

Introduction

Who ever asked to be born? No one ever asked to be born. It is told that at a time when they were at odds, Johnny Carson's son said to him, "Well I didn't ASK to be born." And Johnny is said to have replied, "No, and if you had asked, I would have said, 'no!'" This morning we are turning our attention in our study of the epistle of James to the subject of birth and in this case the new birth, the birth from above, being born again. It is not a subject on the fringe of the Bible but a central core teaching. People may talk about "born-again Christianity" as though that is one kind among others. But the Bible knows nothing of any Christian who has not been born again. Let's turn then to James 1:18.

[Read Text and Pray]

We remain in the section of James' letter in which he has been addressing trials. He is now seeming to deal with questions that might be raised about the goodness of God. If God allows us to encounter tests of our faith in the context of which we will very likely be tempted, can we truly say that God is good? James replies that we must not be deceived. God is truly good. Although he may allow us to be tried, God himself never tempts. In fact temptation arises because of evil desires already residing within our fallen hearts. When temptations meet opportunity, sin is conceived and death is born. On the contrary, our unchanging God is constantly pouring down from above only good and perfect gifts. James points us to the constant goodness of God by pointing out that he is amazingly gracious. Rather than being a tempter to sin, which leads to death, God is the one who brings about life through the new birth. So within the context, James is arguing that if God in absolute grace raised you, a sinner, to life so that you might truly live, do not think he allows trials into your life to bring your ultimate death.

The new birth is a central and crucial doctrine that is part of our proper understanding of the whole of salvation. So it is fitting that we continue at the snail's pace we have been going. James' main point is that we grasp the amazing reality of the new birth. He describes four critical aspects of what is involved in being born from above. Let's look at them together.

I. The Work Involved in the New Birth.

A. The work of the new birth is expressed here by James in the words, "he brought us forth." The pronoun he refers back to the Father of Lights. God is the Father of Lights who spoke the stars in to existence. In just the Milky Way galaxy there are some 100 billion stars and many, many more beyond. And God not only made them all, he has a name for each one. He is the Father who brought forth creation itself. He brought forth stars on day four of creation. And not only did he bring forth creation, says James, he also has brought US forth.

B. Now, before we examine the work performed by God, we need to understand who is the object of the work of God here. James says, it is US. WE. But WHO are we? Is this a reference to all the people on the earth? Is God not responsible for the existence of every single person ever to live on the earth? Indeed, he is. But James is not referring here to all people in general. The pronoun is us. And the specified group includes James, who calls himself a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Besides James are the ones to whom he is writing. He calls them the twelve tribes in the dispersion. It is a reference to the people of God. He calls them brothers, beloved brothers. And in chapter 2 verse 1, he says that these are brothers because they hold the faith in our Lord Jesus

Christ, the Lord of Glory. So the work about which James is speaking is a work done by God in those who are followers of Jesus.

C. Now let's look at that work. The work itself is to "bring forth." James is sticking with the image of birth. Previously he called upon the reality of conception and birth to describe how our inner corrupt desires lead to sin and death. Now he says that the Father of Lights gives birth. Instead of bringing about death, however, the work of the Father is to bring about life in the place of death.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans 6:23 that "The wages of sin is death." That's what James has been saying in terms of birth. Sin brings forth death. This is the condition in which all human beings are physically conceived and born. Ephesians 2 says about all humanity: we were all "dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked, following the course of this world." We were dead and were hopeless to change our condition on our own. Jeremiah 13:23 asks, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil." Out of one who is dead due to sin can only come more sin. We are powerless to change ourselves. Dead in sin, there is none who does good and not even one who seeks for God.

The new birth is God bringing life to those who are spiritually dead. The new birth is like unto a resurrection. And this is the sense in Ephesians 2. We were dead in our trespasses and were children of wrath, BUT God made us alive together with Christ. It is a work none of us could do. It is not merely turning over a new leaf but gaining a new life. The new birth replaces eyes that are blind to the truth with eyes that see, and ears that are deaf to the truth with ears that hear. As a result the kingdom of God comes into focus. As Jesus told the Pharisee in John 3, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven." When one is born again, born from above, brought forth, the reality of God as creator and sin as a terrible reality is clear to us. The beauty of Jesus as a sacrificial substitute is a comfort to our soul. The glory of purity and holiness of life is attractive to us. God himself becomes our desire and his law our delight. We hunger and thirst for righteousness. Paul says that whoever is in Christ is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold new has come.

This new birth is not only a New Testament concept. It is also an Old Testament teaching. Jeremiah (31:31-34) depicts the change as God putting his law within his people and writing his law upon their hearts. Through Ezekiel the Lord depicts the new birth this way: (36:26-27) "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 in you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." This is the "bringing forth" about which James speaks. If we hold the faith in Jesus Christ, it is because God, the Father of Lights, brought us forth out of death into life. He has removed the old person we were and replaced him with a new man. We have been raised out of death and have been brought into life. This is proof that God is always good. His wonderful intentions for us begin with life itself.

It is a life that comes to us through the work of Jesus Christ. Even before we believe in him, it is his death that secures for us the goodness and kindness of God. It is the union we have with Christ before we even know him that guarantees a day will come when we will believe. But before that belief can come, there must be a new birth. You can trust God in the midst of your trials. You can know that his purposes for you are good because it was his plan from eternity past to bring you out of death into life.

II. The Will Prompting the New Birth.

A. This point is actually what jumps out at us in the first instance as we look at James 1:18. It says, "Of his own will he brought us forth." We are looking at whose determination it was to bring the new birth about. It is an important point throughout the scripture for the saved to know who to credit for their salvation. From the beginning to the very end, we are told that God is the one who is to be credited. There is not one iota of the work of salvation for which we can congratulate or bless or credit anyone other than God himself, and that especially means ourselves. You might say, "Yes, but I believed." Not a few evangelicals around the world now and throughout the history of the church have argued that God gives to human beings free will and that out of that free will they choose to believe in Christ.

Free will is a concept with which we must exercise extreme care that we conceive of it rightly. People make choices according to their desires. They do what they want to do. The will is free in the sense that it is not forced to act in opposition to its nature and desires. But the fact of the matter is that the human will is in bondage to its nature. What it freely chooses when left to itself is sinful. Left to itself the world hates the light. Left to himself, Pharaoh hardens his heart. Given over to themselves, human beings will dishonor their bodies and out of a debased mind will choose the path of all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, and deceit. They will not choose to be born again. No, they must be born again or they will never freely choose to repent of sin and to believe in Jesus Christ.

The saved can never credit any portion of their coming to Christ to themselves. For it all starts for them with being brought forth from death into life. And the will that directs this birthing process is the uninfluenced, purely self-driven will of God. James says, "Of HIS OWN WILL he brought us forth." It was fully and completely and exclusively the will of God. James reiterates the point John makes in chapter 1 where John explains that whoever receives Christ by believing in his name gains the right to become a child of God. And yet John clarifies that those who do receive Christ were first born again. And he adds that this act of being born again was not a birth "of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." If the new birth were to be dependent upon the will of any man, it would never happen. Human beings are corrupt and will not come to the light unless the light first shines in them from God.

Let's consider how powerfully the Apostle Paul makes this point. It is in 2 Corinthians 4. Let me just read these couple of verses. Beginning with verse 3, Paul writes:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The unbelieving world is blind to the truth. They cannot see the light of the gospel. It is like a person who is blind. You can shine a light in their face and they cannot see it. If the light is on or the light is off is irrelevant. What the blind person needs is sight from the inside or the light remains imperceptible. Therefore, those who believe, those who see the glory of the gospel, first had the light shine within them. It came as they were brought forth by God's own determination.

So just to be clear, I ask, Which comes first—Faith in Christ? or the new birth? Am I born again because I believe? Or do I believe because I was first born from above? I would hope that the answer is already crystal clear to you. Those who receive Christ WERE born of the will of God. Those who see the light of the gospel first had God shine light into their hearts in order to be able to see the glory of God in the face of Christ. 1 John 5:1 says, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ HAS BEEN born of God.” It starts with the will of God. God wills to bring forth the dead unto life. And then comes the act. God brings them forth. And then being brought forth unto life, those who formerly were dead now will certainly believe because the old has passed away and new has come.

What is the point? It is a major point. James says, “know this my beloved brothers!” because it is the difference between God’s being properly recognized with praise or human beings inordinately placing confidence in something they believe they were able to bring about on their own and thus ascribe credit unto themselves. It is the difference between human vainglory and all the glory going to God. Many years ago as God was bringing me to this realization, even before I fully embraced it, I was like totally overwhelmed at the thought that I belonged to God 100% because of God. Even the possibility that it was this way made me shudder with a staggering sense of indebtedness to God and the magnitude of God’s love.

It is just like with natural physical birth. Nobody ever was conceived and born because of their own will or decision. Each one of us had nothing to do with our being conceived and born. Rather, the decisions that led to our existence belonged to our parents. Spiritual birth is no different. Our parent is God the Father, and the reason for our rebirth is his will not ours. And all the glory belongs to Him!

III. The Word Accomplishing the New Birth.

Of his own will, he brought us forth BY THE WORD OF TRUTH.

Now think about this. God performs work by his word. Creation was brought into being by the word. The Father of the lights said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” He spoke and what he spoke came to be. Psalm 33:6 says, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.” Jesus himself is called the word of God. People are converted to Christ through the word or message of the gospel. Peter says in 1 Peter 1:23 that God caused those who believe to be born again of “imperishable [seed], through the living and abiding WORD of God.”

The word of truth is the gospel of salvation in Jesus. And here is the picture James brings us in these words. The Father of lights summons creation into being by his word. It is effectual. The word of God accomplishes what it commands. It brings something out of nothing. In the universe the word of God imparts life where there is no life. Even so when it comes to spiritual life, the word of God is the instrument by which his gracious act of rebirth is accomplished. Alec Motyer says, “The Father uses the powerful word of the gospel in two ways: first, he speaks it, inwardly, to our dead souls, imparting life, bringing us to new birth; second, he presents the same word of truth to us as a preached gospel, to which the new life within us makes a personal and believing response.”

We hear with our eardrums and comprehend with our brains the words of the gospel message. Words tell of our great sin against God and the inestimable debt we owe him. We are convicted. Words, however, tell of yet a savior greater than our sin, one who took sin’s penalty upon himself in the place of the guilty. Words are spoken which call us to repent of our sin and trust in the work of this great savior.

Do you remember when you first heard those words? Do you remember the conviction of sin that weighed you down? Do you remember making the decision, the choice, to deny yourself and take up your cross, to repent of sin and to cast the well-being of your soul on Jesus Christ? Without coming to those determinations, without coming to repentance and faith, there can be no hope that you are saved. You must repent of sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ if you are to be saved from the wrath of God. But preceding any repentance or any faith, before either of those realities could be real in you, there was a new birth. You had to have been born of God first by his speaking the word to you inwardly, replacing your dead heart with one that is alive to him. Death was replaced by life through the life-giving word of God. You were born anew. And light shone in your heart. And for the first time, you perceived the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

IV. The Whyfor of the New Birth.

What was the purpose of God in bringing life into the hearts of the dead? James says it was so that "we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." If he had not brought us forth by the word of truth, there would be no firstfruits.

The Lord required the Israelites to bring to him at the temple the firstfruits of the harvest including grain, oil, and wine. The first fruits were to be the best of the crop. They were holy to the Lord. The rest of the crop was for ordinary consumption. Bringing the firstfruits was an act of worship wherein the worshiper acknowledged the goodness and generosity of God in bringing Israel up out of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey.

With this background we get a glimpse into James' point. Firstfruits were holy to God, they were the choicest part of the harvest, and they represented God's merciful grace that reached out to a languishing people and brought them up out of slavery into the bounty of the Lord. God brought forth unto himself a people who once languished in the deadness of sin. He set his kindness upon them of his own will so that they might peculiarly belong to him as his children. By his work they are holy to the Lord; they are his choicest ones and belong uniquely to him. They are brought to his temple.

The firstfruits belong uniquely to God; they are acceptable to God; they are near God; and they are a testimony of God's glorious work of deliverance and blessing. Such is the body of believers in Jesus Christ. Among all his creatures those who are his in Christ through the new birth are special to him. Peter says we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light."

You see, no such people would exist if God had not brought them forth. And those that have been brought forth—that's you and me who believe in Christ through the initial and irresistible grace and birth of God—have been brought forth like the firstfruits to be set apart to God and to proclaim the glory of God!

Conclusion

What are the practical ramifications of these truths this morning?

1. Understand who you are. If you are believing in Christ Jesus. It is because God brought you to it. If you love God, it is because he first loved you. And these things being true call you to proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. When you grasp these truths of who you are, it will affect how you worship, how you live, how you pray, how you relate to others, and how you face trials. Pride is crushed into oblivion.

2. Understand who you are. If you are not believing in Jesus, then what you need most is something you cannot do for yourself. Understand that you need God. You need his work in you. You need to cry out for him. You need to seek him with all your heart. You need to repent of sin and trust in Jesus Christ. Has he brought you to see yourself as a sinner today? Has he brought you to see that there is no remedy for sinners other than the blood of Jesus Christ that was shed for sinners? Then come! Come to Jesus. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and trust in Jesus.