

Sermon- The Mystery of Spiritual Rebirth

Scripture: John 3:5-8

March 13, 2016

Last week we looked at how Jesus gave Nicodemus who would be considered a Harvard Law professor, Supreme court judge and member of the president's cabinet all rolled into one, a spiritual 101 lesson. Even though it was really a really basic spiritual lesson from Jesus' perspective, it had poor Nicodemus completely stunned. If you recall, Jesus took this approach we said because Jesus wanted Nicodemus to realize his complete inadequacy before God and through that, Jesus was opening his eyes to the extent of his need for Jesus.... Today we are going to get deeper into the details of the spiritual birth that Jesus was talking about.

Now when Jesus tells Nicodemus that being "born again" is one of the most basic starting steps into the kingdom of God, the reason Nicodemus was suddenly out of his league was because Jesus had just revealed a spiritual mystery to him. So before we go any further I need to explain a little about what a spiritual mystery is. Now there are many things that relate to faith that we need to understand with the help of our ability to reason. So for example on numerous faith issues when Jesus is explaining a spiritual concept he uses a "parable" which is really real world analogy of a spiritual reality. So for example when Jesus wants to explain to us the attitude of our father God towards those who repent and turn back to him, he uses the parable of the Prodigal son. So when we hear the parable, we understand the relationship between the father, younger son and older son in spiritual terms and we can even place ourselves in the shoes of one of the characters and learn a spiritual lesson for ourselves. If you notice everything that we did in this exercise involved engaging our ability to think and reason. But there is another dimension of thinking required in our faith world. In this dimension, we still need to think carefully, but our ability to think alone will not be sufficient. This is the dimension of spiritual mysteries. For example when we are trying to understand the "person of Jesus" we are dealing with something we have to use all of our mind to understand and after we have exhausted our ability to understand we realize that there is even more to it. So for example we have two facts about Jesus. One that Jesus is 100% human and the second is that He is 100% divine. We understand that Jesus was fully human because he was born of a 100% human mother. But he was not conceived in a way that any other human being was ever conceived. John 1:14 says, Jesus was the Word of God become flesh. Col 2:9 says in Him the fullness of the Deity dwells in bodily form. So here our rational mind knows what 100% human is and to some extent we can imagine what 100% divine is, but to be able to add 100% human and 100% divine to get

a complete picture of Jesus is even beyond human imagination. When we reach beyond our imagination we are now in the presence of a mystery of faith. But let me clarify. Just because something is a faith mystery does not mean we get to turn our brains off at that point. No, we need continue to use our minds to hold the mystery. So we need our reason to understand the boundaries of the mystery. So the boundaries of the personhood of Jesus mystery involves understanding what Jesus is not. We need to understand that Jesus is not just human, he is not half human, half God, he is not just God somehow disguised as a human. These negations are the boundaries of the mystery. The boundaries make clear to us the limits of our reason and even our imagination. But the boundary is a place for us to stand and realize that we can go no further but simply stand and look with the eyes of faith into an incredibly beautiful mystery.

With this little explanation of what a spiritual mystery is let's move back into the conversation Jesus is having with Nicodemus, about being "born again".

Our passage opens with Jesus telling Nicodemus "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.^[b] ⁶ Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.^[c] ⁷ So don't be surprised when I say, 'You^[d] must be born again.'

Off the bat we can now understand that what Jesus was talking about here was a spiritual mystery. Because being "born again" is not only something beyond Nicodemus' imagination, it is beyond ours as well. Having said that there are a few very important details of this mystery that needs to be understood. The first thing we need to understand is that Jesus is talking about when he says you have to be "born of water and the spirit". For many years I read the phrase "born of the water and spirit" as a two-step process. First you have to be "born of water" referring to physical birth, and then at some point in your journey all kinds of things happen to you and some people experience a second birth which is really a spiritual birth. I don't know if you have read it this way, but because this is simply a description of how life happens to many people, many people have thought that that is what Jesus was talking about. But as I began studying this verse I began to realize that that is not how this verse is intended to be understood at all. You see there is a conjunction "and" that is clearly joining the water and spirit. So conceptually what it means is that Jesus is talking about the same event when he is referring to both the water and spirit. In other words being born again somehow does involve both water and spirit. Gerald Borchert a highly respected theologian and Greek Scholar points out that for the Jewish people who lived in the

desert, water was symbolic of life itself. That is why in the Old Testament there are many places where water is associated with spiritual life. Take Ez 36:25-27 for example. Reading from verse ²⁵ *“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols.”* ²⁶ *And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.** ²⁷ *And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.* ¹ Of course later on Jesus talks about himself as “living water” and this image is carried even into the very end of the book of Revelation in which a stream of living water is present right in the center of the New Jerusalem. So could Jesus have been referring to the water of baptism when he says “water and spirit”. Yes I believe he is even though Nicodemus would not have understood it then. So when Jesus talks about being born of “water and the Spirit” he is referring to two essential aspects of spiritual life, being filled with the living water that can cleanse and fill you and then being filled with the Spirit, which is the breath of God that brings your new body to life. This my friends is the description of the mystery of being “born again”.

Now if you think about it, this is a tremendously big deal because Jesus has just exposed the door to the Kingdom of God. This is the kind of access to God that people throughout history have been seeking, from the people who built the tower of babel to the sages and mystics of the East. These mystics created all kinds of rituals and ways to have access to the Kingdom of God. Some of them were disappointed and some of them were deceived but people never stopped searching for a way to reach God. And then suddenly, Jesus comes along and just like that he tells Nicodemus, you want access to the Kingdom of God, no problem here is the key, you simply need to be “born again”. ...But there is a catch. And the catch is in verse 7 & 8 where Jesus says, So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You^[d] must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

At first glance it seems like another cryptic message from Jesus and a little confusing. Because first Jesus says, unless you are born of the spirit you cannot see the kingdom of God. And then Jesus says, “you can’t explain **how** people are born of the Spirit”. Well lets unpack this a little. The “how” Jesus is referring to gets to the details of what is happening at the central moment when a person comes to Christ. When you think about the process the question is, God is doing something, the individual is also doing

¹ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Eze 36:25–27). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

something so how much is God and how much is human in this process. It cannot be 100% God and 0% human because then if someone does not come to Christ they cannot be judged for something they were never responsible for. On the other hand we know it is not 100% human and 0% God because a human act without God in it would have no spiritual significance and cannot be called spiritual rebirth. So this brings us to another central mystery of being “born again”. How is God and the individual working to make this happen. This “how” actually is the central mystery of all God-human interaction. That is exactly why Jesus says, you cannot explain how people are born of the Spirit. But like the wind that you cannot see but can only be aware of its effect, so also Jesus tells us that you cannot know “how” a person comes to Christ, you can only see the effect of being “born again” in the form of transformed life.

But if you are a persistent fellow you might still ask the question, God do you need to keep the “how” so mysterious? Well, people through the ages have trying their own formulas to do different things to reach god from going on long pilgrimages, to intense penance, to years of meditation. All these paths have been presented by some set of people as a formula to reach God. The problem is when there is a formula, there is exploitation and commercialization and nowhere does God find this exploitation more detestation than when it goes to things of God. So Christ is clear that there is no way to God but through the process of being “born again”. And this process is not controlled by human beings, it is controlled strictly by God. Like the people building the tower of babel we need to understand one thing, we cannot reach God without God. Because we are finite and sinful and from where we stand there is no possibility to reaching a God who is pure and infinite. The only way to reach God is to be “born again” and the only way to be “born again” is through the work of Jesus Christ. Next Sunday we will look at the most famous passage in the Bible John 3:16 which talks about how God bridges the distance between God and us from his side.

But for today, we just need to understand certain key things about the mystery of the phenomenon of being “born again”. First, being “born again” enables us to enter into the spiritual world. This involves being remade with living water and powered by the Holy Spirit. However this is not a process that we get to control. God is the one in control and it is God’s action that enables us to receive this new birth, so we cannot boast in having achieved this “spiritual rebirth”. And because we don’t get to control it, every “born again” experience looks extremely different. Let me give you two examples of Born again experiences. The first one is CS Lewis. Now CS Lewis first encountered God when God did not listen to his prayers as a young boy for his mother. His mother died and that made him an atheist and agnostic who built up what he called as impossible

intellectual barriers to God. After many years of intense intellectual struggle at the age of 31 he had to admit a belief in God and when he was 33 years old he finally gave his life to Christ and was born again. CS Lewis' path to being born again took decades. On the other hand Ravi Zacharia an equally well known Christian had a very different experience. Ravi Zachariah was born in a nominal Christian family who lived in Delhi, in India and never went to church. When he was in school he faced a lot of academic difficulties. One day when he was 17 years old he was in so much despair that he consumed a whole lot of poison with the intention of ending his life. He was discovered however and taken to hospital. As he lay in the hospital with his mother by his side a local Christian worker heard came and gave his mother a Bible and marked a verse to read. The verse happened to be John 14:19 "because I live, you will live also". That fragment of a verse was enough to cause him to give his life to Christ. For CS Lewis it took decades. For Ravi Zacharias it was a matter of hours. And there are all kinds of people whose process of coming to Christ lies somewhere in between. Jesus said, "you can't explain how people are born of the spirit" and because every experience is unique we don't get to judge someone else' "born again" experience as well.

So yes, you say I understand a bit of the mystery of being born again. I understand I don't get to control it, but you still ask the question, so what must I do to be born again? Well, this much you can so, surrender your life to Christ unconditionally. Just give it to Christ. And this is not a one time thing my friends, if you are anything like me, I like to surrender and then try to take back control and then I have to remind myself to re-surrender control. So friends at this time reflect on your life, some of you may need to surrender your life to Christ for the very first time, some of you may need to re-surrender your life that you took back the control of. Where ever you are today, let's all together surrender our lives once more to Christ and bring him all the glory. Let us pray.