

Born Again? Really?

John 3:1-21

June 14, 2020

The American philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) once said, “The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation.” In others words, there are a lot of people who are not satisfied with their own lives. Even among those who have achieved great success in their own career, there are many who have not found fulfillment.

Abraham H. Maslow (1908-1970), an American psychologist, suggested that human beings have different levels of needs. He called it “Hierarchy of Needs.” Basically, what he says is that we have different layers of wants that need to be satisfied in order find fulfillment in life. We have basic survival needs, food, water, warmth, rest, etc. Then we need safety and security. We also need a sense of belonging. We need friends, relationship, intimacy. In order to find joy in life we need more than food. We need friends, a sense of belonging, and intimacy. We also need a sense of accomplishment. We need a sense of success in life. But not just a sense of success but a sense that we have done all we can with the potential that we have.¹

Maslow says that is how we find fulfillment in life. I think he is right. We are constantly pursuing for fulfillment. Life is a never-ending quest for contentment.

A retired tennis player Boris Becker was an incredible athlete. He had great success in his career. He had fame and wealth. He could have anything he wanted and whenever he wanted it but he found his life empty and meaningless to the point that he almost killed himself. Even though he had everything he wanted, something was missing. He put it this way, “I had won Wimbledon twice before, once as the youngest player ever. I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed: money, cars, women, everything....I know that this is a cliché. It is the old song of the movie and pop-stars who commit suicide. They have everything and yet they are so unhappy....I had no inner-peace. I was a puppet on a string.”²

Boris Becker is a witness to the fact that most people know deep down in their hearts that something is missing from their lives.

¹ <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

² Quoted by James Merritt in his sermon “*Are You a Satisfied Customer?*”, www.esermons.com

Nicodemus had the similar problem. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Israel. He had power and influence in society. He was a man of success and status but like Boris Becker, he was a man without inner peace. He was searching for meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. He was searching for an experience of God's power in his life. To him Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Nicodemus wondered, "How can someone be born again when they are old? What would that mean? What would that look like?" Nicodemus was well-educated. I am sure Nicodemus knew that "being born again" could not mean in a literal sense but then Jesus was not an ordinary person. Nicodemus knew Jesus had performed some incredible miracles. They were so amazing that Nicodemus confessed that the miracles Jesus had performed were the very work of God.³ Because Jesus was such an incredible miracle worker, perhaps Nicodemus believed that it might be possible for Jesus to cause an old person to be physically born again.

However, Nicodemus and Jesus were talking about two different things. Nicodemus was talking about the flesh and physical body and Jesus was talking about the Spirit. Jesus said to him, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit."⁴

From everything we know about Jesus' teachings, what can we conclude that Jesus meant when he said that we must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God? It means to be a completely different person, with different values and goals of life.

When we were born into this physical world, we are born grasping things to ourselves. Look at babies. The first movements of baby's hands are to clutch. Babies are utterly focused on themselves, on their own needs. A newborn baby only knows what it wants and when it wants it. It doesn't matter who you are or what you are doing. It doesn't care how busy or tired you are. When it wants to be fed or changed or held, it will let you know; and it will not stop until you satisfy its needs. Babies are utterly focused on themselves.

³ John 3:2.

⁴ John 3:5-6.

The progress of maturity is to learn to grow out of being self-centered and to realize and meet other's needs and wants. That is how the natural progress works in the physical world. We start off being self-centered and then we learn to share.

But being a new person requires much more than that. Being born anew is to belong to our Lord forever. A retired Presbyterian minister Rev. John Buchanan once shared a memorable story of his ministry. There was time when he baptized a two-year-old boy. After the child had been baptized with water, Rev. Buchanan put his hand on the boy's head and said, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever."

The little boy looked up and responded, "Uh-oh." It was an amusing moment. The congregation laughed. Buchanan wrote, "It was an appropriate response...a stunning theological affirmation." That "Uh-oh" was a recognition that everything had changed, that this boy would never be the same.⁵

What kind of change does it require for a person to be a new person in Christ? I am sure we can mention many different things but if I share just a couple, the first is a new perception. Being a new person requires a new way of seeing things.

An American singer, Amy Grant has a song called "Father's Eyes." It is a wish or a prayer that when other people examine her life, she wishes them to say, "She's got her Father's eyes. Eyes that find the good in things, when good is not around;
Eyes that find the source of help, when help just can't be found;
Eyes full of compassion, seeing every pain;
Knowing what you're going through and feeling it the same.
Just like my Father's eyes."⁶

Jesus saw the world through the eyes of the Father. He had the eyes of compassion and empathy. What would it mean to have such eyes, "the eyes of the Father"?

Ice skating instructor, Elizabeth O'Donnell, puts on a very special ice skating show every year. She specializes in teaching physically and mentally challenged people to ice skate. The first few years after she left the Ice Capades, she began to teach ice skating but she didn't feel challenged in her work. However, she found a new joy and purpose in teaching the joys of ice skating to the blind.

⁵ Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, http://day1.org/3823-the_start_of_the_trail.

⁶ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/amygrant/fatherseyes.html>

She founded the Skating Association for the Blind and Handicapped, which is now known as the “Gliding Stars.” With the help of other skating instructors this organization has taught more than 15,000 people with physical and mental limitations and challenges to ice skate. Every year the students put on a show to share their new skills.⁷

Second, when a person is born again, he become a part of a new family. When you were born into this world, you were born into a family. Just like that, when you are born again, you are born into a new family. You would have a new family.

When Jesus’ mother and his brothers came to visit him, Jesus said, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”⁸

When you experience new birth, you acquire a new family. A sheriff and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Keys, lived over the county jail. One day Mrs. Keys, a kind woman, came down to call her husband.

As she turned back to go upstairs, she heard someone crying. Listening carefully, she found the sound coming from a tiny figure huddled in a dark corner of a cell. As her eyes became used to the darkness, she made out the form of a boy, perhaps eight or nine years old. “Son, what are you doing here?” she called.

Frightened at the voice, the boy, whose name was Charley, turned. After a pause, he came toward Mrs. Keys and saw that she was smiling. Charley poured out his story. In a fit of rage, he had shot a twelve-year-old girl, and he was being held for murder.

“But what of your family?” the sheriff’s wife asked. “Ain’t got none,” he said in a pitiful voice.

In an hour Mrs. Keys had permission from the local judge to move Charley from the cell block to their apartment. In two days, Mrs. Keys turned a frightened, half-animal into a well-dressed, smiling boy.

⁷ <http://glidingstars.org/odonnell.html>.

⁸ Matthew 12:46-50

Soon the Keys' home became his home. At the trial, Charley was sentenced to the reform school. "Can I come back here when I get done?" he asked Mrs. Keys.

"But son, you will want to go on your own," Mrs. Keys replied. "And besides, you wouldn't want to live over a jail."

The boy looked around and said, "It ain't jail, Mrs. Keys. It's home."

The sheriff's wife hugged the boy. With a big smile she said, "I need a son."⁹ That day, Charley, the boy, became her son.

Can you imagine how rewarding it must have been for Mrs. Keys to change the young person's life? How about Elizabeth O'Donnell who gives young skaters, who otherwise could never have the opportunity to shine in front of an audience to become "stars" for a night? Can you imagine how rewarding it would be to you if you could look beyond your own life to invest yourself in others?

Seeing the needs of others, and investing our lives in others are the ways to be and grow as a new person in Christ.

⁹ A. Dudley Dennison M.D., *Shock It To Me Doctor!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 91