

Union with Christ

The New Birth

Last Sunday we learned the tremendous truth from Colossians 3 that Christ is our life. Christ is our life not only in the age to come when we receive everlasting life in the kingdom of God, but he is our life now. The Spirit and life of Christ is in us just as the sap life of the vine lives in the branches. And we are children of God just as Jesus Christ is.¹

But we do not begin life as children of God. We begin life as children of fallen Adam. When Adam rebelled against God the tragic consequences of that sin were inherited by all of his descendants. Therefore Psalm 51:5 states that we were all “brought forth [or born] in iniquity.” Jeremiah the prophet proclaimed that all of our hearts are “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.”² And Romans 3 makes it clear that on our own “there is none righteous, no not one” for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”³

We do not always fully act out on the sin that is in us, but we are also not as good as we were created to be. And so if we are to have and enjoy life in Christ something must happen to change us. A radical change must occur in the very nature and fabric of who we are. And the Lord Jesus Christ tells us exactly what that change is in John 3.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
(John 3:1-3)

We need to understand something about Nicodemus if we are to understand the importance of what Jesus said. Nicodemus was a God-fearing man. He was a Pharisee which means that he belonged to a strict, conservative

¹ 1 John 3:1-3

² Jeremiah 17:9

³ Romans 3:10, 23

sect in Judaism. He was a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme ruling council of Israel. Nicodemus was what we would call a good, religious man. But Jesus said that if Nicodemus wanted everlasting life as a child of God, he needed a radical transformation. As a child of Adam, he needed to be born again. He needed a new nature.

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’
(John 3:4-7)

Jesus said, “You must be born again” or literally, born from above.” These are words of absolute necessity. The first time we are born we are born of the flesh. We have the DNA of our dad and Mom within us. And we have our unique personalities and our talents and skills. And we do good things and funny things and charitable things. But we also sin—it is in our nature.

And our deepest, darkest sin is that on our own God does not come first in our lives. We do not love our Creator with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. The Bible tells us that we were created for God’s glory.⁴ We are to find our delight in Him and to bring Him glory in all that we do and say. But on our own we do not. Being flesh and sinful we live for our own glory, which is sin and the wages of sin is death. So Jesus Christ declares that we must be born again, born of water and the Spirit to receive a new nature not tainted by sin.

When Jesus spoke of being born of water he was not referring to literal water, but to a cleansing from sin. To be born of the Spirit is to be born from above, to have the Spirit of God within you to make you a child of God. As a religious leader Nicodemus should have understood this, but he didn’t. Thus Jesus chides Nicodemus on this,⁵ because the concept was prophesied in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, concerning the new covenant. Let’s read what God promised.

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you

⁴ Isaiah 43:7

⁵ John 3:9, 10

shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.
(Ezekiel 36:25-27)

The sprinkling of “clean water” refers to a cleansing from sin. And the gift of the “new heart” signifies the new birth, to be born again. The heart stands for our whole nature. The “heart of stone” is rebellious, stubborn, sinful and self-willed. The “heart of flesh” is pliable, soft and responsive to God. It is God's Spirit in us which is our new nature.

Now how does this new birth occur? It occurs by the power of God when we trust in His Son Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.
(John 3:16, 17)

When you believe in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, you are saved. As a child of Adam your fate is to perish, to cease to be, forever. But when you are born again you become a child of God and your destiny is everlasting life in His coming kingdom. Let's again read about the simplicity of salvation, this time from Romans.

that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”
(Romans 10:9-11)⁶

⁶ A question that people often ask is how can the Old Testament believers be saved and gain everlasting life if they lived before the time of Jesus? The answer is that God knows the hearts of His people. He knows who believed in Him and trusted in the coming of His Messiah. And therefore God makes this promise to the believers in the Old Testament. “Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, O My people, I will open your

Note the immediacy of salvation! A sinner may have wrestled with his or her unworthiness or sense of self-righteousness for years. It may be that he or she has doubted whether Christ is real. But the Word of God is spoken or read and faith is generated in the heart⁷ and in that very moment salvation and the new birth occurs. What amazing grace this is!

And consider as well the completeness of salvation and the new birth. You don't trust in Christ for salvation and then go to a spiritual half-way house. There is no trial period. You cannot be just a little bit saved. Salvation and the new birth is immediate and complete.

Now, I am not saying that you cannot mature in your faith, you can.⁸ Every day we can grow in our faith and in our understanding of God's Word and enjoy a fuller experience of what it means to be a child of God.⁹ And one day when Christ returns we will be exactly like him in every way.¹⁰ But the Word of God is adamant; you cannot be more saved than you are the moment you first believe.

The reason why we must be born again is that as sinful beings we will perish otherwise. The how of the new birth is to trust what God says about His Son Jesus Christ and to believe in Christ as your Lord and Savior. What happens to us in the new birth is revealed in Titus 3.

For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.
⁴ But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, ⁵ not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy **He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,** ⁶ [which] He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior,
⁷ that having been justified by His grace we should

graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. ¹⁴ I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken *it* and performed *it*," says the LORD.'" (Ezekiel 37:12-14). When God puts His Spirit in His Old Testament people they will have been born again.

⁷ Romans 10:17

⁸ 2 Peter 3:18

⁹ Romans 12:1, 2

¹⁰ Philippians 3:20, 21; Colossians 3:1-4

become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.
(Titus 3:3-7) [my emphasis in bold]

This is all very similar to what was promised in Ezekiel 36 and spoken by Jesus in John 3 to Nicodemus. First, there is a washing away of sin, a washing of regeneration, or of the new birth. Then there is a new Spirit-generated, Spirit-empowered and Spirit-protected new life. It is the life of God in Christ in us. This changes our very nature. Here is how the apostle Peter describes the change.

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, ³as His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, ⁴by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be **partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption *that is* in the world through lust.
(2 Peter 1:2-4) [my emphasis]

The expression “partakers of the divine nature” is the definition of what it means to be born again. The first time we are born we are partakers of Adam’s nature—a nature that sins and that leads to corruption. But then God calls us to His Son Jesus Christ through the Scriptures. And through the knowledge we gain about Christ as we believe in him we gain all that we need for all of life and godliness. We receive hundreds of precious promises, promises of peace and joy and love and life. And we become here and now possessors of the divine nature. Therefore we have escaped the corruption and effects of sin.

What we have here is one of the most wonderful descriptions of what it is to be a Christian. Having the divine nature the traits and characteristics of God and Christ can be seen in us. Just as we all once manifested the nature of Adam, we can now put forth evidence of God in Christ in us. We are not merely forgiven people we are changed people.

The power of our salvation in Christ results in becoming God’s very own children now in this present age. We share in His nature, because of His Spirit in us. This does not make us little gods, but it does fundamentally and radically change us. The apostle Paul makes this point in 2 Corinthians.

Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

All of humanity can be described as being in one of two categories: in Adam or in Christ. On the one side is sinful, fallen humanity, which by its union with Adam can only end up like Adam. On the other side is redeemed humanity, who in Christ have a full share in Christ's life and all that he achieved.

In the new birth we are taken out of union with Adam and placed in union with Christ. This is the reality of a revolutionary change. Our being a new creation in Christ means that we have not just turned over a new leaf, but we are qualitatively changed. The old you is gone and gone forever. The new you has come and you will continue to become like your Lord and Savior and ultimately you will appear with him in total glory!¹¹

There are immense treasures associated with our being in Christ. And we will explore these next Sunday, but being in Christ changes everything. Praise God!

¹¹ Romans 8:28, 29; Colossians 3:1-4