

Birth Out of Death

Romans 9:9

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

"Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray for him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." (James 5:14-15) That is what God's children do with sickness. They don't rush out for a doctor. They don't rush to the other extreme and say, "I will not use a doctor." They first exercise faith in God's promise to heal. And that is the normal pattern. If on an odd occasion God does not heal, then they ask the Holy Spirit to show them what ugliness of self or what new beauty of Christ is causing the delay. But normally God will either heal directly or he will heal through a doctor, or with rare saints like Paul, he will ask the person to walk on in glorious victory despite the thorn in the flesh which they continue to suffer.

Now, that is God's normal way for his children. Those of us who are children of God, who are born of the Spirit, who regard ourselves as people who have a personal relationship with our Creator -- we are expected to walk in a day-to-day experience of God's promises being fulfilled in us -- except on those rare occasions when God is trying to show us something about our attitude to him that is not right.

There are some of us who have experienced the opposite of that. For some of us the fulfillment of God's promises is a rare exception rather than the norm or the rule in our lives. There are some of us who hear that kind of promise and think, "That has never happened to me! I have never seen that occur in my life." If you are in that position, if you find you do not experience as a normal rule the promises of God being fulfilled, then perhaps you should question whether you are really a child of God or whether you are simply a nominal Christian.

We have paralleled the situation of a person like that with the things Paul said about the Israelites in Romans 9. Paul explained that the Israelites were descendants of Abraham, and therefore inherited the promises which had been given to Abraham, promises of a special land of their own, promises of prosperity, promises of a special international status. Paul said, "Look at them -- under the heel of Rome, impoverished by the high taxes which they have to pay to the military occupying power, and their children not having special status internationally. Does this mean that the promises of God failed? No!"

The fact is, that the descendants of Abraham were split in two, and it was only the descendants of Abraham who came through his son Isaac that were to enter into those special promises that God had given. Paul pointed out that the other son, Ishmael, did not receive the same promises. Ishmael was the son that Abraham had by his wife's maid. God promised Abraham, "You will have descendants as the sand upon the seashore." Abraham and Sarah, his wife, got impatient and said, "It is about time this is to come about. We have no children." Sarah said, "Why don't you take Hagar my maid to bed and have a son by her and then we will have descendants as God promised?" Ishmael was the result of that illegitimate union and God refused to extend his promises to Ishmael. He said, "No, Abraham, only your descendants that come through Isaac, your son, will receive my promises."

Isaac, of course, was the son that was born about 14 years later when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. God gave Isaac, by a miraculous birth, as a gift to them. God said, "It is the sons and daughters that you have through Isaac that will receive the promises that I made originally to Abraham."

Some of you have wondered, "What about Ishmael? Does that mean that God predestined Ishmael to be rejected?" Loved ones, the answer is in Genesis 21:20. "And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow." So Ishmael became an archer and God was with him. It didn't mean that Ishmael and all his descendants were rejected by God so that they could not be his children. It simply means that the special privileges that God had promised to Abraham of a special land, a special status internationally among the nations, and the special privilege of having God's Son born in their race -- those special privileges that God extended to Abraham and to the Israelites and to the Jews -- were not to be extended to Ishmael and his descendants. But it didn't mean that Ishmael himself could not be a child of God. It simply meant that he and his descendants would not have the special national privileges that God gave to the Jews.

In other words, not being an Israelite was not a matter of salvation, it was a matter of not being involved in the special function that God had for Israel in our world. But it is different with the spiritual Israel. We who are children of God and who are born of the Spirit are the spiritual Israel. We who have a personal relationship with our Maker are the spiritual Israel. Now, loved ones, we are saying that if you are not a member of the spiritual Israel, God's promises of life forever and of a close friendship with him that lasts throughout eternity do not extend to you if you are not a member of the spiritual Israel.

In other words, not being a member of the Israelite nation does not necessarily mean that you will not live with God forever. It simply means that you will not take part in the special function that God has for Israel in this world. Not being a member of the Body of Christ or the spiritual Israel, not being a child of God or not having a close, personal friendship with our Maker -- that means you will not receive the promises -- not only of healing -- but the promises of life forever in the presence of our Maker.

What we have been saying is, just as God had every right to choose Israel and his descendants as the ones who would receive the special privileges of a special land of their own and special international status -- and as he had the right to reject Ishmael and his descendants for that -- so God has the same right to determine the conditions and qualifications for those of us who are to receive his promises of life forever and his own friendship and his own presence in our lives and the fulfillment of his own promises.

The nature of that choice he made -- because he did choose -- was to select a certain group of people with certain qualifications to whom he will make his promises of life everlasting real. The nature of that promise is stated clearly in today's verse: Romans 9:9. The qualifications are clearly outlined. This is the nature of God's choice. This is the basis on which a person becomes a child of God. I'm thinking of those of us who may feel that God's promises are appealing but who say, "I have never seen that promise of healing in my life, and there are many promises that I am actually a bit skeptical of. I do think I'm a Christian, but I must admit the promises of God are not normally fulfilled in my life. It is the exception rather than the rule for me." I'm thinking especially of you, loved ones, and I'm trying to outline to you what the basis of becoming a child of God is so that these promises can be made real to you.

Romans 9:9: "For this is what the promise said, 'About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son.'" That is the basis on which a person becomes a child of God. The first Greek word in the verse is "epangelias" and it means "promise". Grammatically we can't put it there in our English translation, but God put it as the first word in the verse to emphasize to us that the basis of becoming a child of God is God doing what he said he would do. It is not what we do. It is God doing what he said he would do.

It was what God could do that made Isaac's birth possible. Actually, Abraham was in his 80's and Sarah was 10 years younger, and they couldn't do much in the way of having a child. When they did try to do something, God still rejected what they did. God rejected Abraham's attempt to bring about God's promises through Hagar, Sarah's maid. So even when they did attempt it, God rejected it.

Now it is the same with us, loved ones. All our efforts will never make us children of God. Every attempt that you and I make to make ourselves children of God will fail. We are just like Abraham. He decided that he couldn't do anything with this old Sarah, so he thought, "I'll take this younger woman and maybe with my own effort I can produce what God wants me to produce."

We are the same. We think in our own minds, "What God wants is good people. So if I can make myself good then I will be his child. I'll have these promises fulfilled in my life." And so we do the same thing Abraham did, we stir up all our human effort and try to be good. Isn't that true? Probably all of us, even those of us who actually are children of God, have a sneaking feeling that what makes us children of God is being good.

Do you remember the people that Jesus was most critical of? Do you remember who they were? Do you remember the people he called "a generation of vipers"? They were the Pharisees. They were the humanists who were trying to live by the Golden Rule. Now would you listen to that, loved ones, because we are so quick to think that Son of Sam [a serial killer] and everything evil is so far over on that side, and we are so much further on this side, so much closer to God, that it is hard for us to realize that the people that Jesus criticized most were the Pharisees, the humanists of his day, who were trying to live by the Golden Rule.

Why does he criticize them? It is in Luke 18:9: "He also told this parable to some who trusted themselves." That is why Jesus criticized them -- because they trusted in themselves and in their own ability to produce at least a little of what God wanted from them. Abraham thought, "He promised me a son miraculously, but maybe if I produce a son at least by Hagar, maybe that will be a little of what he wants." That is why Jesus was an antagonist of the Pharisees, because they trusted in themselves and in their own ability to be a little bit like what God wanted.

That comes close to home. How many of us like to think we, in our own power, can produce a little of what God wants? Do you see that is what Jesus opposed? He opposed any feeling in men or women that they, by trusting in themselves, could be a little bit like what God wanted. Do you realize the cause of the fall in the Garden of Eden? Have you ever thought about it?

The fall was our rebellion against God, our determination to live without him. Do you know what caused it? We talk about apples and apple trees, but apples had nothing to do with it. Some of us who are a bit Freudian talk about intercourse and think that was what it was. But if we don't fall into those traps, all of us have no doubt at all it was that we wanted to be bad boys and girls, and God rejected us. Well, loved ones, it isn't.

Let's look back at it in Genesis 3:5, and it wasn't to do with badness at all. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." That seems pretty good. You will be "like God" -- surely that is what God wanted. In other words, we parted from our Maker because we wanted to be like God. Not because we wanted to be bad, not because we wanted to be evil, not because we wanted to do all kinds of dirty things, but because we wanted to be like God. We wanted to be like God through knowing the difference between good and evil. In other words, through our own understanding of what good was, and through our own understanding of what evil was, we, by our own efforts, would be like God. The whole reason for our fall out of God's presence was our desire to be good on our own.

Now that explains the somewhat mysterious comment that Jesus makes in Mark 10:18. Remember, the young man comes and says, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Do you see that? "Good" is "God-ness". Anything that isn't God is not really good. Good is God himself and his Spirit and his life, and there is no goodness apart from himself. That is why Jesus says, "You are saying that I'm not the Son of God, that I'm not uniquely attached to the Planner of the world, and yet you are calling me good. Why do you do that when you know yourself that there is no goodness apart from God? If I'm good, it must be because I'm part of God."

Now you see the trap we have fallen into. We keep talking about moral good and moral bad. Actually, those things are beside the point. When God talks about good, he is talking about anything that is his own life, that is dependent upon him alone. And independent goodness is as bad as independent badness in God's eyes because it is a total misunderstanding of what good and bad is. God is actually not primarily concerned with good and bad -- he isn't. He is concerned with whether you depend upon him or you don't depend upon him -- whether you know him or whether you don't know him -- whether you love him or don't love him. He is concerned about that -- and only his life, therefore, can produce real goodness. Any goodness that you and I produce is just imitation of that life. It is taking the qualities of it and trying to reproduce them without the actual life itself. It is counterfeit, unreal, and it is as much sin as murder is sin.

How then do we enter into the promise of God? How do we become children of God, loved ones? By doing what Abraham did, by finally looking the facts straight in the eye. You find Abraham doing that in Romans 4:18: "In hope he believed against hope". You see, there are two hopes there: "In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, 'So shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."

In verse 19 Abraham looked at things as they really were. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead, because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. He looked at his own body, a hundred years of age, and thought, "I can't do it." He looked at Sarah (who was 90) and thought, "She can't do it." He looked at the facts as they were -- and then he gave up human hope.

Human hope is what keeps a lot of us out of God -- honestly, it is. Human hope is looking at the probability in the light of human circumstances and hoping in the light of that. Abraham stopped

that. He looked at the human possibilities, saw no hope there and he gave up that human hope. Then he hoped with divine hope against the human hope. Divine hope is a sure confidence that God will do what he promises. And Abraham hoped with that kind of divine hope.

So the first step for you if you are in this situation is to look the facts straight in the eye. Look at the kind of person that Jesus will save. In Matthew 9:13, Jesus, at the end of his discussion of the people who have no need of a physician says, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Look at yourself straight in the eye and see that Jesus can do nothing with a person who does not regard himself or herself as a sinner. Look at yourself precisely as God sees you.

Loved ones, I'd like you to look at Romans 7:18 because it is so strong. This is precisely as God sees you, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." That is how God sees you. There is nothing good in you, that is, in your flesh. "In your flesh" means on your own.

There is nothing good in you as far as our Maker is concerned. You can say to me, "But, brother, you should just see what I give to the United Fund. You should see how kind I am to my parents. You should see how patient I am at times with the kids in class. You should see that there is good in me." Loved ones, there may be moral good, there may be good in the world's eyes, but God himself knows that there is no goodness apart from his life. If you live in your flesh, on your own, independent of him, then there is no good in you. There is no good thing in you at all. If you say to me, "Well, what about those acts of kindness that I do? What about the generosity that is in my nature? What about the kind of love that I show to my colleagues at work?"

Loved ones, do you know what God says about it? "All our righteousness is as filthy rags." (Isaiah 64:6) So all the righteousness that you and I produce by our own efforts is self-righteousness. It is righteousness that we produce by dint of our own strong wills, but it is not goodness as God counts goodness, because goodness is "God-ness". The greatest error that you and I have made in Christendom is to spell God with two "o's" and spell the devil without a "d". We have made God an abstraction called "good". We have made the devil an abstraction called evil, and we think when we avoid the evil and we are good, we are what God wants. We are not. We are still in the position that Eve was in in the Garden of Eden when she wanted to be like God and wanted to be good independent of God.

Loved ones, the first step is to see yourself and myself for what we are -- independent producers of goodness at times and badness at times. But it doesn't matter whether we are good or bad if we live independent of God. If we live apart from a personal friendship with him and a love of him, we are in sin -- and the only way to remedy sin is for us to experience death. That is the only way. Sin has to experience death. That is why God said, "The wages of sin is death". (Romans 6:23) It is the only way to destroy sin -- death. That is why the Father sent Jesus, his Son.

You may say, "Why is that true?" Because, loved ones, your miserable, sinful self is the squirmiest, slimiest, slipperiest serpent that you could ever attempt to grasp -- it is! Romans 8:7 says that "The mind of the flesh is enmity against God; it will not submit to God's law, neither indeed can it." That is true. Your miserable old self will keep on producing a little prayer, just so it can stay alive inside you and get its own way. The only way for that to be eliminated from your life is for it to be destroyed. The only step that is real for a person who wants to become a child of God, who wants to be born again is to come to Jesus and say, "Lord Jesus, will you take these filthy rags

that I have been showing off to everybody? Will you take these little acts of goodness that are all mixed up with myself and my own egotism? Lord, will you make this self that has existed so long inside me pleading that it was doing good? Will you crucify it with yourself, Lord, so that all my good acts and all the goodness in me is destroyed with you as well as all the badness in me and all the bad acts?"

Only in that way will you come to the place where a new person can be born inside you and where the same Holy Spirit that governed Jesus' life will govern yours. Only in that way will you pass over the river Jordan from Egypt to the promised land joining with all those people who are crying, "The good that I would, I cannot do, and the evil I hate is the very thing I do. The law of God is being fulfilled in me, who walks not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

But you have to be real about yourself. It is the only hope. If you think you can keep on churning it up so that you will get to a degree of goodness that will qualify you to become a child of God, you are involved in a lost cause, because it is that very attempt to produce that goodness yourself without actually going through the death with Jesus on the cross that is the heart of sin.

I don't think you are any different from me. I think I'm a rat and was a rat, but I don't think that you are any better than me. I think you are just as subtle, just as clever at obtaining your own independent way as I was. You need Jesus' death for that old self just as much as I did. Loved ones, that is the first step -- be real about yourself, pull away all the veils, take off the rose-tinted spectacles and see that you are gross. You are gross! You are a selfish, miserable, "good" monster! But you are an independent monster that wants to get its own way and wants to do anything as long as you can remain independent of your dear Father in heaven.

Loved ones, once you have seen that -- if you really look at it -- you will see that there is nothing less than death that will take care of that. Will you go to Jesus and ask him that he, through his Holy Spirit, show you what you have to be willing in your life to experience -- that death with him that will destroy that old self and will release you into newness of life, a new life, where it is possible at last not to keep excusing yourself by saying, "But I'm only a sinner, you know." There are lots of us that misinterpret the whole gospel and say, "You are right, brother, God only saves sinners, and I'm going to keep on being a sinner to the end of my life so that he will keep on saving me."

You will part from those people, those humanists who pretend they are Christians, and you will come into that group of princes and princesses who say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me", because they have experienced a supernatural regeneration through crucifixion with Christ and not just a human-induced reformation through their own will power. That is what God wants for you.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we know from our dear friends and from others that what brings shame to you is those who call themselves your children and who do not practice what they preach. We know that comes about because we try to be good on our own. Lord, we see that goodness is not a matter of moral action. Goodness is primarily a matter of being connected with the Source of goodness through a submission that is total to you and to your Holy Spirit. Lord, we see that all of our goodness is as filthy rags. So, Lord Jesus, we ask you to bring us to death with you -- whatever that costs. Blessed Holy Spirit, will you bring us to a complete death of our own abilities and of our own self in Jesus on Calvary. And then, would you begin to produce in us, the fulfillment of the Law by

giving us his life and his Spirit. We ask this, our Father, that we might at last live in victory as you intended us by your power and for your glory. Amen.