

Sermon for Sunday, February 20, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Senior Pastor  
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"BORN--REBORN--THEN WHAT?"

Philippians 3:7-16

Text: "...but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."  
--Philippians 3:13b-14

A man named Nicodemus once came to Jesus by night. He came at night because he was a religious leader and he really didn't want to be seen publically in the presence of Jesus. But Jesus saw right through the man's spiritual problem and said to him, "Nicodemus, you must be born again." Well, that rather puzzled Nicodemus. He had been born once and he did not yet understand what it meant to be born again. So he said to Jesus in some bewilderment, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus gave him an answer that is important to you and me. He said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'you must be born anew.'" And that is important to us because Jesus taught us that not only is a man born physically, but he must also be born again, he must be born spiritually.

If you are here at all this morning, obviously it means you have been born physically. If you are a Christian this morning--if you have confessed your sin and accepted Jesus as your Savior--you have been born again spiritually. It is to you who are born again Christians that I wish to speak this morning. If you have been born--reborn--what then? You see, the Bible tells us that God's will for us goes beyond reborn. In the 4th chapter of Ephesians, the Bible tells us that God wants us to go on to mature spiritual manhood so that "we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro..." (Ephesians 4:13ff) St. Paul once wrote to the Corinthians to make exactly that complaint against them. He said, "And I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but...as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it." And then St. Paul goes on to add sadly, "...and even yet you are not ready..."

I would like to ask you Christians that question this morning. Are you ready for spiritual solid food? Or, are you still a baby Christian who needs milk? The writer of the book of Hebrews once complained, "...by this time you ought to be teachers...(but) you (still) need milk, not solid food." (Hebrews 5:12). And then he adds, "But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice..."

When you were born, you went through certain stages. First there was the infant stage when you were basically helpless and needed someone else to take care of you. But then you became a toddler and learned to walk. Slowly you matured, you learned to talk, to dress yourself, to tie your shoes. One day you went off to school and began the first grade. The years went by and before you knew it you had finished college and began your career. And while you may still have some immaturities, if I asked you where you were in your physical development, you would say, "Well, I am a man (or a woman). No, you didn't stay an infant or a toddler or a child or a youth. You grew up and you matured. But what happened when you were re-born? What happened when you accepted Jesus and were spiritually born again? In the beginning you were a spiritual infant, what the Bible calls a babe in Christ. But where are you now in your spiritual growth and development?

You see, one of the serious problems with us Christians is that many of us never outgrow our spiritual babyhood. In age we may be 40 or 50 or 60, but spiritually

we are still in diapers. And if by some magic this morning all of us could be made to appear in physical form according to where we are in spiritual development, what do you think the sanctuary would look like this morning?! We would be the largest nursery in St. Louis! And if that happened, I'll tell you I'm grateful I've got my robe on!

So, we are born, then in Jesus we are re-born. But the real question at that point becomes, "What then?" Well, St. Paul says we are to grow into mature manhood (Eph. 4:13). Over in Colossians he says he wants to present every Christian "mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). And then in our text for this morning St. Paul says that he strains forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the prize for the upward call of God. Then he says this, "Let those who are mature be thus minded..." (Phil. 3:15). Thus, if we are born, then spiritually reborn, the "what then" means that we should begin to mature--to grow up--to develop as Christians.

Would you like to know how to grow and develop as a Christian? Would you like to know some of the secrets of spiritual maturity? Would you like to know how to get out of your spiritual diapers? Well, first there are two prerequisites. There are two things that you have to have before you can begin to grow spiritually. The first thing you have to have is the Holy Spirit. After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus he spent some forty days with his disciples. At the end of those exciting, wonderful days, Jesus told his disciples that they were to go share with the world that God loved them and that through the cross he forgave them. According to St. John he told them to go feed his sheep. According to St. Luke he told them, "you are witnesses of these things." According to St. Mark he told them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news..." According to St. Matthew he said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." Now that was the instruction the disciples had. You would think that they would take off in all directions to do what Jesus said. You would think that in their excitement and enthusiasm they would begin immediately to obey his command. But they didn't. They didn't because they were not ready. Jesus said to them, "But stay in (Jerusalem) until you are clothed with power from on high" (St. Luke 24:49). And then Jesus explained what he meant. He said, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." And Jesus said, "(then) you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8). So the disciples needed the Holy Spirit.

And did you know that those first Christians didn't make a move until they had the Holy Spirit? The Bible tells us they stayed right there in Jerusalem until the Jewish feast day of Pentecost came. On that day God gave them the Holy Spirit. The Bible says they were all together in one place when suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the place where they were sitting. And the Bible says they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. After that, when they had the power of the Holy Spirit working in their hearts and lives, they did what Jesus told them to do. They went out into the world to tell men about Jesus.

But, you might be thinking, that is fine for those first Christians. After all, they were pretty special and something like that is not for everybody. Well, let's look at the Bible. When St. Peter began to preach about Jesus, the Bible tells us that the people's hearts were cut as he told them about the good news of God's love and forgiveness. And they cried out and asked, "What shall we do?" Do you remember what St. Peter told them? First, he said, "repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins..." But the second thing he added was this, "and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38) So the Holy Spirit is for all believers.

So from the very beginning, it was clear that if a born-again Christian was going to grow he had to have the Holy Spirit working in his heart. That's why St. Paul once met some Christians at Ephesus and asked them about the Holy Spirit. Apparently he sensed something lacking in their Christian experience. Apparently he recognized that somehow these Christians were not growing spiritually, were not maturing into spiritual manhood. So he asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

That means quite simply that the first prerequisite for growing as a Christian demands that we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Would you think that a maturing Christian is one who has love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control? Well, I think so, too. But did you know that the Bible says that those characteristics of the Christian are the fruit of the Spirit? (Galatians 5:22) So if you don't have the Spirit, you can't have the fruit! Without the Holy Spirit, you just don't grow.

The second prerequisite for growing out of spiritual babyhood is a nasty word--a word we don't like. It is the word discipline. You not only have to have the Holy Spirit, you have got to have discipline, you have got to have dedication. Some of you football fans may remember several years ago when the quarterback of the Baltimore Colts was injured. An aging reserve quarterback named Earl Morrall came off the bench to lead them to a championship, and on to the Superbowl. Someone asked him what it took to be number one and this is how he answered. "I think it's the same for a whole career or just one season, and I can wrap it up in one word: dedication. Working every day as if the whole game depended on you, even when you know you're not going to start...being willing to pay the price every day can pay off, and I suppose that's true of any kind of job you've got to do--whether it's playing football selling suits, or running a business."

Well, that's a good description of what it takes to be a winning Christian, one who is growing into manhood. It takes dedication, it takes discipline, it takes working every day as if the whole game depended on you, it takes being willing to pay the price every day. Isn't that what the writer of Hebrews said? He wrote, "But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice..." (Heb. 5:12).

How hard are you working at being a Christian? In our Scripture for this morning St. Paul uses the image of an athlete in training, running to win a prize. He says, "...straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God.." Are we straining at being a Christian? I play a lot of sports and I know what straining means for an athlete. I can see a player straining every muscle, the sweat drenching his face, reaching out to the limit of his endurance, Are you working like that for Christian maturity?

The fact is, too many of us want our Christian growth and Christian life to come easily or automatically. We don't want anything to be hard or to cost effort. But listen to St. Paul as he describes his effort to grow in Jesus. He writes, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (I. Cor. 9:25, 26).

That is a very vivid picture of a man working at discipline. Until you and I as Christians are ready to do that--to work hard, to strain forward to what lies ahead, to beat our desires of the flesh into submission, we will never get far beyond the spiritual diaper stage.

No, it is a struggle to grow that goes on as long as we live. Many of you have heard of Corrie ten Boom, the great Christian lady who was put in a German concentration camp. There she suffered greatly because she tried to help Jews who were being persecuted. If you have not read her book, Tramp for the Lord, I recommend it to you. In that book she writes, "It would seem, after having been a Christian for almost 80 years, that I would no longer do ugly things that need forgiving. Yet I am constantly doing things to others to cause me to have to go back and ask their forgiveness. I...break the circle of God's perfect love." (P. 169) Yes, we are in training for life.

Would you like to know how to grow and develop as a Christian--to know some of the secrets of spiritual maturity? Next Sunday I will share with you some of those secrets. But before you begin you see, there are two prerequisites--you must be filled with the Holy Spirit and you must exercise discipline. You can be filled with the Spirit if by faith you ask God to give you His Spirit in power. And you can exercise discipline by a deliberate act of your will whereby you surrender control of your life to that Spirit. Born--reborn--then what? That depends on you! Are you ready to begin?

Well, that's a good description of what it takes to be a winning Christian, one who is growing into manhood. It takes dedication, it takes discipline, it takes working every day as if the whole game depended on you, it takes being willing to pay the price every day. Let's that was the writer of Hebrews said, "The whole food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice..." (Heb. 5:12).

How hard are you working at being a Christian? In our Scripture for this morning St. Paul uses the image of an athlete in training, running to win a prize. He says, "...straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God." Are we straining at being a Christian? I play a lot of sports and I know what straining means for an athlete. I can see a player straining every muscle, the sweat dripping from his face, reaching out to the limit of his endurance, and you working like that for Christian maturity?

The fact is, too many of us want our Christian growth and Christian life to come easily or automatically. We don't want anything to be hard or to cost effort. It is to St. Paul to be disciplined, the effort to grow in Jesus. He writes, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we do it to receive an imperishable one. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I control my body and subdue it just as if I were competing to obtain a crown that will not fade away." (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

That is a very vivid picture of a man working at discipline. Will you and I as Christians be ready to do that--to work hard, to strain forward to what lies ahead, to have our bodies of the flesh subordinated, we will not get far beyond the spiritual diaper stage.