

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE BORN AGAIN AND NOT KNOW IT?

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A church member asked, "Is it possible for me to be born again and not know it?" He was obviously a believer but he equated a dramatic conversion experience, which he had never had, with the new birth Jesus said was necessary to see or enter the kingdom of God. "Is it possible to be born again and not know it?" I want to move towards an answer to his question.

In his late night conversation with Nicodemus Jesus was clearly speaking metaphorically when he said, "You must be born again." Nicodemus made the mistake of taking Jesus literally. "How can I enter my mother's womb again?" Jesus in affect said, "You don't understand. I'm not speaking of earthly but spiritual things. I'm using birth as a metaphor of what's necessary for anyone to see or enter the kingdom of God." So let's think about physical human birth.

First, we don't choose to be born. All we do is show up. We don't choose our parents, our race, our intelligence, or our genetic inheritance. Birth is a gift. *Secondly, something mysterious takes place from conception to birth.* Scientists explain the biological process but explanations don't destroy the sheer mystery of developing human life that culminates in physical birth. *Third, children don't know they've been born for months.* I remember observing one of our sons in his crib waving his hands around when he was a few months old. All of a sudden he stopped waving and began staring at his hand. He turned it over. His eyes opened wide. He had a puzzled expression. His mouth opened in awe as if to say, "Wow, that hand belongs to me." I thought, "Not only has he been born, now he knows he was born."

In some ways ^{Jesus said} *the New Birth is like physical birth. First, we don't choose to be born again.* As a teenager you can't imagine how I worried about being born again. What a relief it

was to discover that the new birth isn't something I'm responsible for. It's entirely of God's grace. What a wonderful discovery ~~to discover~~ that a loving God chose us for his children long before we could choose God. He didn't choose us on the basis of our orthodoxy or on the basis of what we've done or refrained from doing. The writer of the first letter of John says, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God." Not all children are blessed with loving parents but the Gospel proclaims a God in Christ who loved and chose us long before we were physically born. After we're born again we may anger, disappoint and break God's heart, and he may severely discipline us but he will not stop loving us any more than loving parents reject their children when they disappoint and break our hearts. Paul writes to Ephesian Christians, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who destined us in love to be his children through Jesus Christ."

We illustrate this wonderfully good news whenever we baptize an infant. The universal consensus of the early Church is that Jesus referred to baptism when he said, "You must be born of water and the spirit." Just as loving parents embrace and love their children, so God embraces us in baptism before we recognize our heavenly Father. When we faithfully fulfill our baptismal vows and bring up our children in the church our children enter a realm in which they know they're God's children, loved unconditionally. Outside the church, how would they see or want to enter the kingdom of God? Baptism, particularly infant baptism, illustrates how the new birth is entirely by God's grace. *And just as breathing is necessary to live* Yes, faith in Christ is necessary, but we don't trust Jesus as our savior in order to be born again. We trust him because we have been born again. Yes, obedience is necessary, but we obey, not in order to be born again, but because "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."

Second, the new birth is mysterious and unpredictable. Humans can't control through baptism who is born again. Jesus said, "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit." In other words, the new birth is mysterious and unpredictable. Humans can build windmills and raise sails but we can't control the wind. The wind blows where it wills. The life giving Spirit of God, like the wind, is beyond our control. We dare not limit God's grace in Jesus Christ to those who are baptized or have made a profession of faith in Christ. The Gospel proclaims the prodigality of God's love that sent his son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. There's always something mysterious and unpredictable about the new birth.

Third, just as children don't realize they've been born for months, so it's possible for Christians to be born again and not know it. I think of a fascinating article by Glenn Tinder, retired professor of political science from the University of Massachusetts. He described his upbringing in a religious but non-Christian home in the 1930s. He described the horrors of World War II and his own seemingly unforgivable acts in that war. He described his long and distinguished career as an academic. Through it all he notes the subtle ways he gradually became conscious that he had entered another world, the Kingdom of God, a kingdom he once had not even been able to see. He concludes, "I still have not described the actual event of my becoming a Christian. There is good reason for this: no such event occurred. I can only say that I was not a Christian during my time as a graduate student and a young instructor, whereas well before reaching the age of fifty I was" (*Christianity Today*, April 26, 1999, p. 37). Some Christians can tell you the day and hour they first trusted in Jesus Christ but many more are like Glenn Tinder. We just don't know when we were born again. Like a child who slowly comes to

the awareness of who our parents are many of us come slowly to awareness that we are beloved children of God and ^{only slowly come to} embrace the One who first embraced us.

Finally, Jesus concluded his conversation with Nicodemus saying, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." I don't understand why so many people have no awareness of God's love for them. I know that sin blinds all of us. I also know ~~all the~~ innocent pain and suffering can blind us to God's love for the world. Furthermore, I know, we're responsible human beings who find creative ways of avoiding and rejecting God's love. Yet when I think of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ I have hope. There was a time when I believed the world is so sinful that it's a wonder God would choose any to be his children. But as I've grown older I've come to believe that God's grace is greater than the world's sin or my own. That's not to minimize the world's sin or my own, but to magnify God's love. I've come to hope God's love in Jesus Christ is so uncontrollable that all will come eventually to believe in Christ and that none will perish. I long for all to share that faith. I deeply desire for all of us to believe and act on the good news of the Gospel! Believe that in Jesus Christ God loves the world and you and wants no life to be wasted, no soul to perish -- including your own. Believe and that faith will make a difference in your attitude and behavior in relationship to God, others and yourself.

Let us pray: God of all times and places, in Jesus Christ, lifted up on the cross, you opened for us the path to eternal life. Grant that we, being born again of water and the Spirit, may joyfully serve you in newness of life and faithfully walk in your holy ways; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.