

New Birth (Part One)

“Unless he is born again”

Reflection 47 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

A picture of little Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach haunts me. Aylan was a three-year-old Syrian boy who slipped from his father’s arms into the cold, dark sea late last summer and died as did his five-year-old brother and their mother. They were in desperate flight from war-torn Syria. They had relations in Canada who would have taken them in if they made it. They didn’t. His picture went iconic. We could all see how Aylan was dressed. Someone his last morning dressed him as lovingly as we dress our children.

It’s a picture like that illustrates so well that we, we seven billion people who together live on this planet, need a new world in the morning. Things have to change. Hearts need to change. Some ways of thinking and living need to change. It’s like a whole lot of us need to be born again. Maybe we have to restructure our lives so that we can help the hundreds of millions of people on earth who live utterly desperate lives.

So let’s look again at a classic text in John 3:1-8 and see if we can make some connections, maybe some connections we’ve never made before. It’s a well-known story. It tells of a nighttime conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was part of the Jerusalem religious establishment. He was a Pharisee, and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, in effect, the Jewish Supreme Court. That means that Nicodemus thought that the way to God was through the law as interpreted by the traditions of the elders.

He comes to Jesus, the text says, “at night,” perhaps secretively, not being sure of what his fellow members on the Sanhedrin might think of his being with Jesus. He addresses Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God” – that is, he recognizes a hint of God in Jesus. But Jesus seems to drop the courteous small talk and cuts straight to the real issue. He asserts in verse 3, “Truly, truly, verily, verily, let’s get this one thing straight – unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” The Greek word (ἀνωθεν) for “again” has the sense of “anew,” that is, born “anew,” or “from above,” that is, born “from above,” suggesting that only God can effect this rebirth. Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that the basic human need is not for more law but for a radical rebirth: a break with tradition, with the old ways of living and thinking, a transformative experience in which one starts over. In another place, Matthew 18:3, Jesus will say, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Unless you start over.

With this one idea, Jesus sweeps away all that Nicodemus stood for and demands that he be remade. “If you are not reborn, if you don’t start over completely, you will not even see, perceive, recognize, experience the reign of God. It could be happening all around you, and you’d miss it!” In verse 4, Nicodemus responds, “How can this be? How can an old man be reborn? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb?” Perhaps his feelings are hurt. Perhaps he thinks, “Only proselytes are reborn. I was born a Jew. I’m a Jewish leader, and surely that’s good enough.” Or perhaps, and I think this is more likely,

he's being wistful, "Can you really change? Even when you're old? After all these years, could I really start over?"

So Jesus restates this truth. In verse 5, "Unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." For every one, whoever they are, whatever they've done, good or bad, however old they are, there can be a turning point! In fact, there must be! People do change. Everyone knows people can change for the worse. Why can't you see, Jesus asks, that they can also change for the better? There can be better people. There can be a better world.

Now in passing, I note that when Jesus talks of being "born of water and the Spirit," he is referring to baptism. John 4:1 says that Pharisees were keeping track of who was baptizing more, John the Baptizer or Jesus, so Nicodemus would have caught this reference almost immediately. Nicodemus knew about baptism. Jesus, Christians are sometimes surprised to learn, didn't think up the idea of baptism. Most world religions have some sort of ritual cleansing in water. In Nicodemus's time, Jewish converts were baptized. Women who were ceremonially unclean were baptized. There are still first-century mikvahs (baptistries) all over Israel. In national revival movements, like that of John the Baptizer, hundreds of people were baptized.

What would have been astonishing to Nicodemus is that Jesus is addressing these words to him: a man, a good man, a religious leader, Jewish and not a convert, a man and not a woman. Nicodemus had spent his whole life being religious. But now Jesus is telling him he has to be born again. He needs to start over. He needs to be radically reborn from above. And then he adds in verses 7-8, "None of this should surprise you. The Spirit is like the wind, which means, it blows where it wills. It breaks out everywhere, in ways you don't expect it." In another place, Jesus says, "[The kingdom of God] does not come with careful observation. You cannot say 'Here it is' or 'There it is.' It is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). But, Jesus says, this one thing you can count on, Nicodemus: you need to be born again.

Everyone does.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week