

This is sermon #8 in our series of sermons on the Basics of the Christian Faith. And the question that we will consider this evening is “How Does Salvation Change Us?” We will be looking at what it means to be born again. This subject is closely related to the effectual call which we considered a few weeks ago, but the focus will be different. When we looked at the effectual call, we were looking at the beginning of the Christian life. The effectual call brings a dead sinner to life in a way that is analogous to Jesus effectually calling the dead Lazarus out of the grave. When people are effectually called by the gospel, God brings dead sinners to life and enables them to repent and believe. The application of salvation to a sinner begins with God effectually calling sinners from death to life.

But that new life is an ongoing reality in the lives of those who are saved. And that is what we will focus on this evening. We are really looking at the same thing – namely the transformation from spiritual death to spiritual life that happens when a person is saved. But it is important to see how this applies both to the beginning of spiritual life and to the permanent change that is the result of the new life that we have in Christ. It is the latter that we will focus on this evening. The reason that this is important and worthy of a separate sermon is that salvation involves living a changed life and the new life that we receive in Christ is the power for living the kind of life God is calling us to live.

This is what Jesus is referring to in John 3 when he speaks to Nicodemus about being born again. In John 3:3 we have Jesus’ words to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” And verse 5, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Clearly Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was talking about. He did not understand that Jesus was speaking figuratively. In verse 4, Nicodemus asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus did not make the jump from the idea of physical birth to the idea of spiritual birth. To be born again is to be receive new life from the Holy Spirit. Jesus uses the phrase, “born of the Spirit” a number of times in this passage. He is talking about a new beginning that is analogous to our original birth. When we are born our life begins. Of course, Jesus here is not thinking about the absolute beginning of life at conception that has become so important in the light of abortion. In general terms our life begins when we are born. And Jesus’ point is that our spiritual life begins when we are born again or born of the Spirit. We receive new life. We receive spiritual life. We become alive in a way that we were not alive before. And that life is given to us by the Holy Spirit. We are born of the Spirit.

Now Jesus also speaks of being born of water and the Spirit. This phrase “born of water and the Spirit” is an allusion to a very important passage in the OT. This is very common in the NT. Jesus or the human writers of the NT often allude to the OT and by considering the OT passage with the NT passage they give us insight into what is being taught. When Jesus speaks of being born of water and the Spirit he is alluding to Ezekiel 36:25-27. That passage is a promise that God made to Israel concerning the future salvation that he had been

promising. This is what God promised, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

This is what Jesus is speaking about when he speaks to Nicodemus about being born of water and of the Spirit. He wants us to understand what he is speaking about by thinking of these verses from the OT that I just quoted. To be born again is to be born of water and of the Spirit and that involves all the things mentioned in God’s promise of future salvation in Ezekiel 36:25-27. It involves cleansing. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” It involves a new heart and a new spirit. “And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put with in you.” It involves having the Holy Spirit living within us who will enable us to obey. “And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Now this gives us a pretty clear answer to the question, “How does salvation change us?” If we are saved, we have been born again. We have been born of water and the Spirit and that means cleansing. It means a new heart and a new spirit. It means the Holy Spirit within us who causes us to walk in God’s statutes. This is a huge part of what it means to be saved. Our sins are forgiven. We are made right with God on the basis of Jesus’ perfect life and atoning death. But we are also changed. We are profoundly changed. And the result of that change is that we now are careful to obey God’s rules.

This is a very profound change. Remember what we saw in an earlier sermon about our condition apart from salvation. We are sinners. That means that we have sinful hearts. It means that we are dead in sin. It means that we are twisted in a sin-ward direction. Remember Romans 8:7-8 “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” That all changes when we are born again. Our minds are no longer hostile to God. We do submit to God’s law. We are now able to obey. This is a radical transformation. It is a change at the very core of our being. Now instead of being solely concerned with pleasing ourselves, we are greatly concerned with pleasing God.

Obedience to God is now a good thing. It is something that we want to do. It is something that we delight in. We understand that this is the good life. This is how we are designed to live. This is the life that brings fulfillment and satisfaction. What looked good to us before now looks harmful and destructive. What used to look boring and restrictive is now seen to be enriching and freeing. This is a major change in orientation – not sexual orientation, although that may be involved, but life orientation. This is a change in what we love and what we hate. It is a change in our desires. Living to please God is now the greatest good.

Now we must understand that while this is real change and a substantial change it is not a complete change as long as we are in this life. Our sinful nature is not completely eradicated so that we are completely free from

any attraction to sin. The new life is powerful, and we are definitely attracted to God's way for our lives, but there is still the ongoing reality of remaining sin. Paul describes this struggle in Romans 7:14-25. Verse 15, "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Verse 18, "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." Verse 22 "For I delight in the law of God in my inner being...."

These verses from Romans 7 describe the struggle that is part of every Christian's life. That struggle is there because of the real, but incomplete change that happens when we are born again. The struggle is there because the Holy Spirit is dwelling within us, but our sinful nature is not yet completely eradicated. But we do change. We do take obedience seriously. We do delight in the law of God in our inner being. We want to obey, and we do obey to a significant extent. But we do not obey perfectly yet.

What does this look like? We love God. Not perfectly, but really. We love Jesus. There is a real relationship with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. We want to know them better. We pray. We worship. We trust. We thank. We seek to please. We read the Bible. We seek the kingdom of God. Again not perfectly, but these things are a reality in our lives. And we relate to people differently. We are learning to love. We are learning to give. We are resisting selfishness. We are learning patience, kindness, sacrifice for the good of others. We are learning compassion. We are learning service. We are learning to put others before ourselves. We are learning sexual purity. We are learning self-control. We are learning contentment. We are learning humility. Not perfectly, but these things are a reality in our lives. This is some of what being born again looks like in our lives if we have in fact been born again.

Now in Jesus's discussion of this matter with Nicodemus in John 3 he makes a number of important points about the new birth. First of all he stresses its necessity. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." The Kingdom of God is both a present reality and the goal of God's saving purposes. It refers to the reign of God and it refers to the realm in which God's reign is recognized. To see the kingdom of God is to be healed from our spiritual blindness so that we see God as he truly is as the King of the world. To enter the kingdom of God is to enter the realm of salvation – the realm in which God's reign is recognized and submitted to. So it is salvation both in terms of individual salvation, but also in terms of cosmic salvation. To see and enter the kingdom of God is to be saved and to be part of what God is doing to establish his kingdom over all the world.

Jesus is saying that the being born again is necessary to be part of God's kingdom. If we are not born again it means that we are not yet part of God's kingdom which means we are still part of Satan's kingdom. In John 3, Jesus is stressing the necessity of the new birth. He is stressing that to Nicodemus who was a Pharisee – a ruler of the Jews. Among his contemporaries Nicodemus would have been considered a leader in the kingdom of God, but Jesus is telling him in no uncertain terms that he was not a member of God's kingdom unless he had

received the new birth. Jesus' point is that just belonging to the Jewish nation did not make Nicodemus a member of God's kingdom. Just belonging to God's covenant people did not automatically make Nicodemus a member of God's kingdom. Even being a teacher in Israel was not enough. What was necessary was being born again.

This passage is stressing to us the absolute necessity of being born again. It is not enough to be a church goer. It is not enough to be born and raised in the church. It is not enough to be a minister or an elder. All of these things are good, but unless we are born again we are not in God's kingdom. That is Jesus' main point in this passage. Being in God's kingdom involves this inner renewal with its outward affects that he calls being born again. As we have seen that means inner cleansing. It means a new heart and a new spirit. It means the removal of the heart of stone and its replacement with a heart of flesh. It means the indwelling of the Holy Spirit so that we walk in God's statutes and are careful to obey his rules.

And so Jesus treatment of this subject calls us, you and I, to ask ourselves whether we have been born again. This is a huge part of what being saved means. This is part of the blessedness of salvation in Christ. It is a renewed life and it is absolutely necessary.

There is something else that Jesus teaches about the new birth in this passage. It is mysterious and it can only be known by its effects. In verse 8, Jesus says, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." We do not control the wind. We hear the wind. We don't know where it comes from and where it goes. Of course, Jesus is speaking our experience of the wind. He is not thinking in terms of the weather maps on television that do tell us where the wind comes from and where it goes. From the perspective of our personal observation we just experience the wind and we do not observe where it comes from and where it goes.

Jesus's point is that the new birth is not something that we control. It is not something that we understand. It is something that is known only by its effects. We experience holy desires in our hearts, and we reason from the effect to the cause which is being born of the Spirit. We know that we are born again when our desires and our attitudes and our actions begin to conform to God's commands.

This is very important. It means that we are not to look for the new birth as a distinct experience. Instead we are to examine our lives to see whether there is evidence there of the new birth. And what this means in practice is that we are to listen to what God tells us in his word about life and salvation and live accordingly, trusting in Jesus and seeking to live as God tells us to live in his word. We are to conclude that we are born again when and if we see the results of the new birth in our lives.

This is how John deals with the new birth in 1 John. 1 John 3:9 "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he had been born of God." 1

John 4:7, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love his from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”

So being born again is part of what it means to be saved. This is how salvation changes us. Paul is referring to the same thing using different language when he writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.” By referring to believers as new creations, Paul is saying that believers belong to the new creation now already even though the new creation will only come in its fullness when Jesus returns. The new creation actually began through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and being born again means experiencing the new creation in this life already.

Jesus makes the same point in other language in John’s gospel when he speaks about salvation in terms of eternal life. At the end of our text passage, verse 14 & 15, Jesus says, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” The new birth is the same thing as receiving eternal life. And the term “eternal life” means literally, the life of the world to come. What Jesus is speaking about is the same thing as Paul is speaking about when he teaches that believers in Jesus experience the life of the new creation in the hear and now. This is eternal life.

Now in the rest of this sermon we will consider some of the ways that the rest of the NT speaks about the implications of this teaching that salvation involves this profound renewal of life. It uses many different terms and images to refer to the same reality. We have already considered some of them - born of the Spirit, inner cleansing, a new heart, eternal life, new creation. But there are many more. The basic idea is that we are renewed inwardly so that we begin to think and feel and live differently. An awful lot of the NT deals with this reality using all kinds of different language.

One of the central ideas is that the exhortations to live as Christians are rooted in this reality of this profound spiritual change that has happened to all true believers. The sequence of thought is often, since you have received this new life in Christ, live it out in your lives. You have been made new. Live the new life in obedience to God. Romans 6 is an important passage here. Romans 6:11 says to believes “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” And then comes a “therefore.” Verses 12-13, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life....”

Jesus has spoken about the necessity of the new birth. What the rest of the NT does is address believers to remind them that they have been born again and to exhort them to live the kind of life that is now possible because of this great change that Jesus has produced in them through the Holy Spirit. In many different ways the writers of the NT say to believers – this is true of you, therefore live the kind of life that is possible.

In Ephesians 2:10 Paul writes, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Then in chapter 4 after he had reminded the Ephesians of the power of God working in them he writes, “I therefore, ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Peter in 2 Peter 1:3 writes, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.... And he continues in verse 5, “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection and brotherly affection with love.”

What is common to all of these passages is the point that believers in Christ are renewed in Christ and that renewal means that they have what they need to live lives that are pleasing to God. It is possible to grow in godliness and love and self-control and caring for others not because we have the strength in ourselves, but because we have been made new in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Now the NT also teaches, as we have seen, that we still struggle with sin. That is also clear from the fact that there are all these exhortations in the NT to be more godly and loving and all the rest. We should not be discouraged because progress is hard and we often fail. We can expect that. But at the same time the NT reminds us over and over again that if we are in Christ we have been renewed and we have been given what it takes to grow towards the Christ-likeness that is the goal.

God here is dealing with us in a way that is in harmony with how he has designed us. If we feel hopeless, we have little inclination to try hard things. If we are in a state of despair it is impossible to put any effort into anything. But if we are hopeful a lot more is possible. And the way that the NT deals with this teaching about the new life that we have in Christ if we are believers is all about encouraging us to make the effort that it takes to live godly lives because we actually do have what it takes because we are born again, we have new hearts and the Holy Spirit is working in us enabling us to do what we could never do on our own.

But we must not forget that this does not make it easy and it does not mean that we will never fail, and it does not mean that we can make great strides without any effort. What I am concerned about here is a terrible discouragement that can come over us if we look at the language of the new life that we have in Christ and draw the conclusion that we will be able to grow quickly and easily with minimal effort. That is certainly not what the Bible teaches. Remaining sin is a continuing reality and it is a big reality in our lives. Hear what Paul says in Galatians 5:17, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for those are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

If you are a believer, you have been born again. You will change. You will grow. You will obey. You will become more like Jesus. But you will also fail. You will also sin. You will be disappointed in yourself. You will resonate

with Paul when he wrote in Romans 7:24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” But then he continues, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Jesus is the ultimate encouragement. The new life that he has given will gradually grow and there will be fruit. But the forgiveness that he has earned for us will be a continual need and encouragement. So will his righteousness – the wonderful truth that Jesus has not only died the death that we deserve to die, but he has also lived the perfect life that we owe to God and so even though we still sin, our record with God is perfect because it is Christ’s record placed on our account.

And so we carry on. Resting in Christ and striving to live a life which is pleasing to God because we can through Christ who strengthens us.