

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BORN AGAIN - PART 1

Dr. John Allan Lavender

John 3:1-7

What does it mean to be born again? How does it happen? What are the outward evidences of this inward experience? How can we and others know we have, indeed, been born again?

These are but a few of the questions which have been rolling through my mind the last few days as I've pondered what I might say this morning. The more I thought of the profound significance of the new birth, the more I became convinced I could not possibly do this subject justice within the limitations of a single sermon. So I've revised my preaching schedule and will deal with various aspects of this theme in a series of Communion messages. Next month I want to give particular attention to the "how" of this subject and will be speaking on the theme:

"How To Be Born Again".

Today, I want you to think with me about the more general nature of this experience as we answer the question:

"What Does It Mean To Be Born Again?"

It's interesting to note that Jesus rarely called people "sinners". His favorite way of describing the spiritually unenlisted was to call them "lost".

Sometimes, He referred to them as sheep who were lost without a shepherd.

Sometimes He described them as coins which had been lost through the carelessness of another.

Sometimes He said they were like a prodigal son who was lost through deliberate choice and calculated self-will.

But, regardless of the language He used or the figure of speech He employed to describe their plight, Jesus made it perfectly clear that everyone upon this whirling bit of cosmic dust we call our world is so out of joint spiritually speaking they must pass through a crisis experience whereby

they are transformed,  
made new,  
or, to use the words of scripture: “born again”.

Notice I call this a crisis experience. That doesn’t mean you must have some kind of spectacular conversion similar to that of St. Paul who was knocked down in the middle of the road and made blind for three days. Not at all.

God is a God of infinite variety and He deals with us  
in a multiplicity of ways.

But however it happens, the important thing to remember is that coming to Christ is always a crisis experience.

It does not mean a new leaf.

It means a new life.

It does not mean a temporary juggling  
of your present set of values.

It means a mighty, transforming, supernatural  
event whereby your whole nature is reordered.

You are invaded from on high.

You are inhabited by God.

That which you once hated you now love.

That which you once loved you now hate.

The new birth is a crisis experience because it is a transforming experience. And, it is a transforming experience because it is a supernatural experience.

Let me show you what I mean.

Dr. A. J. Harms, who preached that magnificent sermon at the Service of Installation when I became you pastor, has written a valuable little volume entitled: The Quest For Christ. In it, Dr. Harms tells

of the experience of Walter Beckwith, the famous lion trainer, who tried to change the nature of lion cubs by employing every possible advantage of civilization.

He fed them on milk entirely.

Never once were they given meat or allowed the taste of blood.

Their native environment was totally replaced with the fruits of civilization.

Every hint of life as it is known in the jungle was eliminated.

But one day, when the cubs were ten months old, he heard his wife calling: "Walter, come quick!" Looking out of the window he saw one of those bottle-fed, carefully trained cubs slinking towards the children's pet burro which was grazing on grass about 50' away.

Before Walter Beckwith could shout a command or warning, the cub was close enough to strike. In a flashing instant it

leaped on the burro's shoulder,  
hung on the mane with one paw and,  
with the other, reached for the animal's nose.

When the cub jerked the animal's nose back, the burro fell to the ground and with bared teeth, the cub began to attack the jugular vein. He was after blood! The nimbleness of Walter Beckwith saved the burro's life.

Now, that cub had had the best of care.

He had never wanted for food.

He had been given all the advantages of civilization.

But he was just as much a hell-cat as his ancestors who were raised in the jungle. By birth he had a lion's nature and nothing, short of a supernatural re-birth, could change him.

In the thirteenth chapter of Jeremiah, this truth is plainly brought forth in the prophet's question:

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin? Or the leopard his spots? Then may ye all do good that are accustomed to do evil?”

You see, a mere change of environment,  
a bit of civilization,  
a good natured turning over a new leaf  
will not suffice.

Old things cannot pass away and all things cannot become new unless you are completely changed by a supernatural act of God. You must become a new creature in Christ. You must pass through a crisis experience.

A transforming,  
revolutionary,  
supernatural event  
which Jesus called being born again.

Now, in the simplest possible language, to be born again means bringing into birth a new you. A you whose life is centered not in time, but in eternity. Not in the transient stuff of this existence, but in the eternal things of infinite worth in the world to come.

To be born again means the birth of a new you. It means you have died to yourself and have come alive to Christ.

Some time ago there appeared in Baptist Leader an article by Grace Vernon in which she gave a vivid account of some of her experiences on the mission fields in India. Her first convert was a caste Hindu. He had been arrogant and proud, regarding Christians as dirt under his feet. However, he was finally won to Christ. He had this crisis experience. He was born again.

On the day of baptism, his family conducted a funeral for him. They burned his body in effigy and confiscated all his property. Thinking he would need sympathetic understanding, the missionary said,

“I’m so sorry the joy of your baptism was marred by the behavior of your family.”

To which this new babe in Christ responded,

“Oh, don’t feel sorry for me. Don’t you see that by holding a funeral they reminded our whole village that on the day I took Christ into my heart I really did die? I died to myself. A new me was born. Old things passed away and all things became new.”

To be born again means bringing into birth a new you. Oh, your outward appearance—such things as

your address,

your name,

your occupation—

may remain the same, but deep down within you, a wonderful transformation will have taken place.

You will have given way to Christ and will be able to say with Paul:

“I am crucified with Christ—I am dead, I don’t live any more—but Christ lives in me.”

That doesn’t mean His flesh becomes your flesh. Nor does it mean there is any physical fusion between you. What it does mean is that Christ has come to occupy your heart, mind and soul so that:

What He loves, you love.

What He hates, you hate..

His will becomes your will.

His interests, your interests.

His affections, your affections.

His desires, your desires.

That’s what it means to be born again—the bringing to birth of a new you—a soul re-created in its original state: in the image of God! A life with an inner glow so that radiating from it is something

of the sweetness and beauty of Jesus.

I read this week that Billy Graham told a reporter 95% of the people making decisions in his mammoth crusades are church members who have never been born again. That's a thought-provoking statement and one which may be far closer to the truth than any of us care to admit. For you see, the Devil's Masterpiece is what I call: the reasonable facsimile, the almost perfect copy of the real thing.

I am sure he has deceived many into believing the presence of their name on a church register is synonymous with having it written in the Lamb's Book of Life. But that isn't so!

It's worth noting that Jesus didn't speak the words of our text to

an alcoholic,

a woman of the street,

a murderer or

a social outcast.

He addressed them to a church member.

A member of the synagogue.

A member of the inner circle.

A prince among people.

A leader and master of men.

But with it all, a lost soul that needed to be born again.

A good man? Yes!

A righteous man? Yes!

A noble man? Yes!

*But a lost man!*

The categorical imperative—the one great absolute essential for salvation—is found in these five words from the lips of our Lord:

*“Ye must be born again.”*

And I would not be true to the trust you have placed in me as your pastor if I did not ask this morning:

“How is it with you, my friend?

Can you close your eyes right now and say:

“Yes, I know whom I have believed and am persuaded  
that He is able to keep that which I have committed  
unto Him against that day”?

Can you say:

“I am His and He is mine”?

Can you say:

“Once I was lost, but now I am found. I was blind,  
but now I see”?

Have you been born again? Not are you a church member. Have you been born again? Do you have the witness within you that you are God’s and He is yours?

You *can* you know. You *can* settle the issue right now. The bible says:

“If any man be in Christ he is a new creature.”

He is changed completely.

He is supernaturally transformed.

Old things are passed away.

All things are become new.

That doesn’t mean that suddenly you will be perfect or that in many ways you will even be conscious of the alterations which have begun taking place within you. What it *does* mean is that you will have changed your course and will have set your sights, not upon time, but upon eternity. Not upon self, but upon the dear Lord Jesus.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, in his book The Resurrection and the Life, tells of a girl who was converted in his church in England. After many months she came into his office one day and said,

“Pastor, it’s no good. Religion just won’t work. I have just as bad a temper as ever. I am giving up.”

Dr. Weatherhead doesn’t go into the details of what he said to her, but he adds that when she left she was somewhat encouraged. Within ten minutes of her leaving, her father, who didn’t know she had been in for a conference, came to the church office and put down a generous donation for the work of Christ.

When Dr. Weatherhead asked why he was doing so, he said,

“Because, since my daughter started coming here, she is not only a different girl, but my home is a different place. Something has happened to her. She has been changed. I can’t thank you enough.”

No, *you* may not realize how different you are or how changed you still can be. But—  
if you want to be better than you are,  
if you are dissatisfied with life and yourself,  
if you are bored with your job and nearly everyone you meet, then give Jesus Christ a chance. He has changed others. He can change you. He can take you as you are, and make you what you ought to be: a new creature re-made in the image of Jesus.