

THE NEW BIRTH

How We Can Be Born Again



Holy Spirit, life in Thee,
Only by God's Word can be.
On the cross our sins Christ bore;
Turn, and trust – live evermore!

In the early part of His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus made it plain that no sinner can enter the kingdom of God apart from being born again (Jn 3:1-7). He then went on to explain what the new birth *encompassed*, and how it is *experienced*.

What is the new birth? It is one's:

ENTRANCE INTO SPIRIT LIFE

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ... The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the

sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you *of heavenly things*? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, *even the Son of man which is in heaven (John 3:6-13).*

What is the new birth? It is the beginning of life in the Spirit - of God-created spiritual life and true spirituality. Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (6). Life in the flesh is ours by way of physical birth; life in the Spirit comes only through spiritual birth. There is mystery involved in this birth. Jesus likens it to the invisible wind whose power we hear but whose path is too profound to get our minds around (7). Nevertheless, from the Bible we do understand that the new birth is wrought: 1) by the Spirit of God; 2) through the Word of God and its testimony concerning the Son of God.

The Spirit of God is the agent in the new birth.

Three times in four verses, Jesus refers to being born again as being born "of the Spirit" (5-6, 8). Jesus said, *It is the Spirit that quickeneth (Jn 6:63)*. Only the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Triune God, can give spiritual life to the spiritually dead. It is a supernatural work that none other than a supernatural Being can do.

Being born of the Spirit of God makes us “sons of God.” The Bible says, *But as many as received him [Jesus], to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (Jn 1:12-13).* One does not become a child of God by being born “of blood.” The Jews erroneously thought that they, being physical descendants of Abraham, were naturally children of God; but spiritual life is not passed on through ancestral bloodlines. Nor do we become children of God by “the will of the flesh.” Many people wrongly assume that, through human willpower (abstaining from wrong; attempting to do right) we gain acceptance with God. Yet, it is not by the strength of our will and flesh that we attain spiritual life and become sons of God. Neither is it “of the will of man” – what others wish and desire, or even decree. Popes and Presidents (and celebrities) may publicly proclaim that we are all God’s children; but what people wish or declare to be so, their will in the matter does not make it so.

The engendering of God’s children is “of God” (13). Only the Holy Spirit can generate a living spirit in the soul of a dying man. It is a work of the God of Heaven. In fact, the Greek word translated *again* in John 3:3 is fairly translated *above* in 3:31, for to be born again is to be born from above. Regeneration is the gracious, mysterious and miraculous work of the Spirit of the most High God. He is the agent behind all spiritual life. God’s Spirit gives new life to all who receive God’s Son by birthing them into God’s family.

The Word of God is the instrument the Holy Spirit uses.

The Spirit brings spirit life to the spiritually dead by first enlightening the mind and awakening the conscience

to what God says in His Word about our sin, and the Savior God sent to save us from sin. As with Nicodemus, we each must cease disbelieving the Word of God spoken by this Teacher come from God if we would be born of God.

Nicodemus was having trouble grasping this born-again message Jesus was asserting. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born” (4)? Jesus explained that He was not talking about being born again physically but being born from above spiritually. Nicodemus still reacted in disbelief: “How can these things be” (9)? He was not asking for clarification. He was calling into question what Jesus was saying as is evident from the Lord's response to him: “ye receive not our witness” (11). Before Jesus says anything else to Nicodemus, He confronts his unwillingness to receive His Word as true.

To help Nicodemus (and us), Jesus impresses upon the conscience three truths concerning this Word from the God of Heaven. First, there is the *certainty* of the Word. When Nicodemus asked how these things could be, Jesus answered, “Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things” (10)? Of all people in Israel, this notable Bible teacher should have known about these spiritual truths now brought to his attention; yet, Nicodemus did not know. How unlike Jesus, who says to him, “Verily, verily [i.e., most assuredly] we speak that we *do know*, and testify that we *have seen*” (11). Christ is no ignorant witness; He knows. He is no hearsay witness; He has seen. He is not speculating about, but testifying to, spiritual realities. The Devil deceives multitudes by raising the question, “Who can really know for sure what is true about God and heavenly things?” The answer is, the One who “came down from heaven” and “ascended up to heaven” (13).

In fact, while Jesus stood on earth talking to Nicodemus, He referred to Himself as “the Son of man which is [not *was*] in heaven” (13), hinting at His Deity, His oneness with the Father that He later avowed (Jn 10:30). Surely, Nicodemus would have pondered, “Who is this man?” To the awakened conscience, the whole of Scripture testifies: this is the God-man. Now, who could possibly be more qualified to teach the human race the things of God than *this One* who came down from God, and ascended back to God? Whether we acknowledge it or not, His Word - God’s Word - is certain.

There is also *clarity* in His Word. Jesus says, “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you *of* heavenly things?” (12). Jesus did not speak to us in a foreign, heavenly language. He communicated heavenly truths to us in earthly expressions we could understand, else we could never believe. He used words that people on earth are familiar with – like birth. We all understand the significance of a birth. It is the beginning of a new life, a new experience for a new creation. Christ gave us both a clear and certain testimony, leaving us no excuse for not receiving His words as true. If we are going to be born again, we *must* consent to its truthfulness. James 1:18 says, *Of his own will begat [birthed] he us with the word of truth.* The Spirit of God cannot birth any one into the family of God who is contesting the truthfulness of the Word of God. The “word of truth” is the very instrument He uses to bring about this birth.

Then there is also *cleansing* in the Word as indicated by Jesus’ words, “Except a man be born of *water* and of the Spirit” (5). What is the meaning of being “born of water?” The context suggests that it could refer to the watery physical birth by which we all come into the world. Yet, in the Old Testament, which Nicodemus should have been

familiar with (remember, Jesus chided this “master of Israel” for not understanding these spiritual realities), water is used to symbolize the cleansing that would accompany renewal by the Spirit under the New Covenant (Eze 36:25-27). “Water is emblematical of the public profession of repentance, and the Spirit is the agent that produces the inward change. The meaning, therefore, is, that an entire change in the spiritual condition of the soul must be *openly avowed* and *truly experienced*, to fit the sinner for the kingdom of heaven” (Abbot New Testament Commentary).

Because the Word of God is central to this cleansing and renewal, water sometimes symbolized the cleansing and purifying power of the Word. In Ezekiel 36, the water that cleanses may somewhat allude to the Word that cleanses. The Old Testament suggests this imagery: *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word (Ps 119:9)*. In the New Testament, this symbolism becomes even more pronounced. Jesus said, *Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you (Jn 15:3)*. Paul wrote: *That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word (Eph 5:26)*. The Apostle Peter declared that we are “born again” by the incorruptible “word of God,” the soul having been “purified” by “obeying the truth through the Spirit.”

Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever (I Pet 1:22-23).

How is one born again? The agent (the Holy Spirit) takes the instrument (the Word of God) and, bringing

about genuine repentance and faith, cleanses the soul. Now, *the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin (I Jn 1:7)*. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and opens our eyes to what Jesus did to cleanse us.

Jesus lived a sinless life. The Bible says, he *knew no sin (II Cor 5:21)*. He was *in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:16)*. Jesus always obeyed His Heavenly Father, doing *always those things that please him (Jn 8:29)*. A spotless life was of utmost importance, for only an unblemished lamb could be offered to God in sacrifice as atonement for sin, which is what happened when:

Jesus died a substitutionary death. Romans 6:23 says, *the wages of sin [what we earn for sinning] is death*. However, *Christ died for our sins (I Cor 15:3)*. God's sinless Son stood in our place, willingly taking on our sins as His own. *He bare our sins in his own body on the tree (I Pet 2:24)*. *He gave himself for our sins (Gal 1:4)*, pouring out His life's blood. *Without shedding of blood is no remission of sins (Heb 9:22)*. Jesus, *the Lamb of God*, shed His own blood so our sins could be *taken away (Jn 1:29)* and *forgiven (Eph 1:7)*. *He washed us from our sins in his own blood (Rev 1:5)*. In doing so:

Jesus reconciled sinners to God. Our sin *separated us from our Creator (Is 59:2)*. Those who trust Christ, *he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death (Col 1:21, 22)*. God saw Jesus agonizing on the cross for our sins, and God was satisfied with His death in our stead. The prophecy was fulfilled, *He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied (Is 53:11)*. God's justice was wholly satisfied, for sin's wage was fully paid. The evidence of God's satisfaction is seen in the resurrec-

tion of His Son. Jesus is alive, seated at the Father's right hand, the fountain of Spirit life from which all may freely drink (see Acts 2:33; Jn 7:37-39).

The new birth is entrance into this Spirit life. The Spirit of God engenders children of God as the Word of God creates sincere faith in the Son of God. Faith in Jesus is paramount, for the new birth is:

EXPERIENCED THROUGH SINCERE FAITH

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (Jn 3:14-16).

God is love (I Jn 4:8). Despite our disinterest in Him, God is not disinterested in us. He loves us. He is *not willing that any should perish (II Pet 3:9)*. Instead, He willed to give His own Son to save us from sin and grant us everlasting life and a home in Heaven. What God requires of us is to believe this wholeheartedly - to put heartfelt faith in His Son for salvation. In the context of Jesus' teaching on the new birth, this sincere faith consists of two strands.

Sincere faith perceives the offense and end of sin, and repents.

The faith needed to be born again is illustrated by the Lord Jesus from the Old Testament story of the brazen serpent that Moses lifted up and hung on a pole. The story takes place during Israel's wilderness wanderings as recorded in Numbers 21:4-9.

And [as] they journeyed ... the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. And the people

spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.

As they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan, the children of Israel oftentimes sinned against the LORD. On this occasion, discouraging circumstances caused them to be critical of both God and Moses for having led them into such circumstances. To bring them to a life of faith wherein they simply trust and obey, “the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people.” Many were bitten and died; others lay dying. At last, the Israelites woke to the dreadful end of sin.

... Death was inevitable

... No human remedy was available

... Judgment was imminent, and being from God, just

As these realities set in, so did the fear of the Lord, which is *the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7)*. The Israelites, having finally wised up, repented. They acknowledged their offense - “we have sinned” - and sought mercy from God. *The LORD God is merciful and gracious (Ex 34:6)*.

He responded by having Moses make a serpent of brass and hang it on a pole. In Scripture, the serpent is the symbol of sin; brass is associated with judgment. Thus, the serpent of brass depicted God's judgment of sin carried out on that wooden pole. With the sins of the people being judged there (figuratively), God was able to extend to them this merciful promise: "it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live." And every bitten, dying soul who by faith looked upon that which hung on the pole, *believing* God's promise of life, lived. All who looked – lived! They escaped the judgment *for* their sin when by faith they beheld the judgment *of* their sin portrayed on the pole – which brings us to the second strand of true faith.

Sincere faith trusts in the sacrifice of God's Son, and rests.

"Look and live" is still God's invitation to all who have been bitten by *that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan (Rev 12:9)*. That is all of us. All have sinned. All are dying. All will face judgment, for "*it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment*" (*Heb 9:27*). All who realize their dire predicament and in repentance desire mercy from the LORD, if they will look in faith to Christ dying (literally) in their place on that old wooden cross, they will live. Friend, if you will believe God's promise of eternal life and trust God's Son to save you, He will not fail to do so. But you must believe in this God of justice and love, and commit yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. In His substitutionary death and resurrection unto life is the *power of God* to save you from death and grant you eternal life. Hence, dear one, take this Good News to heart and *repent* of your sins against God; cease from your own labors to gain His favor, and by faith *rest* in the finished work of Christ (see Rom 1:16; 10:9-10; Jn 19:30; Heb 4:1-11).

God promises a sure salvation to those who believe in Jesus for salvation. Our Lord uses two phrases in communicating this, and He repeats them both. He first promises that the believer “should not perish” (15, 16). To perish is to come to ultimate ruin - in hell. We were created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. To perish is to lie in ruins forever, never to realize the purpose of our existence. Jesus assures the sincere believer: that will not happen to you.

Furthermore, he promises that the believer “shall have eternal life” (15, 16). Jesus said, *And this is life eternal, to know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent (Jn 17:3)*. To have eternal life is to know the Eternal One and His Son Jesus. It is to know by experience His greatness and goodness, His love and grace, His ways and holiness, His joy and peace, His Kingdom and blessings, His Presence and Heaven. It is to know and experience this, and more, incrementally, and abundantly, in time and eternity.

Knowing God is utmost in importance but uncommon in experience. For many, God is nothing more than a supposition. He is not a reality, only a possibility. Many others assume God exists, but He remains personally unknown. Dear friend, that will not change until one is woke to the offense and end of sin, for sincere faith has its roots in apprehending the evil nature and eternal consequences of sin and, owning our own, sensing our *need*. Then, when God’s Savior becomes a *necessity*, the God of Scripture will become a *reality*. Then, we will be able to see Jesus Christ for who He is - a *real* Savior for *real* sinners, who *really* will save all who put their faith and trust in Him for salvation.

Faith is not a leap in the dark but an honest consideration of that which is true, and acting on it out of sincere belief in it. What is true is that we are sinners, under the sentence of death and facing the certainty of Judgment. We have no capacity to save ourselves, but do have this invitation from the Father in Heaven: come to my Son for salvation. Do what a drowning person would do when a lifeguard arrives; grab hold of the rescuer and hold onto him as if he is your only hope, because He is.

Jesus is the sinner's Rescuer. He is humanity's one and only God-provided Savior. *There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).* There is no need of another. *For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen (II Cor 1:20);* they are all true and shall be fulfilled in Him who died and now lives to intercede for His own. Thus, His own can be *confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6).* *Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it (I Thess 5:24).* Have you this confidence in God's Son to save you? Have you answered God's call to come to Jesus by faith, and trust Him for salvation? John Newton said, "This is faith: renouncing all that I am apt to trust in and depend upon, and relying wholly upon the blood, righteousness and intercession of Jesus Christ." Have you done this? Are you doing this? Will you do this?

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