

## BORN ANEW – Grow Your Spirit With Us II

Lauren Chance Boyd - June 7, 2009

### **Introduction**

Pastor John is on a cruise this weekend, a much needed vacation – and I was given the privilege of preaching this morning.

Usually, we celebrate The Holy Spirit for one day during Pentecost and then move on – back to Jesus and God the Father. In fact, many churches treat the Holy Spirit like “Cousin It,” they just don’t know how to talk about the Spirit in our lives. Well, we will spend this summer talking about the Spirit. We invite you to grow God’s Spirit in your life here at Park Hill.

### **Scripture Breakdown**

This passage helps us know where to begin and gives us some guidance how to grow.

So let’s start at the beginning of the passage. I hope it was helpful for Candi and I to read the Scripture together, so that you can get a feel for the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a Jewish leader who shouldn’t have been impressed with this guy, Jesus. Jesus’ signs and wonders impressed many and they became his followers. Nicodemus as a Pharisee wasn’t your typical follower of Jesus. Yet he’s seen Jesus perform miracles, called signs, and decides to go visit him in the dark of night. Nicodemus says he’s impressed with Jesus and Jesus replies, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” Nicodemus is confused as we would be – what do you mean, how can you come out of your mother’s womb more than once? Of course this is confusing, but as a Jewish leader, this type of conversation shouldn’t have been new to him. He had heard countless times in the Old Testament about being born anew and with a clean heart. But he doesn’t get it. Jesus continues by saying, “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.” He still doesn’t get it. Then Jesus says probably with a sigh, “You must be born from above.” He talks about the wind – how we can’t see it, but we see its effects. Nicodemus still doesn’t get it.

“It’s kind of like this guy named John who had a maddening compulsion to tear paper. After years of psychoanalysis, John was still tearing paper, and his family was losing hope. They finally took him to a new therapist. This guy walked around the room with John and talked quietly to him. When John left the office, he was cured.

A year later, John's compulsion had not returned. His grateful family asked the therapist what he had said to John. The therapist responded, 'I told him, Don't tear paper!'"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> -R. Robert Cueni,  
The Vital Church Leader  
(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 29.

Sometimes the obvious is right in front of us, we ignore it. We prefer to over-analyze and over-interpret decisions that face us. For Nicodemus, he is intrigued by Jesus, but decides to over-analyze Jesus' statements instead of really hearing Jesus and making the decision to follow him.

Jesus tells him that God sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but to save it. He tells Nicodemus that eternal life is on the line. If Nicodemus is born again, born anew – he may have eternal life.

WOW – it's seems like an easy answer and the end of the story, not in this text – is the Nicodemus does make the right decision and is with Jesus at the cross. He was offered eternal life and he accepted!

But in this passage, he's totally confused. I think some of us may be in the same boat. Some of us don't believe, don't get it. Some of us are self-professed Christians who are trying to do the right things – attend worship, help out with the youth, go to events, but in the mode of "Doing the right things" – we may be missing the point as much as those who don't even claim to be Christians.

SO – let's talk about what it means to be born again OR born anew – if the term "born again" irks you. I know it makes me think of bible thumpers who I don't relate to. So let's say "born anew." Let's talk about what it means to be born anew. How we are born anew? Why we need to be born anew? What happens if we decide not to be? AND finally what do we do with all this great, fabulous info I'm going to share with you!?!?

## **1 WHAT does it mean to be born anew –**

The term used in the passage is a Greek word that means three things – born from above, born again and born anew. Jesus meant all three things – he didn't mean as Nicodemus says, that we are to be born again from our mothers. Now that's just silly. Instead Jesus holds all three of these meanings in tension.

To be born from above – means to be born through the Spirit. We talked a lot about the Spirit last week and in our songs today. When we asked the Holy Spirit to rain down – that is an invitation to the Holy Spirit to fill this place. To fill our hearts and our minds and to help us be born from above.

To be born again or born anew – means to be born in a fresh new way. A spiritual way not a physical way. Being born anew isn't a human achievement, because it comes from the grace and power of God. This idea of being born anew or of rebirth is throughout the New Testament as well as the Old. You've probably heard this a million times from Galatians but it says, "In Christ there is a new creation!" All over the New Testament this concept is preached! <sup>2</sup>

For non-Christians this is a radical shift and way of thinking and feeling. For Christians, many of us feel we don't need this shift, but we need to be "in tune with God's reign and presence. We all need a transformative overhaul of our traditional ways of seeing and being. We need a transformation of our whole way of knowing and experiencing the world."<sup>3</sup> It's not about becoming a better person, but rather a new person! As God works on us we DO become more loving, more kind and more Spirit-filled, but "becoming a better person" isn't the aim.

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series, vol. 1, p.124-126

<sup>3</sup> Feasting On the Word, vol.3, p.46

Nicodemus, remember him, in his conversation with Jesus he “becomes one of the biggest and most reluctant new-borns on record...He did what most babies do; he squinted against the light and wept with nostalgia for the womb, the old country, the former life.”<sup>4</sup>

Actually, let’s talk about birth for a minute.

Before a child is born, he has eyes but can’t see. He has ears but can’t hear. His brain is forming, but he has no understanding of the outside world. Now at the moment of birth, he sees (although not real well) and hears the noises in the room (although muffled) and he uses his lungs to cry. Once we are physically born, brought into this world we see and we hear and we think and we do.

And although God created us, we are separated from Him. We don’t see through God’s eyes and hear through God’s ears and love through God’s heart! If we aren’t taught about God as young children, we don’t know Him. Sure, God is all around us, but we can’t interact with God until we are born anew. Because of Adam, we are separated from God. I’m sure you remember that Bible story, the very first story in our Bible.

The great theologian, Bill Cosby, talked about this story. He said,

After creating Heaven and Earth, God created Adam and Eve. And the first thing He said to them was: "Don't."

"Don't what?" Adam replied.

"Don't eat the forbidden fruit."

"Forbidden fruit? Really? Where is it?"

"It's over there," said God, wondering why He hadn't stopped after making the elephants.

A few minutes later God saw the kids having an apple break and He was angry.

"Didn't I tell you not to eat that fruit?" the First Parent asked.

"Uh huh," Adam replied.

"Then why did you?"

"I dunno," Adam answered.

God's punishment was that Adam and Eve should have children of their own who also wouldn't do as they were told!<sup>5</sup>

I love that, especially now that I'm a parent. I don't remember my parents wishing me to have "children

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Lischer- "Pick It Up and Read It" Sermon

<sup>5</sup> <http://parent.cleanwebjokes.com/joke/446/Bill-Cosby-knows-kids>

just like me” but I’m sure they said it at some point. I did end up with a pretty stubborn, independent little guy with a temper. Yeah, that sounds like me.

So thanks to Adam, we are separated from God. We need to baptize our children and raise them in the faith - to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We ALSO need to be baptized AND be disciples of Jesus Christ. Not just show up on the occasional Sunday and be a part of an occasional activity, but truly ask for the Holy Spirit to come into our hearts and be born anew because this other kind of birth needs to happen!

Once we are born anew, our eyes are opened and our ears hear new things. There is amazing song that I’ve quoted before in our newsletter that says,

“Heal my heart and make it clean. Open it up my eyes to the things unseen. Show me how to love like You have loved me. Break my heart for what breaks Yours. Everything I am for Your kingdom’s cause. As I walk from earth into eternity.”<sup>6</sup>

When our hearts are born anew, we have access to this amazing, wonderful God! There is much mystery that surrounds God. We can’t know everything, we can’t most things. But when are born anew, we are given a peace that passes all understanding. We know we’re not alone even in the darkest hours. We have the knowledge that the God who made us, love us unconditionally. We may think we love each other unconditionally, but there always conditions – except with dogs. They love unconditionally. But with man – we love conditionally. We don’t mean to, but we do. BUT GOD – loves us unconditionally. God reaches out and wants to walk with us on this path we call life!

The Holy Spirit fills our hearts, mind and lungs. We breathe in Holy Spirit and out flows God’s love to others!<sup>7</sup>

**2** **So how is one born anew** – well it’s simple, we love God and ask the Holy Spirit to come into our hearts and ALLOW Christ to change us. The hard part is when God’s path looks different then ours. It can be a radical shift from our norm.

Like Nicodemus during our passage, “if one does not wish to be reborn, he will deliberately misunderstand what rebirth means. If one doesn’t wish to be changed, he will deliberately shut his eyes and his mind and his heart to the power which can change him...what is the matter with so many of us is simply the fact that, Jesus Christ comes with his offer to change us and re-create us, we more or less say: ‘No thank you: I am quite satisfied with myself as I am, and I don’t want to be changed.’” (Barclay 131)

I know its hard work to follow Jesus. Trust me, I know! Following Jesus sent me from a possible future that looked something like this: Poli Sci/History/or Theatre degree, married to a male, banker with 2.5 kids somewhere in the South – INSTEAD following Jesus sent me down a completely different path and with a completely different future – 6 years of religious studies schooling and a Master of Divinity, an amazing spouse who is the perfect partner, one scrappy little boy who helps me sees God’s amazing grace, and a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, all accepting, all searching wonderful congregation called Park Hill United Methodist Church. It has been a long, hard journey with Jesus so far, but I’m so excited about the possibilities down this road!

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<sup>6</sup> Brooke Fraser, “Hosanna,” Hillsong Publishing

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley , “The New Birth” Sermon

Certainly, there are things we don't want to do – eat better, exercise, for some of you – stop smoking or drinking. It's all hard work and it doesn't matter how many exercise, Shape magazines I pick up, I continue to “misunderstand” what they keep telling me about diet and exercise.

Is this a bad analogy for being a disciple of Jesus, probably – nothing really compares, but when read about Nicodemus who just doesn't want to understand about new life – frankly, I think of dieting and not wanting to understand the facts and the possibilities

**3** **So what's at stake** if we just say “No thank you: I am quite satisfied with myself as I am, and I don't want to be changed” what happens? Well, Jesus maps it out pretty clearly in this passage.

Because of the rift between God and Adam, we are in need of redemption and of rebirth. In the bible translation called The Message<sup>8</sup>, Jesus says it this way,

<sup>10-12</sup>Jesus said, "You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully. I'm speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?

<sup>13-15</sup>"No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

<sup>16-18</sup>"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

So if you don't believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and ask to be reborn, you will perish? Is it a death sentence as The Message says? I know it's harsh but that's what the Scripture says in John 3:16.

“God's gift of Jesus to the world begins the judgment of the world...God sends the Son into the world in love in order to save the world, not condemn it. Yet the very presence of Jesus as incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe, and making that decision is the moment of judgment. If one believes, one is saved; if one does not believe, one condemns oneself unwittingly.”<sup>9</sup>

We don't risk a better job or thinner body or more influential friends – we risk salvation.

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<sup>8</sup> The Message Bible

<sup>9</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible, vol.9, p.553

Jesus talks about the kingdom of God – the kingdom is here, but it is also yet to come. That’s frankly, a whole other sermon. But we can enjoy the fruit of being in relationship God now and know that our salvation is secure.

#### **4 WHAT IF you’re already a Christian in relationship with God – what does all this mean for you?**

For those who have dramatic stories from catastrophe to rebirth – the change may be quick. For most of us, it is a lot more subtle. Like I mentioned earlier, we ask for the Spirit to dwell in us and we do the hard work it takes to be a disciple. We struggle down this road together!

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, grew up a Pastor’s Kid. He even became a preacher, but it took years for him to be “born anew.” It isn’t just those who don’t know Jesus who need to be reborn – it’s You and it’s Me!

It is a daily decision to be a disciple, to walk with God –

So - walk with us. Grow your spirit with us!

Try these things -

1-Ask the Spirit to live in you and guide you

2-Seek God’s Word-in worship and bible studies

3-Be his hands and feet in this community in mission

4-Grow your spirit through fellowship with others

5-Renew your baptism commitment with every Baptism we celebrate

6-Celebrate holy communion with your fellow Christians in a spirit of joy.