



BLESS GOD – YOU’RE BORN AGAIN

1 Peter 1:3-5

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Introduction

Are you born again? Fewer people seem to be asking that question nowadays. It used to be a fairly common way of referring to one’s own Christian experience. The expression became popular in the late 1970’s, through Billy Graham Crusades and the testimony of our first openly ‘born again’ presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter; as well as through the highly publicized conversion of Watergate insider, Chuck Colson, who published his own spiritual autobiography under that title.

Yet over time the expression has become highly politicized, and now carries with it some rather unfortunate and unflattering connotations. The phrase no longer communicates something profound or praiseworthy about a person; instead, it has become a term of derision, suggesting things like religious fundamentalism, right-wing politics, small-mindedness, intolerance and spiritual elitism. I suspect many of our friends and neighbors in Oak Park might hear the term that way. Perhaps you hear the term that way.

In his book, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary*, Christian writer Frederick Buechner explains how this once noble term now sounds in the ears of some, perhaps many.

You get the feeling that to [those who use the phrase ‘born again’] it means Super Christians. They are apt to have the relentless cheerfulness of car salesmen. They tend to be a little too friendly a little too soon and the women to wear more make-up than they need. You can’t imagine any of them ever having had a bad moment or a lascivious thought or use a nasty word when they bumped their head getting out of the car. They speak a great deal about “the Lord” as if they have him in their hip pocket and seem to feel that it’s no harder to figure out what he wants them to do in any given situation than to look up in Fanny Farmer how to make brownies. The whole shadow side of human existence—the suffering, the doubt, the frustration, the ambiguity—appears as absent from their view of things as litter from the streets of Disneyland. To hear them speak of God, he seems about as elusive and mysterious as a Billy Graham rally at Madison Square Garden, and on their lips the Born Again experience often sounds like something we can all make happen any time we want to, like fudge, if we only follow their recipe.¹

Evidently, then, the expression ‘born again’ has fallen on hard-times. This is unfortunate, first of all, because it’s a wonderful biblical *expression* that we find used here in this passage, and elsewhere in the New Testament, not least on the lips of Jesus himself (see John 3:1-10).

But, secondly, and more importantly, this is unfortunate because being born again is a profound biblical *experience*—an experience that not only marks the beginning of the Christian life, but also provides a basis for wonder and worship in our lives. To be born again is thus the foundation of Christian living, as well as the wellspring of the Christian’s praise.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary* (Harper Collins, 1993), p. 24.

This is the main point of our passage today. Peter begins his letter with a hymn of praise: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3). But this isn’t baseless praise; there’s good reason to bless God. And the reason is this: you’re born again. This morning’s passage teaches us, then, that we ought to bless God because we’re born again.

And we *will* bless God because we’re born again. We will, that is, when we realize what it actually means to be born again: why we were born again, how we were born again, and to what end we were born again. These are the questions we find our passage dealing with today; and the answers this passage provides will no doubt cause your heart to sing. They will cause you to bless God because you’re born again.

Mercy Is the Motive

Why were you born again? This is the first and most important question. Is it something you and I do for ourselves, like renewing our driver’s license or getting a hair cut or losing weight? Or perhaps it’s something someone else can do for you: like a parent or a friend or a spouse. If they want it badly enough, and if they pray hard enough, then you’ll be born again. Does it work like that? Who causes you or me to be born again?

Peter identifies the cause of our new birth in this first verse of our passage. And the cause is none other than God himself: “According to his great mercy, *he has caused us to be born again*” (v. 3). If you’re born again, then God did it—not you. God is the cause, the sole cause, of this most wonderful of spiritual blessings. For he is the Father of lights, the One from whom “every good gift and every perfect gift” comes down from above (James 1:17). “Of his own will,” therefore, we read in James, “he brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18). God did it; God causes new birth.

But, digging a bit deeper, let me ask: *Why* did God cause you to be born again? If God was the cause of our new birth, what was his motive? Was it because he saw something special in you that he liked or admired or wanted? Was it because he saw that you really wanted to become born again and therefore gave you a little nudge to get you over the hump? Was it because God saw that you would be responsive to the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ? Or was it because you changed your ways, you were converted, and thus he crowned your conversion with his new birth?

No, none of these are good explanations. None of these explain God’s motive in causing you to be born again. Instead, according to Peter, friends, *mercy is the motive*. God caused us to be born again, as we read at the beginning of verse 3, “according to his great mercy.” This is what moved the heart of God to give you new birth: his great mercy. This explains why you’ve been born again: God’s great mercy. Your faith is not the explanation; your repentance is not the explanation; your conversion is not the explanation. “We are not born again by faith or repentance or conversion; we repent and believe because we have been regenerated.”² Mercy is therefore the *sole* explanation. There is *no other* explanation.

Sometimes Christians are tempted to think that our new birth is the result of our own decision. And sometimes we want to believe that we can be born again as a result of someone else’s decision. But the Bible is clear on this. In John’s Gospel we read: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were

² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 103.

born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (1:12-13). God is the one who gives new birth. And he does so according to his great mercy. Mercy is the motive.

You see, you cannot be born again as a result of your own decision, because before you were born again, you weren’t even alive—but dead. “Dead in your trespasses and sins,” is the way the Bible puts it (Eph. 2:1). That’s what you were before you were born again: a corpse. And, as we all know, corpses don’t decide to do anything, much less to be born again. Nor, for that matter, can you be born again as a result of another person’s decision, because, as we also know, no one can raise the dead, save God himself. Being born again, then, is not your decision—but God’s.

Earlier this week at our staff meeting we had a funny exchange that underscored this truth. We were celebrating one of our staff member’s birthdays with some delicious cake. Stann Leff enjoyed the cake so much he evidently felt compelled to thank the person for being born. To which the person quipped in reply: “Thanks, but you know I didn’t have much a hand in my own birth.” At which point another staff member, one of the mother’s of the group, then added: “That’s right, so we should have the birthday party for the mother and not for you.”

Nobody has a hand in their own birth, whether that birth is natural or spiritual. It is instead something that happens to you: you’re born, or you’re born again. Thus, the credit for your birth, again whether natural or spiritual, doesn’t really belong to you at all—but to the one who gave you birth. When it comes to your natural birth, the credit belongs to your mother; she should get the birthday cake and the presents on your birthday! And when it comes to your spiritual birth, your new birth, the credit belongs to your Father, your heavenly Father, who “out of his mercy” has caused us to be born again (Titus 3:5). He should therefore get the credit, he should get the praise, and he should be blessed for your new birth!

A Living and Life-Giving Christ

The sheer mercy of God in causing us to be born again, this is the starting point for our praise. But there’s another reason to bless God for giving us new birth. God has done something extraordinary in order to make it happen. But what has he done to cause you to be born again? What did God do, so that he could give new life to you? What he did was *first give new life to his Son*.

This is how God has caused us to be born again, Peter tells us. We are born again, he says, “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (v. 3). The resurrection of Christ—this is God’s way of causing us to be born again. Our new birth comes about through Christ’s new life; our new life through his resurrection. Because Jesus was raised, you and I can be born again.

But how exactly does this work? Paul explains in the fabulous second chapter of Ephesians, where he says:

And you were *dead* in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, *being rich in mercy*, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were *dead* in our trespasses, *made us*

alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and *raised us up with him* and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

We've thus passed from death to life by being raised with Christ, who himself passed from death to life. God has given us new life and new birth through the resurrection of his Son, by raising Jesus from the dead—and us together with him.

But how does being made alive together with Christ actually cause us to come alive? How does Jesus' resurrection serve as the means by which God the Father gives us new birth? Here's how: the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to say that we have been born again through the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to say that we have been born again *by the Holy Spirit*. For that is precisely what the resurrection of Jesus means for the world.

Let me put it this way: God the Father, in raising God the Son and exalting him to his own right hand, has now enabled the sending of God the Spirit into our hearts and lives. This is precisely what the Apostle Peter says in his first sermon on the Day of Pentecost, recorded for us in Acts 2. Explaining to those present what were these strange 'tongues of fire' and languages they were hearing being spoken by the earliest followers of Jesus, Peter says to them:

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing (vv. 32-33).

So, you see, the Father gives life through his *living* and *life-giving* Son. The Son is living because the Father has raised him from the dead; and the Son is life-giving because by being raised, he has received the Holy Spirit, whom he now pours out in our lives and thus gives us life.

We have, therefore, as Peter says, a "living hope" because we have a *living* and *life-giving Christ*. And we have been made alive together with him; that's what it means to be born again. Our new birth has come about only because the Father has given new life to his Son by raising him from the dead. He has made us alive in him! So we bless God that we're born again, born again through—and only through—the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

A Living Hope, A Guaranteed Inheritance

So we have reason to bless God: he has given us new birth because of his great mercy and through his living and life-giving Son. But we also have reason to bless God for the new birth because we have been born again *to* something: and that something is new life, new life defined by new hope.

You see, we are all born into a world defined by dying and despairing, a world of disappointments and dead-ends, a world in which things decay and fall apart, a world in which things are unsure and uncertain. This is the condition into which we are all born, whether we like it or not. Yet, as this passage reminds us, a believer has, in the midst of this world of dying and despair, been born again to a "living hope" (v. 3).

But what is this "living hope" to which the Christian has been born again? You'll see that verse 4 goes on to explain the object of our hope, the reality of our hope, indeed that for which we hope. Peter calls it "an inheritance" (v. 4). We have been born again to a living hope, that is,

we've been born again to receive an inheritance. But not just any inheritance: God's inheritance, and thus a guaranteed inheritance because it is guarded by God himself.

Ours is a guaranteed inheritance, first of all, because it is a *perfect* inheritance. Unlike an earthly inheritance, whether money or real estate or the like, our inheritance does not decay, nor can it be destroyed. It can't even be taxed! No, our inheritance is, as Peter says, "imperishable, undefiled and unfading" (v. 4). These three terms, stacked up alongside each other, are intended to leave you with the powerful impression that nothing's wrong with your inheritance. It's imperishable—free from death and decay; it's undefiled—free from anything unclean or moral impure; and it's unfading—free from the natural ravages of time; it will never wear out or grow old.³ In fact, Peter here describes your inheritance with qualities one might use of God. For God himself is imperishable and undefiled and unfading. Our inheritance is thus guaranteed because our inheritance is perfect with the very perfection of God.⁴

Yet having a perfect inheritance doesn't necessarily rule out the possibility of someone stealing it from you, does it? Just because your inheritance won't rot or wear out doesn't mean some rotten so-and-so couldn't sneak in and steal it from you. A perfect inheritance can still become a stolen inheritance, can it not? If you'd like a reminder of the fact that people's inheritances are routinely stolen, visit the website I visited earlier this week: www.stoleninheritance.com. This is a website devoted to sharing stories of stolen inheritances. A rather depressing website you'll agree, but here's how they introduce it.

Welcome to our web site. We have been observing so many cases of stolen inheritances that a web site seemed necessary. Our site is simply a place to post your own comments about what you have experienced or witnessed. We do not require that you belong to any membership or any organization to post on our blog. We do ask that you only state the facts of your situation and avoid diatribes and personal attacks. We are sympathetic to the heartache that accompanies this kind of betrayal. It is a final loss of belief that you could have closeness with family members. It could be the shock of a life time and completely unexpected. No matter how it comes to you, the timing is after the death of someone you were extremely close to and you have more than one issue to recover from. We send our heartfelt understanding out to all who are hurt this way. Posting the truth may not accomplish much, but it gives a voice to a person in a world that will just keep moving at breakneck speed even when your world is falling apart.

Now, while I must admit that I found this website rather depressing and a bit odd, it's not hard for me to imagine the pain and heartache and downright anger that would result were my inheritance to be stolen right out from under me.

Yet, friends, did you know this can never happen to those who have been born again. While your earthly inheritance, whatever that amounts to, may indeed be stolen, no one and nothing can touch the inheritance to which you've been born again. Why not? Because, as Peter says, it is "kept in heaven for you" (v. 4). By whom? The clear implication is that it is kept by God himself. God *guards* our inheritance, and thus guarantees our inheritance.

So our inheritance is perfect and protected, and this gives me great confidence in *it*. But what if I don't have great confidence in *me*? What if I blow it? What if I lose heart or lose faith

³ See J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), p. 21.

⁴ See Douglas Harink, *1 & 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), p. 45.

before I've reached the end? Sure, my inheritance itself is secure; but how do I know that *I'm* secure, and will in the end gain my inheritance?

In order to answer this very question, Peter adds the third and final qualification of our inheritance there in verse 5. Your inheritance is guaranteed because it is perfect and protected, but also because *you yourself are protected*. Your inheritance is not only being kept in heaven for you, but you yourself are also “by God’s power being guarded through faith” (v. 5). God has not only put up a protective wall around your inheritance; he’s put up a protective wall around you. And he’s done so, friends, please note, not despite your faith, but by guarding your faith itself. God ultimately guarantees your inheritance, not because you can live a life of unbelief and still receive it; but because he has committed himself—his own power—to keep you believing.

H. G. Wells wrote an interesting short story entitled, *The Lost Inheritance*. It’s a story of a man whose uncle left him with a rather handsome inheritance, but with a catch. The man’s uncle was a collector of books, and a writer of books. And he had placed his will in the very last book in his massive collection of books, but failed to tell his nephew where to find it. The point was that his nephew would have to actually read, or at least peruse, all the books to find the will and the inheritance.

This never occurred to the man’s nephew, so he could make no legitimate claim to his inheritance, that is, until he found the will. In the meantime, his cousin made a claim to the uncle’s inheritance, and indeed got it. Not only so, but, over many years, he spent every last penny of the man’s inheritance, while this man was left to suffer financial hardship without his inheritance, save all these books he now owned.

So, one day, many years later, the man had reached a particular low point, and found himself despising the only token of his inheritance: all of his uncle’s books. He therefore reached for one, the last one on the shelf, and out of sheer anger and frustration, kicked the book across the room. Of course, the book went flying, but as it did, out flew his uncle’s will, which was lost all this time. Yet by now it was too late: he had already lost his inheritance; it had been spent and was now gone.

Losing your inheritance is an impossibility for those who have been born again. We have been born again to a living hope, to an inheritance that cannot be tampered with. Nor can it be unlawfully transferred to someone else and there squandered. It is sure, and it is certain. For it is guaranteed by God himself. And this is what you’ve been born again to—to a living hope, a guaranteed inheritance, which is yet another reason why you ought to bless God that you’re born again.

Brought to a Praising Disposition

Stepping back now to take these few verses in, we see that mercy is the motive. The great mercy of God explains our being born again. We also see that Christ is the key: the living and life-giving Christ; his resurrection is the reason for our new birth. He is alive, and we have been made alive with him, but made alive—not to a life of dying and despair—but to a living hope, a guaranteed inheritance. More than that, we ourselves are secure; our faith is guarded by God’s power, protected until our ready salvation finally arrives.

Yet rehearsing these great truths about our new birth is not intended to be a lesson in theology; it’s intended to make us steadfast, and to cause us to thirst after holiness, and

ultimately to worship and indeed bless the God who has given us this new birth. Writing several centuries ago, Alexander Nisbet, in his commentary on 1 & 2 Peter, described the purpose of these opening verses this way:

The way to make Christians steadfast in the truth, cheerful under their sufferings for it, and thriving in holiness, is to have their hearts brought to a praising disposition, from the consideration of their spiritual privileges and the excellency of the state of grace wherein they are.⁵

A praising disposition—a heart to bless and praise God—that’s the goal of today’s message! That’s what I pray is happening in your heart as you realize what it means to have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

One final comment, and then we’re done. Perhaps you’ve been listening to all of this and you find yourself not praising God that you’re born again, but wondering if you’ve ever actually been born again. Perhaps you’ve been a regular churchgoer all your life, but if you’re honest, you’re not sure you see the fruits of new birth in your own life: there’s never really been a change of life or a change of outlook on life.

Or maybe you’re not born again and you know it, but you want to know how to be born again.

How can you be born again? Can you be born again right here at Calvary? What do you need to do? Come forward after the service? Pray with a prayer partner? Join the church? Put something in the offering plate?

There is nothing you can do to be born again. It’s not something you do; it’s something God does. God is the one who causes you to be born again: in his sovereign way and according to his sovereign timing. Jesus used this analogy: “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” (John 3:8).

Yet even though you cannot do anything to be born again because it is all of God, God nevertheless uses means to cause you to be born again. And as Peter tells us a little later on in this same letter, one of the key means he uses is the word preached. In verse 23, Peter tells us that we have been born again “not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God . . . And this word,” Peter tells us, “is the good news that was preached to you” (1:25).

So, I say, if you want to be born again, listen to the good news that is preached to you: the good news of God’s love displayed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the good news of sins forgiven and new life given. And as you hear this good news, God may be pleased to cause you to be born again to a living hope. Then, you too will bless God because you have been born again.

Amen.

⁵ Alexander Nisbet, *An Exposition of 1 & 2 Peter* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982; org. 1658), p. 13.