

“Born To Give Us Second Birth”

One of the beloved Christmas carols is “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”. “Hark the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King; peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.” The third stanza of that carol is this:

“Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.
Hark the herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King!’”

Charles Wesley wrote those words. The Methodist movement began under John Wesley in England in the 1700’s. A great revival took place and the Methodist Church was born. While John Wesley was preaching to the masses and winning thousands to Christ, his brother Charles was writing hymns that set forth the theology and teaching that would ground these new believers in the faith. According to some historians, Charles wrote 8,989 hymns!

In this Christmas carol, Charles Wesley wrote of the new birth: “Born to raise the sons of earth, *born to give them second birth*”. When we sing this carol, whether we realize it or not, we are singing about being *born again*!

The Christian life begins with the experience of the new birth! 1 Peter 1:3, written to believers, says: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Later, in 1 Peter 1:23 it says, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”

Jesus taught that we need to be born again if we are to enter the kingdom of God. John’s gospel records a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. “Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He 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.’ Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again’” (John 3:1-3).

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. This means he was extremely religious, a religious leader. He was a ruler of the Jews, a learned man, very smart! He believed in God, and that Jesus came from God. He believed the right stuff! Yet Jesus told him he needed to be born again! Jesus went on to say that *everyone* needs to be born again if they are to enter the kingdom of God. “Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit’” (John 3:5).

Why do we need to be born again? Because all of us have sinned, and sin separates us from God. There is evil within our human nature. There is such a radical dislocation of human nature that just being religious won’t cure it. Making well-intentioned resolutions to do better doesn’t cut it. We need divine help. We need a spiritual rebirth. We need to be born again.

“Born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth...”. Charles Wesley in this carol wrote that Jesus was born to give us second birth, new birth! Let's look at some of the similarities between Jesus' birth and the new birth we can experience.

It's a birth of the Spirit (the Holy Spirit). The angel Gabriel visits Mary and tells her that even though she's a virgin, she will conceive and bear a son, who will be called the son of the most high God. Let's pick up the narrative: "How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God'" (Luke 1:34-35). Notice: "the Holy Spirit will come on you" (vs. 35). Jesus' birth didn't take place by a normal human process! There was no earthly father, no human sperm. It came about through the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is also a key player in the new birth, when we are born again. After Jesus tells Nicodemus we need to be born again, He says this: "Very truly I tell you, 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). There is *physical* birth: we are born of the flesh. We're all a product of a physical birth. But there's also a *spiritual* birth, where we're born of the Spirit. When we're born physically, we enter the physical world. We become aware of the material realm and its realities. When we're born again, or born of the Spirit, we become aware of life in the Spirit and spiritual truths.

1 Corinthians 2:14 says, “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned.” We can be a decent person, go to church, have an interest in religion, believe in God, but until we are born again, we're just not going to grasp the things of the Spirit. *Jesus' birth, and our new birth, is a birth in which the Holy Spirit is involved.*

Then too, there is a mystery to Jesus' birth, and to our being born again. One of the classic doctrines of Christianity is the virgin birth. Mary would bear a child even though she was a virgin. Now try to explain that! How a young woman can become pregnant by God (the Holy Spirit). Good luck! And there's a mystery to how God can transform our lives when we are born again! How He can wash away our sins. How God can change our desires and goals and interests from the inside out! That's not something you can analyze in a test tube or under a microscope!

Jesus made that point: "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The 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" (John 3:7-8). Most of us can't explain the wind, the physics of wind – but we can *experience* the wind blowing in our face. Likewise, the new birth (being born again) is not something so much to be *explained*, as it is something to be *experienced*!

Another similarity: Jesus' birth, and our spiritual rebirth (born again), sets us apart.

Luke 2:7, describing the birth of Jesus, says: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger...”. It doesn't just say Mary gave birth to a son – but Jesus was her *firstborn* son. For the ancient Israelites, the “firstborn” had great significance. We read in Exodus 13:1-2, “The Lord said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.” In another Scripture, Numbers 3:13, God says, “For all the firstborn are mine...they shall be mine. I am the Lord.”

In the Old Testament, the firstborn child, in a unique way, was consecrated to God – set apart for a sacred purpose. God says, “They are mine!” Now this doesn't mean the other children didn't matter to God – it's just that firstborns belonged to God in a special way. They were a reminder that God was the one who gives the gift of children to a couple).

When we are born again, we are set apart for God, consecrated to God. I was born again sometime during my teen years. I can't pinpoint the day or hour, or even the precise month or year, but I know at some point in those teenage years I crossed over the line and became a Christian. I was born again. As a youth, I thought a lot about life, and was trying to find meaning in life - why I was put here on earth. When I felt the call of Christ on my life, and responded by giving myself to Him, I found my purpose: I would live my life for Jesus Christ. I would try to do His will, not my own. This sense of being set apart for God – to serve God – has stuck with me all through my life.

One of my favorite verses of Scripture is 2 Corinthians 5:15: “And he (Jesus) died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died, and was raised for them.” Now we don't have to wind up being a pastor or going into church work for that to be true. When we're born again, we belong to God in a special way. We are to live our life no longer for ourselves, but for Him!

We're looking at how there's a tie between Jesus' birth and our spiritual rebirth, or being born again. One more similarity: ***the new birth, like Jesus' birth, is a humble birth, hidden in the shadows.*** Again, Luke 2:7 says, “She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and *laid him in a manger*”. A manger is an animal's feeding trough.

You would think the Messiah would appear on earth with a lot of noise and fanfare! The King of the Universe will show up with all the regalia of a Super Bowl halftime show! But a large part of the charm and beauty of the Christmas story is that the Savior of the world was born in the most humble of circumstances, hidden away in the little town of Bethlehem!

Humility is essential on our part if we're to be born again. We don't become part of God's family or enter His kingdom unless we humble ourselves. God sets the rules for how we get into His forever family! Jesus once pointed to a child and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever *becomes humble* like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4).

It's not that God wants to humiliate us or put us down, it's just that before we can experience the miracle of the new birth we have to recognize our need: for forgiveness, cleansing, an inward change that reorients us away from self to Christ. Pride can keep us from God and the new life in Christ. We might say, "I'm already religious, I'm well educated, I'm a decent person" – so was Nicodemus.

In a sense, too, Jesus' birth took place out of the mainstream of society. Not in Jerusalem – *Zion!* - where the Jewish religion was headquartered, where all the action is! But tucked away in Bethlehem. Where the angels announce Jesus' birth to shepherds – *shepherds*, of all people!

Over the years I've found that there are people who want to keep this teaching about the new birth off to the side, or relegate it to fringe groups. I've heard people say, "Well, I'm a Christian, but I don't go for this 'born again' stuff...", or, "I believe in Jesus, but I can't say that I've been born again." It's kind of sad that many mainline Protestant churches make little room for the new birth. You just don't hear much about Jesus' teaching that we have to be born again. But this is the essence of Christianity! Conversion to Christ. Being reborn spiritually. Having new life in Christ and a life in the Spirit! Why would we be afraid of this? Being born again is how we enter God's family, and become His daughters and sons!

I think one of the obstacles that can make us resist or be skeptical of being born again is that we get the impression one has to have a life shattering experience: sudden, dramatic, emotional. Like we were really bad; now all of a sudden we're really good! For some, their new birth experience can be that. They are dramatically changed by Christ. Praise God when this is the case! But probably for most, being born again is more like a flower, slowly opening and blossoming as it turns toward the sun. The change is more gradual, but no less life changing!

How can we be born again? 1 John 5:1 says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." Do you believe that Jesus died to save you from your sins? Do you believe with all your heart and all your life, enough to surrender your life and will to Him and follow Him? Do that, and you are born again (whether you feel anything different or not). The new birth is not based on *feeling*, but *faith - trusting in God's word and promises*.

John 1:12-13 also tells us how to be born again. "But to all who received him (Jesus), who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." *Receiving* Christ is the same as *believing in* Christ. When we receive Christ into our life we are born again!

Charles Wesley got it right! "Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them (us!) second birth. Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King!"

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