

BEING BORN AGAIN IS PAINFUL!

Jesus tells us that if we want to be saved we have to be born again.

He said to Nicodemus: *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”* (John 3:3)

So what exactly does “born again” mean?

What is it like to be born again?

Well, what’s it like to be born the first time?

We have a pretty good idea of what childbirth entails for the mother, but what do you suppose it’s like to be born from the infant’s point of view?

Imagine that you are suspended, weightlessly, in water and darkness.

No light, no sense of heat or cold—the fluid in which you’re suspended is exactly the same temperature as your body.

You are not hungry—you're being perfectly fed.

You don't even need to breathe—that's being done for you.

The only sound is a faint, regular soothing heartbeat.

You are completely comfortable in a perfectly controlled environment.

Then, all of a sudden, the water in which you are suspended rushes out and violent forces begin to toss you around.

The walls around you close in and you are forced into an impossibly narrow tunnel where tremendous pressure begins to build up.

The compression becomes so great that your skull is actually bent out of shape.

The pain is intense and it goes on for hours.

Then, suddenly, you are thrust out into blinding light, loud noises, cold air and the leaden pull of gravity.

Your chest begins to heave as your lungs desperately try to pull in air.

Someone swats your rear end to get you breathing.

You gasp and begin to cry.

Congratulations! You have just experienced normal childbirth and everyone is delighted to see you!

Being born has to be a painful, frightening business.

If we had the choice, I suspect we'd choose to stay in the womb and avoid the experience altogether.

That's probably why labor is induced in the mother, not the child!

And it's no different with spiritual birth.

Being born again involves pain.

That's why most people would rather avoid it.

They'd rather stay asleep in their sins than pass through the narrow way, be awakened to the blinding light of truth and learn the gravity of their situation.

Knowing this, Satan specializes in keeping us in peace so that we will stay asleep.

He gradually dulls our conscience until we cease to feel the painful prick of guilt.

He soothes us with the notion that we are less sinful than many others and that God doesn't take our sins all that seriously anyway.

He even suggests that the idea of sin itself is outmoded—maybe even harmful, damaging to our “self-esteem.”

He haunts us with the question: What if there is no God, no devil, no sin, no consequences to sin?

What if there is only me in this world and whatever I can make of it?

And bit by bit we nod off and finally fall asleep to dream that there are neither causes nor consequences to my being: that I exist only to seek pleasure and moderate pain and that heaven is an illusion and hell is a myth.

I am safe in a castle of dreams and the door is guarded by the lord of the castle.

“Pleasant dreams,” he murmurs.

“I have plans for you, but you needn’t concern yourself with them right now. Just slumber on and enjoy your dreams.”

As the old saying goes, *“Satan keeps his palace in peace.”*

Then—suddenly—there is a commotion—a violent noise from somewhere else in the castle.

An enemy, much stronger than the lord of the castle is battering down the gates.

The gates cannot withstand the power of his attack and they crumble.

He binds the strong man and throws open the blinds!

Light pours in and jars me awake.

Suddenly you are dragged outside the castle into new and strange territory.

Glancing back, you see the horrible place you used to inhabit.

He forces you to look into a mirror and see yourself for the first time as you really are and you are filled with self-loathing.

Part of you desperately wants to go back to sleep and to the dream out of which you were torn, but another part of you entertains the strange new notion that you would rather be awake than asleep; that you'd rather see clearly than be blind; that you'd rather know the truth than doze in delusion and that you'd rather go ahead to wherever this strange new leader is leading you.

And then your new leader turns and says to you: *“When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils.”*

Jesus is the stronger man who has invaded Satan's palace and plundered his possessions.

And you and I are His possessions because we were bought at a price—a huge price—which He paid for us.

We were prisoners of war and he has sprung us free..

Not only has He freed us—he has cleansed us and healed us and ***made us whole again.***

We were blind and He has given us eyes to see.

We were deaf and He has given us ears to hear.

We were mute and He was given us tongues to speak.

We were living a lie and He has given us knowledge of the truth.

But part of that truth is the truth about yourself—and it's not necessarily pleasant.

You're not only a sinner—you're the worst of the lot.

If Paul called himself “chief of sinners,” what does that make you?

You want things the Lord hasn't seen fit to give you: more money in the bank, more respect from people at work,

more gratitude from people you've helped—you deserve to be ***appreciated***.

You like to rehearse in your mind ways to prove to people who don't agree with you that YOU are right and THEY are wrong.

Down deep you know that are a hypocritical, pretentious, conniving, angry, spoiled child, and you think, *“If this is reality, I'll pass. I'd rather be asleep! I'll take the dreams I had over the stuff you're showing me!”*

And then the terrifying yet somehow strangely gratifying prospect dawns on you: You can't go back!

You've been bought and paid for and you now belong to the one who purchased you.

You are His possession. Christ has snatched you from the jaws of Satan and you now belong to Him.

And deep down, you wouldn't have it any other way because this is what you were born for—and reborn for.

This is why He brought you forth into his marvelous light: the reason He wants to show you your sins is so that you can cast your sins upon Him.

Not just your past sins; not just your present sins; not just your future sins—ALL your sins.

He wants to show you how sinful you are so that He can show you how merciful He is.

He fills you with so much of His love that it overflows to others.

God wants ALL of you—the good, the bad and the ugly.

He wants to take upon himself the secret thoughts of your darkened heart.

He wants to take upon himself the resentment you feel toward friends who have succeeded where you've failed.

He wants to take upon himself your self-reliance that lets you down time and time again.

He wants to take upon Himself the awful anxiety that plagues you about what will happen to your family if you should no longer be able to provide for them.

HE WANTS IT! HE WANTS IT ALL!

And bit by bit—which is usually the way we give it to Him—bit by bit you begin to experience the freedom from sin that is God’s greatest gift to mankind.

Jesus has broken the power of sin over you!

This epiphany comes from two places: from the knowledge of your sinfulness and from knowledge of his grace.

“For sin shall not be master over you, because you are not under law, but under grace.” (Rom. 6:14)

Oh but it’s not easy to do.

It’s tempting to minimize the problem by comparing ourselves to others who are worse than we are.

To dwell on our moral superiority to the majority of mankind.

To nurse thoughts of all the good we have done: shouldn’t it count for something?

But none of that helps; none of it brings us comfort.

I believe that every Christian secretly harbors down deep in his heart a memory of his original birthplace—Satan's palace.

And however much he may hate the thought of it, it still occasionally exudes a pleasant aroma—the lure of leaving the battlefield and returning to peaceful slumber.

Being reborn is a painful, lifelong affair.

The battle is fierce and the warfare goes on and on.

When I reach this point, there is a verse from one of our hymns that I call to mind.

The hymn is "*For All the Saints*," and the verse goes like this:

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song;
And hearts are brave again and arms are strong:
Allelujah! Allelujah!

Amen.

