

The New Birth

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We are introduced to this theme by the Lord Himself, who put it in the very forefront of His teaching when He had the talk with Nicodemus by night. It is alluded to by John in the preface to his Gospel (John 1: 13), but not in any way expounded until we come to John 3. Having heard of it more fully from the lips of the Lord, we find further details as to it both in 1 Peter and 1 John. We also discover from what the Lord says to Nicodemus that Ezekiel 36 alludes to it, though the term, "born again," is not used there.

Nicodemus was amongst those who were convinced that Jesus was "a Teacher come from God," but he went further than the men spoken of at the end of John 2, by becoming an enquirer. Nicodemus himself was "a master [i.e. teacher] of Israel," and it was something that he should recognize in Jesus a Teacher, who spoke and acted with an authority far above his own. But recognizing it, he came as one who would make a very good scholar, being a privileged person, a member of the most favoured nation. To such a man as this the pronouncement was made that, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

The word translated "again," in this passage has also the meaning of "from above;" it is so translated in John 3: 31, and elsewhere; but evidently Nicodemus did not understand it in this sense, or he would hardly have asked the question recorded in verse 4. In Luke 1: 3 the same word is translated, "from the very first," and in Acts 26: 5, "from the beginning," and that seems to be the force of it here. Nicodemus needed a birth which should be new in the very beginnings of its origin. Nothing short of that would do.

He had been born of the stock of Abraham, and so his pedigree was of the best. He was a very fine specimen of the Abrahamic strain of humanity, yet he would not do for God. The Lord's words clearly put the sentence of condemnation upon him as a child of Abraham, for if that first birth had sufficed there would have been no need for a new one. We Gentiles cannot boast of being children of Abraham, the friend of God: we are just the children of Adam, the man who disobeyed and fell. The new birth cannot be less necessary for us than it was for Nicodemus. He too, of course, was a child of

Adam, just as Abraham was.

Adam's nature was corrupted by his sin, and all his race, generation after generation, partake of that fallen and corrupt nature. Spiritual blindness is one of the forms that the corruption takes, and so we are quite unable to "see the kingdom of God." When Jesus was on earth the kingdom was present amongst men, for He was the King; but men did not see this apart from the new birth. Nicodemus only saw a Teacher in Him, and needed to be born again to see Him in the true light. It is just the same today though Jesus is no longer here. Men see in Him a religious Teacher or a Reformer, but they do not see God in Him, nor do they see the kingdom of God, unless they have come under that Divinely wrought process of cleansing which the new birth involves.

In John 3: 5, the Lord carries His teaching a step further. We need not only to see the kingdom but to enter it, and for this we must be born "of water and of the Spirit." The water is the agent employed, and the Spirit the Actor who employs it. These further statements apparently only puzzled Nicodemus the more, and he asked incredulously, "How can these things be?" The Lord's reply took also the form of a question, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" His teaching on this point was not something entirely new — unheard of up to this point. It had its roots in what the prophets had testified, and notably Ezekiel in his thirty-sixth chapter, where both water and the Spirit are mentioned. The surprising thing was that Nicodemus had remained in ignorance of the prophet's meaning.

The meaning of the word, "water," in John 3 has been much in dispute. We believe its true meaning is to be discerned by referring back to the Scripture to which the Lord alluded. He doubtless used the word as being just that which ought to have put Nicodemus into possession of the key which should unlock His meaning. We ought to read at this point Ezekiel 36: 21-33.

Having read it, we note that the passage speaks of what the Lord will do when at last He gathers Israel His people out of the lands of their dispersion and brings them into their own land. Then He will sprinkle "clean water" upon them and they shall be clean. All their filthiness and their love of idols shall be gone, for He will thereby have put "a new heart" and "a new spirit" within them. The cleansing effected by the water will be of so radical and fundamental a nature that their whole nature will be different. Once this mighty work has taken place they will look back on that which formerly they were with disgust — "Then shall ye remember your own ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations" (verse 31). A moral renovation will have been accomplished.

By discarding bad habits and acquiring good habits, men sometimes achieve a considerable measure of that kind of moral alteration which lies on the surface. The moral **renovation** which Ezekiel predicts goes down to the deepest foundation; putting a man into possession of a new heart and a new spirit, so that instinctively he desires what is good and walks in obedience. Verse 27 shows this. No wonder then that the Lord Jesus spoke of it as a new birth; inasmuch as it is not the altering of a nature already existing, but the impartation of a nature which is entirely new. The new heart is "**given**." The new spirit is "**put within you**." It is **to start anew from the very first**.

Verse 27 speaks of "**My Spirit**" which is to be put within born-again Israel in that day. Though not printed with a capital in our Bibles, it clearly should be, as it refers to the Spirit of God, and hence is to be distinguished from "**a new spirit**" in the previous verse. So the prophet clearly shows us that only when Israel is born again and receives the Spirit of God will they see and enter into the kingdom of God.

All this Nicodemus should have known, though the Lord's words to him carry the truth

concerning it a good deal further. Now we discover that new birth is actually produced by the Spirit of God. He who is born again is born of the Spirit, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit as to its own nature and character. In other words, the new heart and new spirit, of which Ezekiel tells us, is the product of the Holy Spirit and partakes of His holy nature. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, in spite of all that may be done to it in the way of refinement, education, civilization, or Christianization. When all is done, flesh it still remains: it cannot be transmuted into spirit. That alone is spirit which is born of the Spirit. It cannot be found apart from the new birth.

When Ezekiel prophesied of how God would "sprinkle clean water" upon Israel in the coming day in order that they might be clean, the mind of those who read his words would have been carried back to the book of Numbers where twice we get the sprinkling of water mentioned. In Numbers 8 we get the way in which the Levites were cleansed in order that they might enter upon their service. Moses was told to "Sprinkle water of purifying upon them." In Numbers 19 we get the way in which the ordinary Israelite was cleansed from various defilements which he might contract. From the ashes of a red heifer "a water of separation" was to be made, and that water was to be sprinkled upon people and things that were defiled. The "water of separation" which purified was made from "the ashes of the burnt heifer" — typical of the death of Christ — and "running [or, living] water" — typical of the Spirit.

So we pass from the type in Numbers to the prophecy in Ezekiel, and from thence to the Lord's declaration in John 3. Putting all together the significance of the "water" begins to appear. It is the Word of God which brings the death of Christ in its separating and purifying power to bear upon the soul. Of that Word, as well as of the Spirit, we must be born if we are to enter the kingdom of God. In later chapters of the Gospel we find the Lord connecting water with His Word in a way that confirms the matter. Compare the scene recorded in John 13: 5-11, with His words, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (John 15: 3). A further confirmation occurs in Ephesians 5: 26, where "water" and "the Word" are brought together as identical.

Man needs, then, to be born anew from the very beginning. The agent used for this is the Word of God, which applies to us the cleansing virtue of the death of Christ. And He who acts in this matter is the Spirit of God. In John 3 the water is mentioned but once: the remainder of the instruction concerns the action of the Spirit.

But when we turn to 1 Peter 1: 22-25, we find that though the Spirit is mentioned, the main emphasis lies upon that which the water symbolizes - the Word of God. We have obeyed the truth by the Spirit, and thereby purification has reached us — verse 22 views that which is accomplished from our side. Verses 23 25 view it from God's side. The purification is effective by reason of His work in us by His Word, which, as we know from John 3, is wrought by the Spirit. We are born "by" the Word, but also "of" incorruptible seed; and we must not confuse these two things. "By" indicates **agency**; "of" indicates **origin**.

As children of Adam we were born of seed which is not merely corruptible but actually and fatally **corrupted**. We are born again of seed which is **incorruptible**, because Divine. Isaiah the prophet was given a glimpse of the Servant of Jehovah, who should die and rise again; and he predicted, "When Thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see **His seed**" (Isa. 53: 10).

He shall see those who take their spiritual origin from Himself. A thought akin to this seems to lie in these words in Peter. As born again we have a new origin which is incorruptible in nature; and the Word by which we are born again, "liveth and abideth for ever." That which is produced as the result of new birth is characterized by these wonderful things — **life, eternity and incorruptibility**.

From all that we have seen it is very evident that new birth is that work of the Spirit of God in us which is necessitated by the corruption of our nature through sin. It was not enough that a work should be wrought for us which should bring us justification and reconciliation; there must also be this work of moral cleansing, this lifting us out of the corruption of our nature. No external work of cleansing would meet the case; nothing short of our becoming possessed of a new nature springing from an incorruptible source. No deeper or more fundamental purification than that could be conceived.

From the passage in Peter, with its statement as to our being born of incorruptible seed, we pass on naturally to 1 John, where we read, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for His seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3: 9). This verse gives us perhaps the fullest development of the whole matter. No mention is made of the agent employed, the Word of God. Nor is the Spirit of God, who acts in the work, mentioned. The emphasis is concentrated upon God Himself as the Source of all. As born of God, His seed remains in us; it is irrevocable. And we partake of His sinless nature. The born again one cannot sin, just because he is born of God.

In so speaking John views us abstractly, according to the essential character of the new nature which is ours. He is entitled to do so, inasmuch as when God has completed His work concerning us we shall be this not merely abstractly but absolutely. The last trace of the Adamic nature will be gone when our very bodies are glorified. Elsewhere John views us practically, and insists that we have sin in us, and that we do sin: — see, 1 John 1: 8 - 2: 2. This practical view of things is very necessary of course; but so also is the abstract view, which we have before us. It is most important that we should know the sinlessness of the nature that is ours as born of God.

Not only is it **sinless** — for that is a negative virtue: it is also **righteous** (1 John 2: 29), and **loving** (1 John 3: 10, 11). It is marked by **faith** (1 John 5: 1), and by **overcoming the world** (1 John 5: 4). These are positive features of great worth. Only let these characteristics come clearly into display in the believer and it becomes manifest to all men that a mighty moral renovation has been effected: a thorough-going cleansing and purification has been accomplished indeed.

We read of cleansing by the blood of Christ in 1 John 1: 7. Do you differentiate between this and the cleansing we have been considering? And, if so, how?

The blood of Christ signifies His holy life laid down in death for the bearing of the judgment due to us. Thereby we are cleansed **judicially**. The cleansing wrought by new birth and presented as accomplished by water, touches our characters, and involves our having a new nature. We are cleansed **morally**. We could not do without either. Both are ours as having received the grace of God.

You do not think then that the "water," in John 3, has anything to do with baptism?

We are sure that the Lord did not allude to baptism in using the word "water." There would have been nothing surprising in Nicodemus not knowing about it, had that been His meaning. No, He alluded to Ezekiel 36, which Nicodemus ought to have known, and that has nothing to do with baptism. John 3: 5 has no more to do with baptism than John 6: 53 has to do with the Lord's supper: though in both cases we may be able to discern in the outward ordinances some reflection of the truth stated in these passages. In both cases however we have not the ordinance but **the truth**, to which the ordinance makes some reference.

We have had before us different terms: — "born again," "born of water and of the Spirit," "born of God." Do they all mean the same thing?

They all refer, we believe, to the same great work of God, wrought in us by His Spirit. There is no such thought in Scripture as there being two more different kinds of "new birth;" as though, for example, one might be "born again," according to John 3, and yet not "born of God," according to 1 John 3. On the other hand, each of these different expressions has its own significance and force. The first emphasizes the new and original character of the birth. The second, who accomplishes it, and the agent employed. The third, the Source whence all springs. Indeed we think an orderly progress of doctrine may be observed in the four passages, beginning with Ezekiel.

New birth is evidently an act of God; but is it wrought by the Spirit altogether apart from the preaching of the Gospel?

There is a plain answer to that question in the passage in Peter. It says, "Born again. . . by the word of God. . . and this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you." Whatever may have been the word by which the Spirit worked in the past dispensation, in this day the word by which we are born again is that which reaches us in the Gospel.

Then are we born again by simply believing the Gospel? Some hold that we believe to be born again, others that we must be born again to believe.

That is so. He who inclines to Arminianism **would** hold the first view. He who inclines to Calvinism would hold the second. This raises the whole question of how to adjust in our minds the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. We should answer the question by saying, No, not by **simply** believing the Gospel; for, if by believing **only**, we should be shutting out factors of even greater importance. But of course we should be equally wrong if we said it was **simply** by the Spirit; for then we should be shutting out the Gospel, which must not be excluded according to the passage in Peter.

The fact is we need carefully to note the word of our Lord in John 3: 8, where He warns us that the Spirit's work in new birth is something beyond us. We can no more gather it all together in our minds than we can gather the winds in our fists. The passage in Peter gives us a view of things from the human side — especially verses 22 and 23 — and the Arminian seizes them. The passage in John's Epistle views things from the Divine side, and the Calvinist seizes it. For ourselves, we seize both, and are not troubled by finding that we can no more mentally adjust the two sides to perfection than we can adjust and explain the Divine and the Human in Christ Jesus our Lord, or in the Scriptures of truth.

But is not new birth the very beginning of God's work in the soul? Are we not absolutely dead, without the smallest motion Godward, until we are born again?

We all of us started in a state of absolute spiritual death: there was no hope for us except God began to work. The story of God's work in blessing men begins with God and not with man. We are as sure of this as we are that the story of creation began with God and not with man. God took the initiative with each of us, and His Spirit began to move on our hearts just as of old He moved on the face of the waters. But, in the light of the scriptures we have considered, we can hardly call that first moving of the Spirit new birth. New birth is a larger and more comprehensive thing, if we take it as presented in Scripture.

And further, new birth is not the antithesis to a state of death, but to a state of corruption. The

word which in Scripture stands in antithesis to death is quickening. By new birth we become possessed of a nature which cannot sin, and, hence we have "escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1: 4).

Are new birth and regeneration — as in Titus 3: 5 — the same thing?

They are not. The word translated "regeneration" only occurs twice in Scripture, and both times it has the significance of the new order of things to be brought about in the millennial age. Titus 3: 5 however speaks of "the **washing** of regeneration," and we believe that though the regeneration is not the new birth, the "washing" is; and that verse is just Ezekiel 36: 25 - 27 put into New Testament language. Israel will be born again, and thus cleansed from their corruptions in view of the millennial age. We have not had to wait till that age dawns. The washing connected with that coming age reached the heathen Cretians so that they might be cleansed — no longer, "liars, evil beasts, slow bellies," — and therefore should "live soberly, righteously and godly."

That same washing has reached us. We are no longer dominated by corruption, since born of incorruptible seed.