

## Veiled in Flesh the Godhead See, The New Birth, John 1:12-13, 12/17/23

Year End Letter: content also in the pastor's desk article. I hope it is an encouragement to you as we end this year and reflect on what God has done. I also want to remind you about giving as we end the year, while our fiscal year ends in August, we budget for our largest giving month to be December, and historically this is the case- so consider what generosity to the Lord means for you as we close out this year. Pray

This Advent we are slowly walking through the incredible prologue to the Gospel of John that summarizes the person and work of Jesus Christ. In v.1-3 we saw that Jesus is the Word- the logos, the divine creator and reason for all existence. In v.4-11 we saw that Jesus is the Light that came into the darkness of our world. And so this week we are looking at v.12-13.

### *John 1:11-13*

*<sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

On Saturday, Shannan and I were visiting with some people from church and we were reminiscing about the 90s area of corny Christian T-Shirts that were quite popular if you grew up in church circles like we did: Like **Mayo Light Shine**, instead of **Reeses, Jesus**, instead of the **Golds Gym, The Lord's Gym** with a juiced up Jesus bench pressing the cross, or my personal favorite- **Abreadcrumb and Fish**. There is quite a bit of insider Christian culture that people who didn't grow up in the church may look at Christians a little funny or just have no idea what we are talking about- it could be t-shirts, or maybe certain phrases, Christianese sayings that we have like "A Quiet Time" or "Hedge of Protection" "I have an unspoken" or big theological words like sanctification or regeneration. I try to be careful that when I preach or am having conversations in a mixed group of people to limit my Christianese.

One of these Christian insider phrases is the topic of my message today. What we are talking about today is **what it means to be born again**. Now in Wilmington in 2023, if you tell the average person that you are born again, or that you are a born-again Christian, they may be a bit stand offish, look at you funny, or have another reaction- maybe because they have no idea what that means, or because that phrase has certain connotations. People think about being born again as a type of person or Christian, maybe someone that seems a bit extreme. Born-again Christians are people that needed an emotional experience, some dramatic turn in their lives because they were drug addicts, or criminals, or desperate. Or others might think, needing to be born again, that's for people who need more moral structure in their lives, and need a religious group to tell them how to live. And many people think- that's fine for you, but I'm not that kind of person. But today we are going to challenge that notion- Christians in the 1970s didn't invent this phrase, actually Jesus did, and it's what John is referencing in his prologue. So we are going to redeem this important theological phrase and see three truths about what it means to be born again.

### It's a Required New Status

<sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name... born of God.

John says- the world didn't receive him...yet some did receive him, those who believed, these are the same who are born again, or born of God. Do you see the tight connection? There is no middle ground. You either reject him- not born again, or you receive him and you are born again. Being born again isn't something just for some extreme people, or those that need a tight moral structure, it's for everyone. And the best example of this is Nicodemus 2 chapters later. Nicodemus- had a conversation one evening with Jesus about being born again that he would never forget. Turn to John 3. Who was Nicodemus? Nicodemus was about as pulled together, successful and respected as you could get in Jewish society at that time. He was a religious teacher, incredibly morally structured and above reproach, and while we have come to think of pharisees now as the bad guys who crucified Jesus, that was no Nicodemus' reputation- he was thoughtful, wise, more open-minded than his peers. Nicodemus was about as admirable as you could get.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus and says v.2 "*Rabbi (he even calls Jesus by a respectable title) 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.*" You would think that Jesus would say, "Well thank you that's kind, I've heard great things about you too, Nico." That's what we do. That's not what Jesus says, He says, v.3 "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*" Here's what Jesus is saying, "Nothing you have ever accomplished, nothing about your family name, nothing about your pedigree or your positions counts spiritually and eternally. You are at the starting line, square one just like everyone else." I've heard people say, "Oh born again, that's for people who got religious." Nicodemus had more religion and morality than any of us will ever have. He took fasting more seriously, tithing and giving to the needy more seriously, prayer more seriously, Scripture memorization more seriously than any of us. Being born again isn't a call into more religion or to get more moral structure.

Look at what John says about being born again back in our passage John 1- that it doesn't come from *natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will*- your family name and lineage was thought to be essential back then. The human decisions- what accolades, titles you received from religious organizations were considered essential. But what John is saying and what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is an incredible challenge to the notion that it is birth right, religion, traditional morality or social status that gets you into the kingdom of God.

On the sermon on the mount Jesus said this: *Matthew 5:20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus was making a point that it's not more morality or religion that gets you to heaven. Jesus was talking about religious people like Nicodemus. There is a principle at play here- "If it's true for the greatest, it's true for all." A lot of high school basketball players scoff at practicing their

foul shot...but the great Steph Curry puts hours and hours into practicing his foul shot. So if it's true for one of the greatest, guess what, it's true for you. If Steph Curry needs to practice his shot, so do you. If the great Nicodemus can't get into heaven based on his religious rigor and needs to be born again, then the rest of us need to as well.

Nicodemus thought his eternal status was secure because of his excellent track record of morality. But Jesus says your sin problem is worse than you thought. You think it's just sin to murder, but anyone who is angry with someone in their heart is guilty of murder. You think it's just sin to commit adultery, anyone who ever lusts in their heart is guilty, He said you should love your neighbors but you also must love your enemies. So we need to dispel any notion that being born again is for those hippies or people who can't get it together...because here's the reality, none of us can get it together! It's required for everyone, it's required for you and me to see the kingdom of God.

### **It's a Radical New Identity**

*<sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

Now this may be a bit confusing to some of us, because we might say, "Well, hold on, aren't all people children of God?" We hear that a lot. In one sense, Paul says in his message to those in Athens that we are all God's offspring, in other words we all have our source in God because we have all been created by God...we saw that a couple weeks ago in our message about Jesus as the Logos- the creator of everything. See, all people are a creation of God, but all people are not children of God. Look at the way John says this- "The right"- the Greek word for authority. It is the same word that would be using in a legal courtroom by a judge to confer or declare a ruling. John is speaking of a legal new identity as children of God by adoption into his family. When receive Jesus by believing in him- in the legal courtroom of Heaven you are declared a child of God.

**[New Identity Slide]** What an amazing thought that if you have trusted in Jesus Christ as your savior, the most important and true and glorious thing about you is that you are a son or daughter of God almighty! And this is an identity that can never be taken away from you, it will never fade, it will never waiver, it will be true of you forever. And this gives us the kind of security, significance, the kind of peace that our identities really need. Think about how shaky and insecure our identities can be in this world. If you are young and you are a good athlete, and that feels like the most true and important thing about who you are, you love wearing your varsity jacket, having people cheer for you, being successful on the field or court or mat...but what happens if you are injured. What happens to your identity? Or even if you aren't injured, but someone in your position outperforms you and takes your spot? Or even in the best scenario, you get a scholarship you play in college, or even professionally- your max will probably be 10-15 years, and you will be in your mid 30s with a broken down body that is getting crushed by people half your age... This world takes away our identity. Same could be said about beauty- there is always someone better looking, and as David Foster Wallace once said, "When time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you." Even the most seemingly stable of identities- husband, father, wife, mom, manager,

executive- when crisis hits, when the unexpected comes, when conflict, or competition, or new technology, or retirement or death visit us, these identities proved to be just as fleeting and insecure. Why do you think we have something called “Desperate Housewives”, “Mid-life Crisis”, or people who retire from their long careers who go into a deep depression when they don’t know who they are outside of their title and corner office.

But Jesus offers us a new identity that isn’t based on my performance, isn’t based on the economy, isn’t based on time or accolades, or the ups and downs of this life. He gives us the right, the legal, eternal identity as children of God and no one can take that away from us. Do you have this security? Do you have this significance and peace that no circumstances, no matter what anyone says about you, how this world treats you can change?

### **It’s a Received New Life**

So we have seen that the new birth is a required new status- no one sees the kingdom of Heaven without it, that it is a radical new identity as children of God. The question is how do we get this New Birth, how do we get born again? This is the question that Nicodemus wrestled with... “How can this happen when I’m old? I can’t go back into my mother’s womb and get born again, can I?” The problem with Nicodemus’ question is his entire premise, and really it’s his entire way of thinking about religion, and it’s the reason that Nicodemus despite his impressive spiritual and moral pedigree, what stuck at the starting line with the rest of us...right next to the sinners and failures and dropouts and addicts and dysfunctional people. **His faulty premise was this: My status, my identity, my eternal life must be earned.** But what does John say? <sup>12</sup> *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* Let me ask you a question- in your first birth, how much work did you do to make that happen? Were you in the womb doing pushups, practicing, getting ready for your season opener in there? Were you writing your strategic plan? You contributed zero your birth, it was all your mother! It was all her effort, sacrifices for those 9 months, her pain, her struggle, her work that birthed you. Let me ask you another question, in your second birth (your spiritual birth as a child of God), how much work did you do to make that happen? Zero. Who did all the work? Jesus! It was all his effort, it was Jesus leaving the throne room of Heaven and being born in a stable, in humility living the life of poverty and manual labor, sacrificing himself, it was his pain, his struggle on the cross to the breaking point of death, that gave us life. In other words: **My status, my identity, my eternal life must be received** not earned. Simply by receiving Jesus’s gift of life, “believing in his name”, that is the person and work of Jesus. This is what Jesus told Nicodemus in that most famous of Scriptures **John 3 <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

What are we? Are we just religious people? Are we just people who go through religious ceremonies, sing songs and do religious activity? Are we just people who have a certain moral code that we live up to? If you are born again, if you have received the gift of Jesus, the truest, deepest part of our nature and identity that we are children of God.

And that also means that the most important thing about Christmas isn't the presents, it isn't the decorations and lights and singing the carols as wonderful as all of that is. It's receiving the Gift of Christmas- the God man Jesus who has come to make you a son or daughter forever. Have you been born again?