

Really Happy New Year ----Berlin 1-4-26

HAPPY NEW YEAR

Happy New Year!

Don't you love new things?

The smell of a brand new car,

. . . the feel of a new high quality bath towel,

. . . the beauty of a freshly mown lawn

. . . A landscape covered by freshly-fallen snow

. . . Have you held a new baby recently? Whether the wet and messy bundle of new life that just emerged from the womb or the cleaned up and powdered baby in following days or weeks, the encounter with newness is exciting!

START ALL OVER?

On the other hand, do you ever wish you could *start all over*?

--A project has become far more complex and bigger than you expected.

--A plan has gotten off track and seems to be turning out all wrong.

--A relationship was once like the fulfillment of your dreams, but now has become a burden to you, a relationship you wish you could flee. . . . There are times in marriage counseling where a couple with 15-20 years of up and down painful history realizes things are bad today because 15 or 20 years ago we started out in the wrong direction and now we need a total reboot.

--For some, life itself has become so rigorous and burdensome that it feels irreparable—and looking back seems to uncover negativity all along the way.

--Do you wish you could start all over?

I recently ran across a poem. Louisa Fletcher Tarkington-**The Land of Beginning Again**

I wish there were some wonderful place

Called the Land of Beginning Again,

Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all our poor, selfish griefs
Could be dropped, like a shabby old coat, at the door
And never put on again.
Wouldn't that be great. But it's only a wish . . . or is it?

JOHN 3

Look at a scripture with me in **John 3**. This was a remarkable event that occurred just as Jesus was early into his earthly ministry, but he was already making waves. He had performed amazing miracles. He had challenged the status quo in the Temple where *doing business* was displacing the *worship of God*. Religious leaders were angry and beginning their quest to get rid of this young upstart.

But there was one leader, a prominent Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was not ready to just pass him off. He chose to make it very personal. In the evening, when most people are settling into their homes, Rabbi Nicodemus, went to where young Rabbi Jesus and his disciples were settling down. Such visits among established rabbis may have been common. But THIS was risky for Nicodemus: For a ranking leader to visit any little-known rabbi-wannabe was culturally inappropriate. But to visit Jesus, the promising miracle-worker, the disturber of the temple market—very risky!!! But he wanted to know what this was all about. Jesus welcomed him in and Nicodemus spoke,

RABBI, WE KNOW THAT YOU ARE A TEACHER WHO HAS COME FROM GOD. FOR NO ONE COULD PERFORM THE MIRACULOUS SIGNS YOU ARE DOING IF GOD WERE NOT WITH HIM.

“Rabbi” ---That is a title of respect that was amazing! No pharisee would so honor Jesus! But he goes further, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Do you feel the ground shaking? This is like the Pope sending a special delegate to your preacher, saying, “Warren, We in the Vatican have been watching you and we are really interested in your thoughts about the direction of the Roman Catholic Church!” I could imagine Warren scratching his head, “Say WHAT???” But not Jesus!

I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN, HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

His reply to the distinguished visitor is puzzling: "I'm telling you the truth: Unless a person is **born again**, there is no way that he can see the **Kingdom of God**."

Where did THAT come from? Who said anything about the K of G? Remember what was happening in Jerusalem. . . . Jesus knew that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been preparing the way for Jesus with a persistent message: "Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Nicodemus had undoubtedly heard about that message, too. But Jesus twists it just a bit. Instead of simply saying "Repent" he said "You must be born again."

As a very well-educated man, Nicodemus certainly knew about figures of speech, but he seems to be blown away by Jesus' words, so he falls back on a literal interpretation:

HOW CAN A MAN BE BORN WHEN HE IS OLD? SURELY HE CANNOT ENTER A SECONDTIME INTO HIS MOTHER'S WOMB TO BE BORN?

"Now wait a minute! Look at me. I'm a full-grown man! Are you trying to tell me that I could somehow get back inside the womb of my mother and be B O R N again? I think Jesus smiled at that, brushed off the silliness of the question, and added,

"Seriously, Unless one is born of the water and the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God."

UNLESS A MAN IS BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT, HE CANNOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Now, these words and the ones that follow are really heavy theology that I would love to talk about. Both in many church circles and in many political circles, people talk too flippantly about being "Born Again." It is more than simple symbolism, and more than just baptism. But here in Berlin this morning I'm choosing to focus tightly on this one dimension: Jesus is calling for a fresh start through Faith and thoroughly repenting.

DO YOU NEED TO BE BORN AGAIN?

Jesus has given us a gift of renewal--- a renewal that goes far beyond New year's resolutions that rarely make it into February, or "Whoops, Sorry. It won't happen again." If you really want to do more than just be happy and seem to be

successful, . . . If you want live a life in covenant with King Jesus, you need to do more than just keep tweaking things and making adjustments, You need to be *born again*. Out with the old, In with the completely NEW. . . . About 2000 years ago, Nicodemus had a hard time absorbing this, He and the pharisees had a BROKEN System, but they did not want to give it up. . . and in 2026 we struggle as well. Do you need to be born again? Most of us Do. Perhaps born again and again, and yet again.

For Nicodemus and his fellow pharisees, the need was for a *complete re-boot*. I've been there!! And so, I suspect have you.

ARE YOU HOPING TO *ACHIEVE* SALVATION?

Here is the crux of the matter: Too many of us think that we are ***achieving salvation***, by being good people. There is certainly nothing bad about being good, BUT--- If you think you are going to be saved because you're "good enough", you're as hopeless as the Pharisees. We are not going to make it on that basis. If we were GOOD ENOUGH, we didn't need Christmas, and we don't need Easter, either. We can't make it on our "goodness".

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONE AND ONLY SON, THAT WHOSOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHALL NOT PERISH, BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

That's why Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus the message in John 3:16. *God, who knew we could not do it on our own, Loved the world so much that HE took action! He gave his only begotten son—The most uniquely holy person in all history, JESUS had both the raw DNA of humanity and the very essence of divinity!---God's life was coursing through his veins and synapses. If that is not amazing enough, WHOSOEVER **believes** [puts total trust in Jesus] shall not have the destruction we deserve, but will experience eternal life with Jesus. That is a total re-boot.* That is great news.

In the l o n g run, I think I know what that looks like. There are a lot of folks who have gone on before who have trusted Jesus for that eternal life. . . .

But what might it look like in the *right now*? May I personalize it for you? . . .

Here it is: I **would like** to show you my "Good neighbor certificate." "My good behavior medal." "My all-around nice guy award." "good old boy." . . . I **cannot** do that because I don't have such honors. But even if I had somehow maneuvered my way into such honors, they would be useless, probably just a

testament to my manipulation. Such titles would not necessarily be bad. They just don't have any power to save, I cannot achieve my salvation. WITHOUT JESUS, I AM HOPELESS. All I **can do** is believe Jesus and **let him** lead me. I CAN expect my life to be more honorable, more Christ-like, but when such changes occur they are the RESULT of trusting Christ, they are not my good conduct badge.

Looking from another angle, Beginning Again may have some diverse, more indirect illustrations.

BORN AGAIN RE-BOOT TAKES PLACE IN REAL LIFE

1. I have a friend I'll call Mark who grew up in a most unhealthy family. In adolescence he abused drugs and alcohol, developing full-blown functional alcoholism by his college years. He struggled to keep his "life of the party" rep in place, using his drinking companions to build his business. It appeared to be working, but only superficially. As he entered his 30s his behaviors were out of control. His business was failing, and his marriage was crumbling. In desperation, he sought out rehab services. His downward spiral was arrested, but he still drifted about, trying to find another way to get his life moving upward. The real solution came when he had his own Nicodemus-type encounter. A Christian friend pleaded, "Your life plan is bogus! Your only hope is to change your whole foundation. You need Jesus." ----It has not been easy, and he still faces challenges, but he. . . . and his family are experiencing hope & joy they've never known before.
2. Jerry and Sue were a couple who thought they would live happily ever after. They were energetic, athletic, attractive and well-connected. They looked like the all-American couple. When at mid-life they looked with exhaustion at each other and experienced massive depression and hopelessness, they cried, "We just can't keep doing this," They sought help. They did NOT have to change absolutely everything, but the *foundation* had to change. What they needed to change was *loving God*, **more** than they loved themselves and one another. It would be too tempting to oversimplify their born again experience, but there was some remarkable simplicity: They had to go from satisfying everybody else's expectations, and dive deep, again and again, "Lord, What would you have me/us to do?" And each time, they had to utter a new refrain—Lord, Not our will, but YOURS be done.
3. Kendra was a lay-leader in her Christian church. She was a successful businesswoman who applied her business skills to every area of life. She

reorganized the Sunday School of her church. She planned special activities for several church groups, and was in the midst of everything. But when she realized that she was the main decision maker in every activity, she hit the wall. She sought out a spiritual mentor who helped her to go way back into her decision to be a Christian. She realized that she wanted to do everything FOR Jesus, without really submitting TO Jesus. She was amazed when she found that in order to really serve Jesus in the BIG things, she had to very deliberately OBEY Jesus in the little things. Part of her born-again experience was her becoming more of a PARTNER with other Christians, and not a DIRECTOR. Submission can be very hard for leaders.

4. JIM was a sophomore in his local high-school. He was a good Christian kid, in the church since toddlers' Sunday school class, VBS every year. Youth group at church, and even church camp. He was sincere in his desire to be a good Christian. But in school, things began to be different. He sensed that there were certain ways for the "IN-Crowd" to talk, to act, to swagger, cut-down people, even certain ways to treat girls. It was okay to be a church member, just as long as you don't take it too seriously. . . . How did it work out for Jim? He still hopes he can pull it off, He plans to get more serious about his Christianity, someday, but the more he depends on his skill, wit, and charm, the more hopeless he becomes. . . . He's still trying to make it work in two worlds that do not mesh. You know something is going to break. God still loves him, but he tries to avoid that love.

Actually, I think it's time for YOU to tell your story. Where have you gotten off-track? Is it working for you? Not like you wish? How about going with Nicodemus to visit the young Rabbi. "Jesus, you know I won't make it on my own. I need you to help me "reboot" life. No more games. I'll start over, and this time, Lord, I'll do it YOUR way.

God loved the world so much that He gave us Jesus, his unique, only begotten son. Whoever really believes, trusts, puts total reliance on Him, will not be caught in a hopeless trap of destruction, but will receive life that keeps on going. Christmas will never end. Through Faith in Christ, WE HAVE HOPE!

There are people around to help you get re-booted. There are prayers to be prayed. There's a church to help you. There's FAITH to be invested, a Christian life re-born & lived.