

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BORN AGAIN? - PART 2

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John 3:3

Last month we learned that an experience with Christ is always a crisis experience. His purpose is not merely to make nice people, but new people. He is interested in something far more than a good-natured turning over of a new leaf. A new life is what Christ is after. And this total kind of transformation is accomplished by what Jesus called being born again.

And then, we saw that in the simplest possible language to be born again means to bring into being a new you. A few whose life is centered not in self, but in Christ. 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.

But, how are we born again? Henry Swinesburg is a converted Catholic priest who is now serving as a Southern Baptist missionary in India. Prior to his conversion he held a parish in Australia. One day he took to reading the New Testament in an honest effort to find out what it really said. When he got as far as the third chapter of the gospel of John and read of the new birth, he came to be startling and disturbing conclusion that even though he had been ordained by his church and had served as a member of the clergy for many years, he had never known any such transforming experience.

One night, after many months of agonizing soul conflict, he knelt in the quiet of his barren room and prayed, "Dear God, I don't know what this means—I don't know how it can happen—but, if it can happen, let it happen to me. Now!" And it did!

No bells or whistles. No flashing lights or racing heartbeat. Just a quiet knowing in the deepest part of him that "it was well with his soul," and the calm assurance that if he died that night he would spend eternity in glad thanksgiving to God for the gift of everlasting life.

So, in response to the question posed in our sermon title: “How are we born again?” the answer rests in the last line of his prayer: “Let it happen to me. Now!” There must be a sense of need, you see.

There must be a longing in the heart to be something more than you are. There must be a divine discontent with life as it is—and with it all—an urgency, a gnawing hunger, a mounting tide of desire, a craving for salvation which will not be denied.

It is said that one day a man came to Gautama Buddha asking the way of salvation. Buddha led him down to the river. It was bathing time, and the seeker assumed he was to undergo a ritual of purification.

When they were some distance out in the stream, Buddha suddenly grabbed the man and held his head under the water. Finally, in a last gasp, the fellow wrenched himself loose and his head came above the water. Quietly Buddha asked him, “When you thought you were drowning, what did you desire most?” The man gasped, “Air!” Back came Buddha’s reply, “When you want salvation as much as you wanted air, then you shall have it”

Over in the Old Testament we have God’s promise that: “If with all your heart you truly seek me you will surely find me.” The basis of a new birth is a driving sense of need. There must be a deep heart hunger to be at one with God. A craving for life at its best which will not be denied.

And then, there must come the recognition that there is nothing we can do in and of and by ourselves to satisfy this longing. For salvation does not depend upon what we do for God, but upon our acceptance of what God has already done for us.

Dr. Oscar Blackwelder, whose church is located in the shadow of the Supreme Court Building in Washington, DC likes to point out that the marble of which the Supreme Court Building is built is so white that under the summer sun it fairly blinds one to look at it. But when it snows, the Supreme Court Building looks gray.

It is something like that with us and our sin. Our whiteness is gray compared to God's perfection and purity. The more we try to climb out of our sin, the more we become conscious of the weight of the carnal nature which holds us back. What we need is something that can deal with our sin and lift us above it.

The Christian message is that our hope does not depend on being able to merit God's love. Our hope is based upon the fact that God so loved us "that *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us."

What we could not know by our human insights, God came to reveal to us in Christ. Where we could not stand by our own efforts, God came in Christ to enable us to stand. What we could not do to save ourselves, God did for us through Christ upon His cross. And so, not only must we have an agonizing sense of need that cries out for satisfaction, but we must recognize that in Christ alone that need can be fulfilled. "For he that hath the Son hath life, he that hath not the Son hath not life."

And then we must accept the gift God so freely offers. A few months ago, I was invited to preach at a Rescue Mission on Skid Row. Most of the men dropped off to sleep the moment I began to speak. In an effort to get through to the drugged minds of those poor alcoholics that God's gift of salvation was free for the asking I said, "How many of you men think I am honest?" I must admit I was rather shocked to see how few hands went up.

Then I said, "Well, believe it or not, I am honest and I have a dollar bill in my hand. I will give it to the first man who comes up to get it. How many of you believe me?"

The few hands which had been up dropped out of sight. And then a poor, bedraggled wretch who was some mother's son stood up about fifteen rows back and said, "I believe ya," and hobbling down the aisle took the dollar bill from my hand. Boy! When that crowd of men saw that I actually gave him the dollar bill, they snapped to attention and sat on the edge of their seats listening to beat the band! I didn't see another nod during the rest of the sermon. They wanted to be plenty sure that if I made another such offer they were awake to take me up on it!

Now it cost me a dollar, but I got my point across. When the invitation was given about a dozen men walked down the aisle to receive God's free gift of salvation, just as their fellow denizen of Skid Row had received that dollar from me.

You see, not only must we have a sense of need and an awareness that Christ alone can satisfy it, we must also receive Him. We must come to a decision. We must decide to accept Him as our savior, allow Him to occupy our life and thus fulfill the need of our soul.

I often quote Ron Meredith, my Methodist friend from Wichita, Kansas. You have heard me mention him still often, I'm sure the next time you're in Wichita you'll want to hear him I hope you do, because he is a wonderful preacher. I remember hearing Ron say something like this:

"Most of us spend more time and energy deciding than in doing what we finally decide. And thus, we divide our strength, subtract from our energy and add to our burden. Jesus didn't protect people from the necessity of choice. He simply gave them bigger decisions to make. Our first problem is not to worry about *how* to be a Christian. Our first responsibility is to make the major decision to *be* one. And when we make *that* master commitment of our lives to Jesus Christ, all other choices come easy."

Now, there is much more to be said. I have not mentioned confession or repentance or restitution and these are all part of a born again experience. In addition, there is the matter of Christian growth—developing in spiritual maturity—so your life reflects the transformation which has taken place within you. That, too, is so terribly important. But we will have to wait until another time to speak of this.

For the present, let me say again that basically our salvation is tied up with our wants. I talked with a wonderful young man yesterday who is a student of Philosophy. We finally concluded that our difficulty in accepting Christ is rarely intellectual, although we like to tell ourselves it is. Ninety nine percent of the time our difficulty is that we really don't want Him. Our problem is not intellectual,

it is spiritual. The real trouble is not in our mind, but in our wants.

I like what Peter Marshall says in his book: Mr. Jones Meet The Master. Let me quote it. He writes: “Now let us the honest, do we really want to find him? Ask yourself, am I, after all, seeking God with my whole heart? Or must I say in honesty, ‘I want God and yet I don’t want Him, at least not yet. Am I really seeking God with my whole heart?’

“Do we really want to find Him? Are there not some things we love better than Him, the neat little compromises we make whereby religion will not interfere too much with what *we* want to do. We know that conflict.

“We want Him and we don’t want Him. We want His way and we don’t want His way. We pray Thy will but we mean our will. We want to be clean but still cling to the things that make us unclean. We are against strong drink but we must be sociable. We want to be Christian but we don’t want our friends to think we are queer. We want to live in two worlds. But He said long ago, ‘You can’t.’ So we settle down to compromise.

“We will go to church, serve on its committees and support the church financially. But don’t ask us, God, to change. And then we wonder why we cannot find Him. It is still true. ‘If, with all your heart, you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me.’”

“God is not hiding. We are. God is not pretending. Look at the cross. *We* are pretending. Look into your own heart and see. Do you really want to find Him? Then listen! He is not far away.

“I read a story of a woman who was trying to find God. She had a dream which she dreamed more than once, that she was standing in front of a thick, plate-class window. As she looked at it, it seemed to her that God was on the other side. She hammered on the window, trying to make Him see her, but without success.

“She grew more desperate and began to call to Him, and found herself shouting at the top of her voice. And then a quiet, calm voice at her side said, ‘Why are you making so much noise? There is nothing between us.’

“And that’s what you need to know if want to find Him. There is no distance between you and Him except an unsundered will. Won’t you think now of His presence and test it by an act of faith so you, too, will know that He is near? Won’t you close your eyes now—and with the faith you have though it be small—tell Him that you believe. Tell Him that you want Him—that with all your heart you want him—now!”