

# Lecture 2 "Born of Water and of the Spirit."

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*John 2: 23-25, John 3: 1-21.*

## **"Another Comforter"**

*Thirteen Lectures on the Operations of the Holy Ghost.*

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It is of the last importance that we should understand that which the Lord Jesus brings before us in this Scripture with regard to the new birth. I do not deny that in other parts of scripture you hear about the new birth, because even in the Old Testament it is referred to, but in fulness of detail, and depth of expression, nothing can surpass that which we have here from the lips of the Saviour Himself. Added to this is the fact that His words are personally addressed to a man — *better*, I believe, than any man in this hall to night — if human goodness come into the question — but to the best man that the earth could produce the Lord says, "Ye must be born again." The new birth is an absolute necessity, if man is to enter into known relationship with God.

Now, the way in which this truth is brought out in this chapter is very interesting. I do not say that the truth which the Lord brings out is that which, most of all, attracts the heart, or wins the affections, but what He unfolds here is of primary importance for our souls. If therefore we have not understood, if we have not comprehended, experienced, or gone through what the Lord describes in this chapter, we may take it as an absolute certainty that we have not taken one solitary step *Godward*, *Christward*, or *Heavenward*. Well, you say, that is a very sweeping assertion. If it suffice to sweep away what is hollow, unreal, or false in any soul here, I shall thank God, and so will that soul likewise. "Ye must be born again," is written over the gateway of God's kingdom - an absolute rule, with no exception.

The Lord had gone up to Jerusalem at the Passover. When there, many had believed in Him — *apparently*. "Many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did." Then we read, "But Jesus did not commit himself unto them." Why? "Because he knew all men." He did not trust them. He "needed not that any should testify of man; for he knew what was in man." Man, in the springs of his moral being, disliked and distrusted God. This, you will find in the third chapter, He reminds Nicodemus of, as He says, "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness." Man will not have the witness of the Son of God. Concerning those who professed to believe in Him, how solemn is the record, "Jesus did not commit himself unto them." The truth found in the end of the second chapter of John is this, Jesus says to man, I cannot trust you. In the third chapter all is reversed, and there He says, If

you are going to be blessed, you must trust Me. That is an immense difference. Why did He not trust man? Because there was nothing in man to suit God. It is a humbling truth which we must all learn. There is nothing in man, as man, that will suit God, gratify His heart, or answer either to His claims, or His nature. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" — it is not spirit. I know men do not like this doctrine, but, beloved friends, let me appeal to you. If you have never yet known, or passed through what the third of John teaches, bow now to the testimony of Scripture, bow to the solemn word of the Lord Jesus, and do not reject what He there so emphatically presses.

But you may say, Did not these people believe in His name? They did, but *when*? When they saw the glory of His Person? They did not see it. When they saw what He was, and who He was? Alas! they were blind. When they saw His miracles? Yes, and then thought much better of themselves for their faith. If you put a man on the bench, and demonstrate certain things which his eyes can see, and concerning which he is to give judgment, he immediately feels he is of importance. He can draw conclusions from the things before him - perhaps honest and just conclusions — but that is not faith, it is reason. There are plenty of believers in the world today of the type spoken of in the second of John. Theirs, however, is not divinely produced faith. It is merely mental credence of a fact, or a thing concerning which they have had ocular demonstration, and which they cannot deny. Faith after a divine sort is clearly defined by the Baptist, as he says, "He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true" (John 3: 33). Faith, then, is the soul's reception of a divine testimony.

When we come to chap. 3 we see that Nicodemus firmly believed in the miracles. He could not deny them — he could not gainsay them, and therefore he comes to Jesus with this confession, "Thou art a teacher come from God." He comes up like a scholar to be taught. But there was what distinguished him from those of John 2; there was a need in his soul. He came to Jesus *by night*. It was at the *risk* of losing his reputation, which he would minimise by coming at night. True, but he came to Jesus, and that ensured blessing. Why by night? He did not want anybody to know that he had come to Jesus. There are many persons today exactly like that. They would like to come to Jesus, and get their need met, but at the same time, they would not like all the world to know it. Nicodemus knew perfectly well that the world would be in opposition to him if he confessed Jesus to be what He was — the Christ. John the Baptist had plainly declared that Jesus was the Messiah. This news had gone forth throughout the land, and Nicodemus — ruler of the Jews, and man of importance though he was — knew full well that if he confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, he would have the whole nation against him. What matter? If all the world is against you, and you have the Lord Jesus, what matter? Suppose you have all the world with you and are without Him, you will sink to an eternal hell without Christ — you are opposed to the Son of God.

Nicodemus took the first step, and the right step, when that night he came to Jesus — impelled, no doubt, by desires to know something more about Him, desires that nothing but Christ could gratify. It was the expression of the inward craving of the heart, that man, unknown to himself, has after God. Why is man seeking after God? Because he has lost Him — he knows that Wherever you find men trying to reach after God, it is only a confession, — a tacit confession possibly — that they have lost God, they know Him not Where will they find Him? They can only find Him, where, thank God, Nicodemus found Him, in the person of the Man

who died on the cross for sinners. There only is the place where man can fully find God. You cannot so find Him, in creation. You there find His handiwork, not Himself. "The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament showeth his handiwork" (Ps. 19: 1). But that is not Himself. You may have seen a fine piece of sculpture, and admired it greatly; and you have also been shown a magnificent picture, and you have, in your rapture, said, What a wonderful genius, what a hand that man has! Look at the skill of his chisel, and the power of his brush — what a wonderful man! Stop, I will tell you something about him. He is utterly selfish, beats his wife, and starves his children. Seeing his handiwork does not declare to you his nature — you do not learn his heart. If I turn to nature, and study creation, I see the "eternal power," and almightiness of the Lord there, but that does not bring out His heart. No, you never get the heart of God brought fully out until you come to that which this scripture brings before us. Here you have the Son of the living God standing before a man dead in sins, and telling him that His Father has so loved a ruined guilty world as to give His Son to die for it. *God is Love.*

Nicodemus did not know that when he came up that night. He came as a scholar, desiring to be taught, but is little prepared for the first lesson he has to learn. He is met at once by the Lord with this statement, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nothing could be more solemn. Nicodemus understands Him not, and anything more absolutely stupid than his reply (ver. 4) can scarcely be conceived. But the Lord passes that over, and amplifies, and emphasises the truth, saying, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot *enter* into the kingdom of God." In verse 3, it is "he cannot *see*," and in verse 5, "he cannot *enter into* the kingdom of God." None can *see* God's kingdom, and none *enter* it, save they who are born again. There must be a nature suited to that kingdom. Unless a man possess that nature by new birth, he does not understand the things of God. That is why, if you talk to an unconverted, an unawakened man, about heavenly things, the subject is most irksome to him. Talk about religion, preachers, sermons, ordinances, ecclesiastical forms, or philanthropy generally, and he will very likely be either a capital listener, or a critic, but tell him of heavenly things, touch the soul, bring in the claims of God, press the guilt of man, and the necessity of this new birth, and it is at once a most irksome subject. He has neither eyes to see, nor ears to hear, unless, unknown to himself, there have first been a work of God's grace - a need created — in his heart.

Observe how the Lord opens this subject out Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." The reason is then given. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" — a most solemn truth with regard to what man is, as man. Everything partakes morally of its source. *Flesh is flesh.* Do with it what you will, it is *flesh*, and nothing but *flesh*. Educate it to the highest pitch, and it is *flesh* still, not spirit Raise the flesh to the highest point you can, and what is it? Flesh. Saul of Tarsus went to the very summit, so to speak, of the tree of human excellence in religion, and what was he doing? — persecuting and slaying the saints of God. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." You may sublimate the flesh as you like, but you will never distil spirit out of it. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." It partakes of its source; the nature of it is the same as its source.

Then Jesus turns to Nicodemus with immense force, saying, "*Marvel not*" - for He saw the blank look of amazement that possessed that man's face, dark as it was — and just as the Lord read his face, so does He read your heart, my friend, — "*Marvel not* that I said unto thee, Ye

must be born again." Would you enter that kingdom? — "*you must be born again.*" Would you have to do with God, and enter into His heavenly things? — "*you must be born again.*" This, beloved friends, is *intensely solemn*. There is another "*must*" I shall come to presently, where the Lord shows that if you and I are to be rescued from our lost condition, He must die. But the first thing is this, He gets at the soul. The ploughshare of conviction was allowed to do its work in the conscience of Nicodemus that night, and I have no doubt he was absolutely staggered beneath the weight of the saying, "*Ye must be born again.*"

As Nicodemus answers, "How can these things be?" light would appear to be desired, if not already dawning on his soul. He is an anxious inquirer. It is a very happy thing when a man gives up all his learning, and all his knowledge, and takes the place of nothingness at the Saviour's feet. That is what Nicodemus does here, as he says, "How can these things be?" Now he is going to learn. Have you ever asked that question yet? Have you ever been troubled with the knowledge that "you must be born again," and yet have not been able to answer in your soul *honestly* before God, that you have been born again? Have you ever quietly before God asked "How can these things be?"

The Lord's reply to Nicodemus is very suggestive. "Art thou the teacher of Israel, and knowest not these things?" He ought to have known them. This weighty truth of the new birth was in a sense not *new*. It was figuratively alluded to in Old Testament Scripture. What the Lord speaks of here was known before, because He says presently, "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" He had been speaking, up to this moment, of what he calls "earthly things," that is to say, that the new birth was a necessity for every soul of man, even to enter God's kingdom in its earthly aspect, and sphere. The Old Testament spoke thus: — "Fear not, O Jacob, my servant; and thou, Jesurun, whom I have chosen. For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring" (Isa. 44: 2, 3); "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God" (Ezek. 36: 25-28). Here we have doubtless the new birth depicted, in moral effects that could not be without it, in connection with "water and the Spirit." If the figure had a doubtful meaning to any mind, the Lord's reference to such in John 3 as "earthly things" should dispel all such doubt. Observe that both these passages speak of the kingdom of God not yet come, but prophetically marked out as that which is to come. They both refer to the future day of Israel's blessing, when the kingdom of God will be manifested here upon the earth. Those verses are yet unfulfilled, and the Jew is now rightly looking forward to that day. What the Lord Jesus brings out in the chapter before us, however, is not to be waited for, because, if I might so say, the kingdom of God was there in the person of the Son of God that day. (See Matt. 12: 28; Luke 17: 21, *margin*). Man had not eyes to see it; but nevertheless the power of it, and every characteristic trait of its blessedness was there in His person. When set up, and we brought in to it, it can be said — "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." How perfectly displayed were all its principles in the Person of the blessed Saviour!

Let us now inquire, What does the Lord mean by being "born of water, and of the Spirit"? You will find, as we go through John's Gospel, that He constantly uses figures — figures that are perfectly familiar too — to express some weighty spiritual truth. He uses them as symbols of something unspeakably blessed in relation to the soul and God. In the fourth chapter, He uses the *well*, to which the poor woman of Samaria had come for water, as the figure of the Spirit of God indwelling the believer, and, in the seventh chapter, speaks of that same Spirit as "rivers of living water."

Many expositors have endeavoured to extract baptism out of this expression of the Lord, but we must remember that baptism was not a Jewish rite. A man may be baptized, but does that give him new birth? We must be careful always to use Scripture in its right context, and not distort its figures, or symbolical language. Let us turn to other parts of the Word of God to learn the meaning of water.

Our Lord takes water in John 13 and washes the feet of the disciples, saying thereafter, "Ye are clean, but not all." Then in John 15, when Judas had gone out, He says, "Now ye are *clean*" — through the water that I washed your feet with? *No*. "Now ye are clean through *the word* which I have spoken unto you." Water, in Scripture, is always the Word of God applied by the Spirit. It brings God's thoughts to man, and morally judges all that is in him, withal purifying his heart. Again, in the nineteenth of John, out of the side of the dead Saviour, there comes "*blood and water*" - the blood for expiation, and the water for purification. Water carries the sense of moral cleansing, because man's nature is vile; whereas the truth is that what is needed for man is a nature suited to God. Therefore Jesus says, "born of water and of the Spirit," *i.e.*, there must be a new nature thus characterised morally — the water — and in its source — the Spirit. Water purifies that which already exists, whereas "that which is born of the Spirit" in its nature partakes of that of which it is born, It is a new nature imparted by the Spirit — a new life which is really Christ in us. Morally the soul becomes a "partaker of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1: 4). I have no doubt, then, that the water, as a figure, is the Word of God, applied by the Holy Ghost to the soul. The Word carries with it the sense and conviction of my defilement, and need of purification, which, impossible as of the flesh, is only found through the end, under God's judgment, of all that it is, in the cross of Christ (hence the water flowed, as the blood, from His side in death) and by the communication of a new life and nature.

Turning now to Ephesians 5: 25, we read distinctly what water means: "Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of *water* by the *word*." Again, James 1: 18 undeniably attributes new birth to the word: "Of his own will begat he us with *the word of truth*." So also does the apostle Peter: "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" (1 Peter 1: 22, 23). Nothing could be more conclusive to any mind subject to Holy Scripture.

We have therefore the word of God the instrumental means of the new birth; but not the Word of God alone, for the Word of God alone is inoperative. It must be conjoined with the living power and energy of the Holy Ghost. If I am born again, I am so *by the Word*, but also *of*

the Spirit. It is God's sovereign grace reaching the soul by His own blessed Word and producing faith in it, the Holy Ghost to this end using the Word of the Lord. The result is a new life — a new nature characterised by its source. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Have I been born again? That is a question that every soul within these walls may well ask himself. Thank God, I know that I have been born again, and that is why I am so desirous that you should be also, because it is fundamental to the soul entering into relationship with God, without which there is none, and makes it capable of the enjoyment of God, and what is of Him. Put a man into heaven, if it were possible, without the nature thus received, and he would desire to get out of it as fast as he possibly could, because he would feel he was, morally, utterly unsuited to the scene.

The Holy Ghost, then, is the mighty agent, and the Word of God is the instrument, which being received as the result of this divine action by faith in the soul, there is the imparting of this new nature. To again quote Peter's words, we are "made partakers of the divine nature." I quite admit that the possession of this new nature does not carry with it power. That will come in its due place in John 4, in connection with the Holy Ghost as a spring within the believer. But the point here is that there is imparted, by the Word and Spirit, a new life, a new nature, a new existence before God. "Born of God" is elsewhere the way John speaks of it. Thus, in chapter 1 of his gospel we read, "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons (children) 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." (John 1: 12) Then in his first epistle we read, "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5: 1). Again, "Whosoever is born of God sinneth not" (ver. 18); and "whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world" (ver. 4). This I call the New Testament term, in its highest development, for this blessed truth — of which the primary elements have been before us — "born of God," which carries with it the thought of relationship.

Returning to our chapter, we now find the Lord speaking to Nicodemus words which should have revealed His divine glory to him, and unfolding the heavenly side of the truth. As yet all had been earthly. "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." Observe there is a great difference between this, and the end of John 2. There they believed the miracles, but did not receive the testimony. In the "WE" of John 3: 11 we have the most absolute testimony to the Godhead of Christ. True, it is a Man who is speaking, but that Man had been with God, He knew God, nay more, He was God, and He speaks as God. He knew all about everything; knew exactly what suited the heart, and nature of God, and He says, "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?" He is leading up to heavenly things, because His object was to win the heart of man for heaven, Then He passes on to tell us how this is effected. "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven." Well, you say, I cannot understand that. I do not ask you to. Do you believe it? If you believe it, you have in your soul the sense of the glory of the person of Him who speaks here.

The Son of Man, as to His divine nature, was from heaven, and in His Person we have a revelation of heavenly things in all their freshness, as He, who, because of the glory of His Person, could be said (even when speaking to Nicodemus) to be in heaven, and was its glory, enjoyed them. He came out of that scene to a scene absolutely unlike it. For what? He came down to reveal the Father, and, while ever remaining in heaven in the essence of His divine nature, inseparable in His Person from the humanity with which He was clothed, He was found on earth in the form of a servant, in a nature which He will never leave, and in which He has undertaken man's cause, and gone to death to deliver him from eternally perishing. He came to fit you and me to enter that scene where He had ever been, and to make us companions with Himself for evermore. Precious Saviour!

How did He effect this? Listen — "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up." He brings out that if there be an inexorable necessity for this new birth because of man's condition, not less is it the necessity of God's own nature that sin shall receive its judgment if man is to enter the heavenly scenes of which He speaks. We not only have sins that must everlastingly debar us from His presence, but we possess a nature unsuited to God, and therefore the Lord brings out in verses 14 and 15 the truth of the cross, the necessity of His death to meet the claims of God in righteousness, and make a pathway for us into glory. How? Through His death for us on the tree? Look at these two "*musts*," and put them together. "Ye *must* be born again." "The Son of man *must* be lifted up." The "must" of man in his need, is divinely and fully met by the "must" that flows from the heart of Christ in His blessed grace, and led Him to the cross. The Son of Man must be lifted up. All that the flesh was in man must meet its judgment. His sufferings for us were *necessary*. Did Nicodemus understand that? Do you? He knew well that deliverance came to the dying people, when bitten by the serpent, by simply, in faith, lifting their eyes to the brazen serpent on the pole. What has brought in death? Sin. And what do I see upon the cross? He who is Himself the Son of God, and the Son of Man, who knew no sin, made sin for us; and, in His death, sin in the flesh is condemned. As He dies, death is annulled, and my sins are blotted out. "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." Is not that good news? Who does "whosoever" mean? Who does it not mean? That is the point.

But you might say, Who can the Son of Man be, that will die on the cross for a sinner like me? Jesus anticipates the query, as He passes from the necessity of His death for God's glory, in sin's necessary judgment, to the deep and ineffable love of the nature of God, saying, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." You have come back to the spring of all goodness. You reach up to the very source of all blessing. It is the heart of the living God, "for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son."

God is love, and His love has been shown in this wonderful way, that He gave His only begotten Son. And now, all of man set aside for God, and for faith in the cross, and God revealed, not only in the holy judgment of sin, but in His nature of love, there is not merely the new birth, but the life received in it takes its blessed form as eternal life; the one connected with the earthly things, and necessary in order to see or enter into the kingdom, the other found only

in the testimony of the heavenly things that have come in by the cross, and known and enjoyed in the revelation of them.

It is when the soul sees this that the beautiful link that secures blessing is formed — the little link of faith, that which connects the soul with God. Have you ever weighed that 16th verse. It is very beautiful. There are two things that God does in the verse, and two things appear on man's side. They are these — God, *loving* and *giving*, and man, *believing* and *having*. How blessed! You say, That is very simple! But is it too simple for you? You will never get eternal life in any other way; God loving and giving, and man believing and having, is the divine way. What! get eternal life like that? Yes — for "the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6), and "he that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life" (John 3).

Eternal life is something a great deal more than being saved from death and judgment. I believe most of us have limited the thought of eternal life to this, I shall go to heaven when I die. Eternal life is what we possess as life now, and soon as heavenly glory with Christ. If I think of eternal life, I think of the Father, and the Son — of those bygone ages of sweet unbroken communion between the Father and the Son, and I am told that if I believe on the Son, who died, and rose again, I get eternal life. Jesus as it were says, I am going to bring you into association with Myself in all the joys, and incomparable delight that I have known for ever. I have come down to this scene to unfold it to you, and to clear away the barriers, and the hindrances. Rising from the dead, He has gone, as Man, again to the scene where He ever was, and the Holy Ghost has come down to put the believer in the enjoyment of eternal life. That is why the Spirit of God is called "truth" in John's First Epistle. "The Spirit is truth." God is, but the truth is the absolute delineation and expression of something that is. You could not say that God is the Truth, — He is true, — but Christ is the Truth, the Truth about God and about man. In His death on the tree I learn the truth about my own ruin, and my own position, in relation to God — and my condition of distance from God, and, blessed be God, the absolute end thereof. When I look at Jesus now on the throne, there He is still the Truth, the truth as to my nearness to God. Christ is the measure of everything before God. On the cross He is the measure of my need, and distance from God; and now, on the throne, He is the truth as to my acceptance and nearness to God. Christ is the truth *objectively*, and the Holy Ghost is the truth *subjectively*, as making all good and true to the soul of the believer experimentally.

I do not think Nicodemus got the whole truth that night, but he went away with an arrow in his conscience. He comes up again in the seventh chapter, when he puts in a word for Jesus edgeways. Then again at the cross, he appears. There are three stages in his history. It is *midnight* with his soul in the third chapter of John, *twilight* in the seventh, and *daylight* in the nineteenth.

And now, as I close, let me ask, How does it stand with you? Is it midnight, twilight, or daylight, in your soul's history Have you been "born of water, and of the Spirit? Have you yet received eternal life by faith in the Son of God? If so you will gladly follow the Spirit's teaching yet before us in John's gospel.