

**“Birth Through the Word”**

*“He chose to give us birth through the word of truth” (James 1:18).*

What do the following people have in common? Michael Jordan. Martha Washington. Richard Nixon. Amelia Earhart. William Shakespeare. Oprah Winfrey. Christopher Columbus. *Insert your name here.* This is quite an eclectic collection of people, but as unrelated as they may seem they all have a very basic common bond. Every one of the people on this curious list was born to die. Death is life’s ultimate equalizer. No matter what prestigious position a person may hold in this life, no matter how rich or poor, no matter how good or bad, no matter how famous or infamous a person might be; whether it’s Ghandi or Hitler, Luther or the Pope, Michael Jordan or Martha Washington, death is a certainty for every human being who ever lived, and in death the titles and toys of this world become meaningless.

One author (Peter Kreeft) tells of an old Austrian burial tradition that illustrates this truth with great clarity. When an emperor of Austria died it was customary for the people to carry his body to the church in a long and elaborate funeral procession. Once at the steps of the church, they would knock on the door and request admission. Without opening the door, the abbot inside would ask “Who is there?” To this the leader of the procession would reply “The great Emperor Philip, King of the state.” From inside the sanctuary the response would come, “We know of no such person here.” Keeping with the tradition, the people would strike the door again, and again the abbot would answer with the question, “Who is there?” This time the leader would shorten his response, stating only, “Emperor Philip.” To this the abbot would say “We know of no such person here.” The people would strike the door a third time, and again the abbot would ask “Who is there?” To this question the leader of the people would simply answer “Philip.” At this humble response, the door would finally be opened and the funeral would begin. This is an interesting story with an important lesson: Death shows no favoritism and it is something we will all experience.

We generally don’t like to be reminded of our mortality. We spend billions of dollars each year on products that hide the effects of age, and it seems like we are always hearing of a new drug or medical treatment that carries with it the promise of a longer life. In our society, we are obsessed with ways to put off the inevitable reality of death.

Just last month, magician David Copperfield made the claim that he has actually discovered the “Fountain of Youth” hidden in a cluster of four small islands he recently purchased for \$50 million. In an interview about the discovery he said, “You can take dead leaves, (and when) they come in contact with the water (from the fountain), they become full of life again...(When) bugs or insects that are near death, come in contact with the water, they’ll fly away. It’s an amazing thing” (Jane Sutton. August 15, 2006. “David Copperfield Says He’s Found Fountain of Youth”. Reuters.). *Incidentally, you can rent space on one of Copperfield’s magical islands for \$300,000 a week.*

Claims like this get our attention, but the truth is, death does not discriminate, and it is a reality that no one in this world escapes. Before his death in 1981, American writer William Saroyan (Sa-roy-an) said, “Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case.” And somewhere in the back of our minds we hold onto the notion that maybe death isn’t for us, maybe we are the exception, but the words of the Bible and the things we experience in our own lives quickly destroy such desperate thinking.

The words of Scripture explain that pain, suffering and death are all results of our sin, and sin is a something that we experience each and every day. I don't have to come up with some great analogy to illustrate this truth, because this is a truth you see illustrated in your world everyday. Whether it shows itself in strained relationships, or in illness, or in grief, or in the pain of private, personal struggles, sin is a stranger to no one. Sin – and consequently death – are realities that each and every one of us was born into, and they are conditions from which we cannot escape.

That's what makes the claim from today's reading so compelling. James writes, God "chose to give us birth through the word of truth" (James 1:18). What does even this mean? At face value this verse leaves us asking the same question Nicodemus asked Jesus, "How can a person be born when he is old?" (John 3:4). In other words, what kind of birth is James talking about?

James speaks here not of a physical birth, but of something much more important. Today James greets us with the message that we have been born into a new life, a different kind of life, a life that comes not from the flesh, but from God. Today, James promises a life that doesn't depend on the shifting shadows of this world, but on the eternal truth of God's Word. Today, James tells us that we have been freed from the death that our sin deserves and given new birth into a life that will last forever.

In First Peter God tells us that we have "been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (I Peter 1:23). In His Word, we find God's plan for our salvation. Sin is a problem for us, but in His Word, God tells us that He loved us to such an extent that He took the punishment for our sin. In His Word, God tells us that through the death of His Son, He has forgiven us completely and given us a new life – a life that begins now and will last for eternity! Through the power of God at work in His Word, He has revealed something to us that we could have never discovered on our own. Through His Word, He has revealed life!

I don't know the mistakes you have made in your life; I don't know all the ways sin has affected you; and I certainly am not anxious to share my own sins with you; but through the promises found in God's Word, I know beyond any doubt that because of Christ we are loved, we are forgiven, and we are chosen by God. This is the message of the Bible, and in believing this Word of truth we are born again!

Most of today's reading from James focuses on our actions. James talks about leading a moral life and doing good works for others, and these are an important part of living out our new life, but my friends, without Christ none of these things matters. A life of good works is a result of our rebirth, but don't ever think that these things save us. We can be confident of our salvation, because we have been forgiven of our sin and we have been chosen by God for a new life of faith – not because we have earned it, not because of some inherent quality in our soul that made God smile. God has chosen us purely because of His love, and through the death of Jesus Christ in our place, we have life!

As we conclude our month-long emphasis on Christian education, this message remains: "*He chose to give us birth through the word of truth*" (James 1:18). God has chosen you, and through His Word He has given you birth into a life that will last forever! This is God's message to you! Believe it with your heart and share it with your life! Amen.

Reverend Thomas A. Eggold  
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