

Second Birth

Veiled in Flesh: Christmas with John, Pt. 2

Merry Christmas, everyone. We're so glad to have you with us at SWFF today – especially if you are a guest here for the Christmas party. We are celebrating Advent this month by studying the first chapter of the Gospel of John, which is all about Jesus coming into the world – which is the meaning of Christmas. The theological term for what happened at Christmas – God coming in flesh – is “incarnation”. And that's the theme of John.

And so we've titled this series “*Veiled in Flesh*” which comes from the second verse of the Christmas hymn, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. Now, ask any worship leader and they will tell you that Christmas carols are very, very difficult to play – complex musical structures. But so many of them contain such rich theology. Maybe none more so that this one by the great Methodist poet and hymn writer, Charles Wesley. He wrote “*Veiled in flesh, the God-head see; Hail the incarnate Deity.*” That's in verse two.

That's great theology, but probably my favorite couplet is in the third verse: “*Born to raise the sons of earth; Born to give them **second birth.***” And that is a reference to the text from John that we are going to look at this morning. It's very short, just two verses,

but let's take a look at it. This is **John 1:12-13**, “*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*”

Now, I don't know how that strikes you, but that is one of the most important sentences ever written in human language. John sort of hits us between the eyes, and starts right out and says, the reason why Jesus Christ came into the world is that you might be *born again*. It's right in your face. And it's John's way of saying that the new birth is *essential, radical and simple...but hard*. And it's all here in two verses. It's essential, radical and simple...but hard.

First of all, Second Birth is Essential. Now, we only have two verses here, but look at the word ‘yet’. It starts with the word, ‘yet’, and that means there's a context that is necessary to keep in mind if we're going to understand verses 12 and 13. And what happened right before was this – we saw it last week - John was saying that Jesus came into the world but the world did not receive him - that Jesus was the light but the world was dark and didn't receive him. He was rejected.

But *then* verse 12 says, yet some *did* receive him, and all that received him were born again. So there's no middle ground. Either you are born again and you *do* grasp who Jesus Christ is, or you're not born again, and you *don't* - there's no middle ground. It means, anyone who claims to be a Christian must be born again.

Now, in Austin, people are familiar with the phrase "born again". And probably most modern people who have heard the phrase think it's a type of person - and by the way, you don't want to *be* that type of person in Austin. Secular people tend to talk about born again *types* and they actually do see it as a sort of a personality type.

So one of the things they might say is, "Well born again types are people who need an emotional experience." But there's nothing in the New Testament that indicates that the new birth necessarily is dramatic, or even emotional. *But* one idea is well, being born again, that's some kind of cathartic, emotional experience and some people need that.

And they'll also say, "Some people just need a lot of moral structure in their life. You know, they can't really think for themselves." So they need a lot of moral structure, need a lot of moral authority. So it's the kind of personality that wants an emotional

experience, needs authority and moral structure in life. So there's a, you know, there's a born again *type*.

Now one of the ways that you overcome straw-man, stereotypes is you introduce actual people and show how nuanced they are. So biblically, the problem with that whole born again stereotype...is Nicodemus. Now, this is John chapter 1, but very, very soon after this - chapter 3 actually - we come to a long interview between Jesus Christ and a man named Nicodemus in which Jesus brings up the new birth. It's where Jesus actually coins the term "born again". Which *is* a Jesus word, not an American Evangelical word.

And here's the problem with that theory that being born again is some sort of a type of personality. Let me tell you who Nicodemus was. First of all, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin - that's the ruling council. Nicodemus was an older, male, powerbroker - wealthy, established, top of the social pecking order, very successful.

Secondly, he was a Pharisee, which meant he was *incredibly* religious. The Pharisees had all *kinds* of moral structure in their life. And they fastidiously mastered the Bible and followed every single prescription of the Mosaic Law - at least they bragged that they did.

But then, on top of that, he wasn't actually what you and I consider a stereotypical Pharisee, because he was not self-righteous. Pretty humble guy – open to new things. He comes to Jesus. And Jesus was an outsider - he didn't have the pedigree. And yet Nicodemus comes with a very open mind, and calls Jesus, "Rabbi", and says, "Oh, I've heard such good things about you."

So here's about as *admirable* a character as you could imagine. He *knows* the Bible, he's incredibly moral, but he's not self-righteous. He's got it together, he's successful...man, he's got it all. And what does Jesus say to him? You know, Nicodemus starts the conversation like this. He says, "Rabbi, many of us believe that you are sent from God." And does Jesus respond, "Why, thank you! I've heard great things about you, too, Nick." I mean that's how it works in polite society, right?

But no, here's what Jesus says. You must be born again to even understand *the first thing* about the kingdom of God. What? Look, I hear people all the time saying "Oh, to be born again means they *got religion*". Oh yeah, he got born again, he's got religion". Nicodemus has more religion than anybody in this room ever *will* have.

And so when Jesus says, "you must be born again" - to *Nicodemus* - it *can't* be a call to get more religious. It *can't* be a call to get more moral structure in your life. It can't be a summons in a traditional religion, it's a *challenge* to traditional religion. Jesus is saying, "Nicodemus, nothing you've ever done counts, you must be born again. You've got to start over."

And by the way, this is what this verse is trying to show *us*. See, it's not just that no matter how *good* you seem to be - how put together and how great your pedigree - you must be born again. It says "to *all* who receive him"...doesn't matter who. It doesn't matter your pedigree - doesn't matter how *good*.

But at the same time, it also doesn't matter how *bad*. Pharisee or fisherman, it doesn't matter – the entry point is the same, no matter your pedigree. No matter how *good* you are, no matter how *religious* you are, no matter how *great* your resume...you *must* be born again. Doesn't matter how *bad* you are, doesn't matter how *messed up* you are, doesn't matter how *shameful* your background...you *can* be born again. So new birth – second birth – is essential for everybody, not just for a type of person.

Number two, Second Birth is Radical. Now, this is obviously a metaphor and even though it's just two short verses, there are actually two aspects that we learn here - there's other things we could say about being born again from the Bible - but the two things we find out here is to be born again means getting a *radically new life* and a *radically new identity*. Okay, let's look at it. First of all, to be born again means to get a **radically new life**. Well, that's the metaphor - you must be *born* again. You must be *born*.

To "be born" means a whole new life is starting. And through the Bible, the new birth means the implantation of new spiritual life. Sometimes there are places where it's talked about like a seed. So eternal life, spiritual life, is implanted in you when you're born again. Another metaphor, of course, is you're born like a child, you're birthed into the world. And so even though, by the way, we said the new birth isn't *necessarily* dramatic and emotional, it may not be dramatic, but it's *definite*. You're either born or you're not. You either have the seed of spiritual life in you or you don't, okay?

You say, "Well what does that *mean*, to get a radical new kind of spiritual life?" We're not talking about physical life. In fact, that was Nicodemus's his first mistake when Jesus said, you have to be born again. Nicodemus says, "How do I crawl back into my mother's womb?" And Jesus says. "I'm not talking about physical life, I'm talking about spiritual life." Well, what does *that* mean?

Well, let's think about for a minute, what *is* the difference between having life and not? What's the difference between being a rock - which is a non-organic object - and being a plant or an animal or a human being, which is an organism? What's the difference in being a non-organic object and an organism?

Well, I'm sure there's a lot of people in this room probably who could tell me 10 or 20 things, but I'll just give you one that even a history major knows. What an organism can do that a rock can't do is it can grow - plants grow, rocks don't. Now there's a *sense* in which rocks can grow; if you just keep throwing rocks on the pile, you might say the pile of rocks grows, but you wouldn't call that organic growth, you call it mechanical growth.

And there is a way in which religious and moral people can *seem* to grow, but they're actually growing their resume; that is to say they're growing the things they *do*. And they've accomplished this and they've accomplished that. And by the way, that's what happens at eulogies and that's what happens at tribute banquets. This person has done this and chaired this board and given this amount of money and then all this, that's a resume and it's great, good, do it. Please do all those things. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. But it's mechanical growth. It's not organic growth. You're growing your resume. It's like how rock pile grows by throwing more rocks on it.

But when you're born again, that's organic growth. You're not growing your resume, you're growing *personally*. Being born again means you grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, humility, faithfulness, self-control. It means you become wiser and happier and deeper. It means you become more aware of who you are. It means you can handle suffering. It means you can handle opposition graciously. In other words, you're growing *internally*, you're growing as a person. That's organic growth. Being born again means you grow organically. And if you're not born again, you *don't* grow in that spiritual organic way.

I see this all the time with people who – especially those who have been in church their whole lives, but all of the sudden they start to get a fresh appetite for spiritual things. Not religion, but relationship with God becomes *alive* to them. You know, they say “Well, I've been reading the Bible all my life, and I've read this text all my life, but it's like, somebody turned the lights on.”

It's a spiritual appetite, the Word is becoming something they *digest*, not just a set of propositions they hold in their mind. It's actually coming in, it's becoming part of them. The Word of God is dwelling in them richly. They're saying, “It's comforting me, it's thrilling me, it's convicting me in a way I never saw before.” You know why? Because Pinocchio, you've become a real boy! That's the difference between being religious and being born again. You were moving around, but mechanically, okay? And now something's happened.

See Jesus is saying - when you get to John 3 - he's saying, “Nicodemus, you're already ethical. But I'm not here to make you ethical, I'm here to make you a new person. I'm not here to make you *nice* - you're already nice - I'm here to make you *new*.” So it's radical new life, first of all, to be born again.

But then secondly, to be born again means to get a radical new identity. It says, (v.12) “*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave **the right** to become children of God.*” Now, what is *that*? All right, first of all, you're going to say, “Well, what do you mean the people are born again are children of God, I thought *all* human beings were children of God?” According to the Bible, that's partly right.

In Acts 17, Paul is preaching to the Athenian philosophers, and he actually says - he's talking about all human beings - “*we are God's offspring.*” And there is, of course, a sense in which since God created all of us, we are His offspring. For example, we might say Henry Ford was “the father” of the Model T - because he was the *creator* of it. And in that sense of course, God is our Creator, and therefore we're all His offspring.

But you see, what does this mean here? When it says, “He *gave* them...”- they didn’t have it before – “He gave them the right to become children of God.” Some of you know what this is, this is a *legal* term. This is a new legal status. This is called adoption. When you are brought into somebody’s family, you are *legally* adopted - something happens legally - and suddenly you get a new name. Right? Because you’re brought into that family. And what is that? That’s a legally conferred new identity.

Now, what is an identity, everybody? An identity is finding your significance and your security in something. Then you know who you are. And of course, we can get our identity from a lot of things. Maybe it’s pleasing your parents. So if I’m pleasing my parents, I feel significant and secure. Or maybe it’s the fact that you’re an accomplished person in your career, and you’re getting promotions and you’re making money. Or maybe some political cause.

But do you know how unstable and how fragile all those identities are? They’re incredibly fragile because they’re based on *your* performance - ups and downs - *and* circumstances. So you can do the wrong thing and lose your job – or you can do the *right* thing and the industry tanks and you lose your job anyway. You’ve always got whiplash. You’re walking on a

frozen lake. There’s always insecurity, there’s always uncertainty. But what about *this* identity?

Let me give you an extended case study on the journey through identity. Because it goes in phases. Let’s just imagine a woman, and this woman growing up had a religious moral phase. Her parents took her to church. In fact, she went to a very conservative church. And so she grew up and she said, ‘I’m okay. I’m *somebody* because I am so moral - more moral than everybody else.’”

But the problem is, if that’s your identity - that you are a moral, religious person, decent, more moral than other people - well, the trouble is, you *will* fail. And when you fail, you’ll hate yourself. And so when this happened to our young lady, she realized there was a kind of instability in this identity because she couldn’t take failure. Well, what good is *that*?

But then fortunately, or unfortunately, she grew up and she found out that she was beautiful. She was really, really pretty, and so men desired her. And so she shifted, and she started to say, “My life has meaning, I’m somebody, because men desire me.” And there’s a certain kind of power in that, that you know.

And yet when she found out the trouble with that was that now she *needed* to have a man, she *needed* to have somebody desiring her. And as a result of that, she found herself getting into relationships she shouldn't be in, staying in relationships beyond when she should have, allowing a certain amount of abuse. She realized that she was essentially addicted to guys. And so obviously *that* identity wasn't functional.

So she went to see a counselor. And the counselor told her, "This is the problem of being a woman in our society. You feel like you need a man to be complete. But here's what you have to do, you have to feel good about yourself, because you are an accomplished successful person in your own right. So you need to invest in a good career. And then you can say, 'I'm an independent person. I'm somebody because I have made it as a successful businesswoman.'"

And so she said, "Okay!", and she went all in at work - climb, climb, climb. And certainly in some ways it was more functional. But as it turned out, her *career* bumps proved every bit as devastating to her as her romantic life bumps had been. And she was actually every bit as fragile as she had been before. So *this* identity really wasn't working.

And then somebody came along and said, "Well, you know what, that's just very materialistic of you to be so focused on money and career... No, no, no. If you want to really feel good about yourself, feel like you're okay and you're somebody, you need to help people, you need to do charity work, volunteer work, you need to have to be out there and help the needy." So she threw herself into that. And at first she did like it, and, frankly, you know, in some ways every one of these phases was a little better.

But the reality was, she really didn't *like* these people. And worse than that, she started to realize that she was actually *using* them. She was using their misfortune to feel better about herself. And in many ways instead of serving them, she was manipulating them. And she started to be nagged with some guilt about that. Kind of felt like the same kind of moralizing she had done as a religious youth – just now as a secular adult.

And then one day, along came somebody who shared the gospel with her. But when she heard the gospel, at first, she thought, "Oh, I've done that. That was my first phase. I tried the religion thing." But the friend graciously and wisely persisted – wasn't pushy or condemning - and she visited the church a few times and started listening to the messages more and more. And eventually a change began to take place.

And one day she realized, “Wait a minute, this is not just a new identity phase. This is a whole new way of an identity operating. Because even when I was religious and moral, I was trying to save *myself*. And every single time, I was trying to be my *own* Savior, my *own* Lord. Because at every phase my identity was rooted in ‘I’m moral, I am beautiful, I am successful, and I am helpful’ and every single time it was fragile and unstable because it was based on my performance and the circumstances of the world.”

“But this is *radically* different. This identity is based on a relationship with the Lord of the universe. And it is a relationship based on what He has done and not anything I have done or will do - *that’s* my security. And that changed everything. And she finally began to make progress internally – in peace and contentment and compassion and all kinds of things. She was growing. See how radical that new identity is?

Okay, last, I gave you an extended case study because it makes the last point rather simple. How do you get this? Well, it tells you, it’s very simple. “*Yet who all who did receive Him, who believed in His name...*” Now the grammar there shows that those are not two different things, it’s saying the same thing twice. What does it mean to receive Jesus Christ? Who *did* receive him...who? Those who “believed in His name.” What does that mean?

Well see actually, **Second Birth is so Simple, it’s Hard**. It’s so simple, it’s hard! The New Testament essentially breaks the process of new life down into two parts - *repent* and *rest*. To believe in Jesus’ name means to repent - stop believing in other names, or in your own name - and rest in what he has done for you.

If you go to the book of Acts, every time people say to Paul or Peter, “What must we do to be saved?” They reply with some variation of “repent and believe in Jesus, repent and turn to God.” What does it mean to repent? Most of us, when you hear the word “repent”, you think it means ask God’s forgiveness for what you’ve done wrong? And sure it does, of course. But if you think that’s *all* it means, here’s where you get tripped up.

I’ve talked to so many people over the years who have thought “I’ve become a Christian because I asked God’s forgiveness for what I done wrong and then I promised to live for Him.” Is that what it means to believe in His name? No way. Why not? Well, here’s what you’re doing. What you’re saying is, “Please forgive me for what I’ve done in the past and now I’ll do better. Because now I’m coming to you with my sincerity, I’m coming to you with my surrender. I’m coming to you and I’m really going to live for you.”

But that just proves that you still don't know what it means to be born again. Why? Because when you're born...let me ask you, how much does the person being born contribute to the birth? Nothing. A baby is not born because of his or her planning. The baby is not born even really that much through the pain and labor of the baby. It's somebody *else's* pain and labor. In other words, the parents are the ones who bring about the baby, not the baby.

And what that means then is to come to repent, it actually means to do what that woman did. Why did I give you that long illustration? What did that woman finally figure out? She realized that in every case, not just that she had done bad things – and she had, by the way, done particularly bad things during her beautiful phase and during her successful phase. Under enormous pressure to land the boyfriend or the contract she had done things she wasn't proud of. So she did bad things.

But repentance for her meant to say “Not only do I repent of the bad things, I repent of the *reason* I was doing all the good things. Which is to try to be my own Savior and Lord, trying to create my own identity, instead of resting.” See, to be born again means to say, “Jesus, you have done it all. I simply receive what you have provided for me by your saving grace.”

Let me tell you what the hardest thing is about repenting – about becoming a Christian. All you need is nothing...but most people don't have it. See, when you say, “Forgive me for what I've done and from now on I'm going to live for You.” You're coming with *something*. No, no, no, no, you've got to come with nothing.

You've got to come and say, “Jesus, everything I've ever done - bad *and* good - has been trying to create my own identity instead of resting in what you've done.” You have to sing the lyrics of another hymn, *Rock of Ages* - “nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy Cross I cling.” That hymn is the total gospel by the way: “nothing in my hands I bring”, that's repentance; “simply to Thy Cross I cling”, that's resting in him.

So we have nothing to do? No nothing but simply rest in Jesus and say, “Father, nothing in my hands I bring, please accept me because of what Jesus Christ has done.” And like I said, that's actually hard, but here's what might help. There's a place a little later in John where Jesus says something else pretty interesting about childbirth.

He says in **John 16:21**, “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because *her time has come*; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.” Now, I’ve experienced that twice. My wife got the double whammy – with both of our children, she had terribly long labor and *still* had to have a c-section in the end. The worst of both worlds. I firmly believe that if men had babies instead of the women, that every family would have only one child in it.

But in both of those instances, what brought about the birth of my children was not Anika’s labor and effort, or Ari’s labor and effort...it was Deanna’s. And it was dreadful. But it’s significant that Jesus says a woman has pain in childbearing because “her time has come” – the KJV says, “her hour has come.”

Some of you already know that in the book of John, when Jesus talks about “his hour” – we talked about this in the previous series - it means he’s going to the cross. It’s the hour of his death. And so here is what I think he is saying. Back in the old days before epidurals and - more significantly - hospitals and anesthesia, not only did all children get born through the *suffering* and pain of their mother, but also at the *risk* of her life - every time.

But Jesus Christ is saying, “You were born again through *my* pain, through *my* suffering, through *my* labor...at the *cost* of my life. And it was horrible what I experienced on the cross, but like a woman in labor and suffering, the minute she sees the child, her joy overwhelms her pain.” I’ve seen *that* aspect of childbirth as well.

And what is Jesus saying? He’s saying, “You’re worth it to me. All that pain I endured on the cross is worth it the moment you are in my arms.” Look at that. Listen to that. Think about that. Let that move you and then rest in that. And you will get rights to become children of God.

Yes, it’s hard. Our culture says, “Don’t give yourself up.” The culture is constantly talking to us about, “You don’t want to humble yourself, you don’t want to give up control. You don’t want to suffer.” But that’s what Jesus did in order to win you. He did the hard part. Our part is easier – thought still difficult – “believe in his name”, “receive him”, repent and rest.

This is how C.S. Lewis ends his great work, *Mere Christianity* - let's leave it with this: “The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit the death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end.”

“Submit with every fiber of your being and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.” (*Mere Christianity*, 226-227)

Let's pray...