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Sermon

What's My Ancestry? Who do you think you are?

John 3:1-17; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; Genesis 15:1-6

12/3/2017

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Nicodemus came quietly by night to see Jesus. He was a senior Pharisee and learned scholar. Indeed, Jesus called him the Teacher of Israel which was a high office. It starts off positively. But we never hear what he intended to ask. He acknowledges the miraculous signs of Jesus and that Jesus has come from God. At that point, Jesus takes over the conversation with his agenda or maybe the answer to the question which Nicodemus is about to ask or needed to ask.

And what he says is that you cannot see the Kingdom of God naturally. You won't see the rule of God through your own efforts. There has to be a fundamental change to make that possible; you must be born again.

"Born again!", Nicodemus exclaims, "how can that be?" They rapidly clarify that Jesus is not talking about a physical rebirth. It is something else. He talks about being born of water and the Spirit and goes on to say (v6), "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

Now there is much debate about the phrase, "Being born of water." The two main ideas are that it refers to natural birth or to baptism.

If it is baptism, it emphasizes that baptism is a requirement of the Christian life which is true. However, we know that at that time, the baptism being offered was a baptism of repentance. Much later when Paul met some people who knew only of John's baptism, he clarified that they needed Christian baptism into the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. So it was quite a leap to expect Nicodemus to know about a form of baptism which had not even then started.

I favour the interpretation that 'born of water' refers to natural birth, because Jesus said (v5-6), "... no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

It appears to me that these are parallel statements: "born of water" = "flesh gives birth to flesh"; "born of the Spirit" = "the Spirit gives birth to spirit".

So he is talking about physical and spiritual dimensions. You must be born and be born again. Two births.

Regardless, of whether born of water refers to baptism or natural birth, what Jesus is saying here ties in well with last week's epistle reading from Romans 5.

Romans 5:12 “When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.” (New Living Translation).

Paul argued there that Adam’s sin affected us all. We are regarded as part of Adam when he sinned and guilty with him. Furthermore, we inherit a sinful tendency from our forefather so that we do actually sin ourselves as well.

We can understand an illustration based on DNA inheritance. We inherit physical characteristics from our parents. We receive desirable characteristics and also some undesirable. You may look like your mother or father – which may be a good thing or not depending on your taste.

A friend of mine was adopted. In his forties, he located his birth family and was amazed at how alike he was to them in mannerisms and other non-physical ways. Another example is genetic diseases which are passed on from parents to their children.

In the same way, we can think of the sin principle in us which we inherit spiritually. It makes us tend towards rebellion and self-will against God. The result is that all sin and so all die.

Simon Ponsonby, an English theologian who spoke at New Wine a few years ago, writes,¹

Adam is father and font. He is the head of our race. His DNA of sin has been imputed and imparted to us. I found myself noticing a character weakness in one of my sons that I recognized I have, and it’s a propensity my dad has. I don’t think it is simply an environmentally learned thing. We inadvertently receive both the good and the not-so-good from our genetic ancestors.

Paul says that our propensity to sin is not simply an act of rebellion and volition, but a condition we have because our ancestor Adam gave it to us.

He continues,

The good news is that we are not tied to our ancestry – it can be ‘genetically modified’, so to speak, spiritually re-engineered. Natural born-to-die sinners after Adam can be spiritually reborn after Christ into righteousness and life. We are imputed with Adam’s unrighteous DNA at [natural] birth, ... and, ... we are imputed with Christ’s righteous DNA at our new birth, born again to holiness.

This is the process, the rebirth, which Jesus is talking about to Nicodemus. Jesus has told Nicodemus that for anyone to enter the Kingdom of God (that is be saved) he must be born again of the Spirit – or we might say be given new spiritual life from God.

In response, to Nicodemus’ amazement, Jesus strongly affirmed his authority to teach of such things:

“I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe our testimony. ¹² But if you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. John 3:11-13 (NLT)

In other words he is the only person who has started from heaven and come to earth – he knows about spiritual matters in a way no one else ever has – this is yet another of his claims of divinity.

He continued by saying he would be lifted up (on the cross) and all who believe in him would have eternal life. Believing in Jesus is to put your trust in him to save you. It is not mere intellectual assent, but it is trust.

He likens this to the incident in the wilderness wanderings when the Israelites were plagued by biting snakes.² The solution God gave Moses was to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. When people were bitten, if they looked to the bronze snake they would be healed of the snake bite.

It seems an odd comparison to us, but here is an idea which may have resonance for you. We have heard already of being born again to move us out of the sinful inheritance of Adam into a righteousness from Christ.

¹ Ponsonby, S., 2013, *God is for Us*, Monarch Books, Oxford, p173

² Numbers 21

We could like that sin principle in us to the poison of the metaphorical snake bite from when the serpent tempted Adam and Eve. Look to Jesus and we are freed from that poison.

The famous verse that follows is directly connected. Looking to Jesus as he is lifted up is explained further in this verse 16. For God so loved the world.

God loved the world – this is the Father from eternity and throughout time loving (desiring the best for) the world. The world is not the earth, not the animals but those able to put faith in him. He loved people - not the evil world systems - but individual humans. He loved us so much that he gave his most precious one and only Son. One and only is otherwise translated “only-begotten.” Jesus is the only-begotten son of God. We may through him be adopted as sons, but his essential and eternal nature is Son of God.

God the Father gave God the Son to be lifted up on the cross to die so that those who believe in Him, who trust his death and resurrection to be sufficient to save them, these ones shall not perish but have eternal life.

To perish here is to be condemned in the eternal judgement which is the opposite of eternal life.

This God-man who had come down from heaven came not to condemn but to save the world. But this is not universalism where everyone is saved. Those who believe in him are saved and the chapter continues to make it quite clear that those who do not believe are condemned.

This is the answer to the inheritance of sinfulness which Paul observed in all mankind from Adam. But in today's epistle from Romans 4, Paul is arguing about inheritance from Abraham. Inheritance was an important matter for the Jews and it is important throughout the Bible.

Besides the inheritance from Adam, there was for the Jew and inheritance of righteousness from Abraham.

We heard the account of the call of Abram from Genesis 12. We should also hear of the time which resulted in saving faith for him:

Genesis 15:1-6 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." ² But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." ⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." ⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Paul's argument is that Abraham was not justified by keeping the Law of Moses which had not yet been given. It did not come from his good works. It came from this faith. God made a promise to him and he believed it and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

God was prepared to take the trust Abraham showed in him as the basis to make a transfer of legal righteousness to his account. The metaphor is from accounting.

If you go onto a benefit or pension and it is paid by bank transfer, value is transferred to your bank account. If you were in overdraft, when you go and look the overdraft has gone and you have some credit. It is there. It is now yours to spend. In the same way, God makes a transfer from Jesus' fund of righteousness to your spiritual account of your standing before him so your unrighteousness is neutralized and overwhelmed with his good credit.

Paul reasons that the promise to Abraham and his offspring includes those who are of the faith of Abraham. Those who, like him, believe what God says to them become his heirs too.

Thus Paul writing to Jews and Gentiles in Rome can say (v16), "He is the father of us all." God sees us as spiritual descendants of Abraham when we trust him.

So which is to be your inheritance? Are you inheriting from Adam or have you been reborn and given a new inheritance from Christ? All God asked of us is that we believe in Jesus Christ. He voluntarily died for our sins.

He paid the price. He conquered death by rising again from the dead. As you choose to believe that and ask him to save you and direct you, you are born again, born from above, born of the Spirit.

At that point righteousness is credited to you, as Jesus who knew no sin became sin, so you might become the righteousness of God.³

At that point, you become an heir of Abraham and the promise of blessings and inheritance that were given to him.

Have you taken that step? What prevents you? It is the most important decision any of us can make – our eternity hangs upon it.

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³ 1 Cor 5:21