, chapter 10, *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.* (Romans 10:17) When sinners who are weighed down by guilt, hear the good news that they have a God who loves them in spite of their sins, a God who loved them enough to give his life for them, a God who promises them real life on both sides of the grave—that's the message that the Holy Spirit uses to plant saving faith in the heart. God uses his Word to make believers.

But now, someone might say, “That's great for someone who's old enough to hear and understand what the Bible says about Jesus. But what about babies who we just said are all born spiritually dead? How are they going to be saved? Am I supposed to just read them John 3:16 until they finally say, “I believe”?” No, we don't have to do that. God gives us a much more effective tool. He says, in effect, “Take my word, connect it to water, and it becomes what the Bible calls the washing of rebirth.” Through the washing of baptism, God takes the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won on the cross, and he applies it to the hearts of children, thus creating faith

in Jesus. It grants that child a new birth. Through baptism that child is born again.

So let's apply all of this to your life and mine. Maybe the Holy Spirit first worked faith in your heart as an adult when someone shared with you the good news about Jesus, your Savior. And you remember that moment like it happened yesterday. Or maybe you can't remember anything about when you first believed in Jesus, because it happened when you were like 7 days old, when you were brought to a baptismal font. But in either case, the miracle was exactly the same. God the Holy Spirit transferred the gift of forgiveness, won by Jesus Christ on the cross, into your heart. And as Martin Luther put it, "*where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation.*" In either case, through God's Word or through the water and the Word, God gave you a new life. You were born again.

Now, does that mean a person doesn't need to be baptized to be saved? Well, that depends. The Bible says, "*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.*" (John 3:36) When the thief on the cross said to Jesus, "*Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom,*" did Jesus say? "Oh, if only you were baptized!"? No, he said, "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*" That man was saved by the faith that the Holy Spirit worked in his heart as he listened to the words that Jesus spoke from the cross. Now, if that man could have gotten down from the cross and received the further assurance of God's forgiveness through the sacrament of baptism, do you think he would have done that? Absolutely! That's what faith does. It clings to every expression, every promise, every outpouring of God's grace.

But now, contrast that attitude to the attitude of the person who says, "I don't need to be baptized. I'm fine just the way I am. I don't want what God offers." In that case, it's not that man's lack of baptism that will separate him from God. It's his rejection of baptism. His rejection of baptism is an expression of his unbelief.

In fact, that's why the first thing that Jesus said to Nicodemus was "*No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*" You see, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees as a group had rejected the whole idea of needing to be baptized. That's why Jesus issues this warning to Nicodemus. Jesus says, in effect, "Nicodemus, don't be rejecting this gracious gift of life that I'm offering you."

Well, by God's grace, Nicodemus apparently took Jesus' warning to heart. More importantly, he took to heart the good news that Jesus had to share, the greatest news of all. You know the words: "*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.*" God the Holy Spirit ultimately used gospel words like those to ultimately work faith in Nicodemus' heart. How do we know that? Because on the day that Jesus died, the same Nicodemus was there to take down Jesus' lifeless body, carefully prepare it for burial and then lay it in the tomb. Nicodemus didn't do that because he felt he needed to earn God's favor. He knew he already had God's favor in Christ. He knew that God had forgiven all his sins. Nicodemus was a new man. He was spiritually alive. Nicodemus was born again.

My friends, when you feel like the devil is winning the battle for your heart, when you wonder how God could ever love you, when you wonder where you're going when you die, don't look inside of you. Instead, look to a cross, where God promises that Jesus paid for the sins of the world. And then look to a baptismal font, where God made that gift your personal possession. That's where God made you alive. That's where he gave you a new birth. That's where you were born again. Through his Word and Sacrament, God gave you exactly what you need, namely, faith in Jesus Christ, your Savior. In His name, Amen.