

## “Jesus and New Birth”

John 3:1-21

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### Appendices:

- p16 Testimony of John Bunyon,
- p16 Running Commentary on John 3:1-21
- p25 “What Happens in the New Birth” John Piper
- p27 Faith and Regeneration by C.H. Spurgeon**
- p37 The New Genesis - R.C. Sproul
- p42 Idling life away like an idiot or a madman
- p43 Portions of Francis Thompson’s “The Hound of Heaven.”

### READ John 2:23-3:21

One of the most difficult tasks of a preacher is to convince a person of his need of a Savior when he thinks he already is a Christian.

Millions of Americans, especially in evangelical churches, refer to themselves as “born-again” Christians.

What do they mean and have they been truly born-again?

Today we will address some of the most important words we know about becoming a Christian.

We will look at the words, “saved,” “born again,” “faith,” “trust,” “called,” and “kingdom of God” and “eternal life.”

He was probably a leader in one of the largest and most influential seminaries in the country.

He was the Reverend, Doctor, Distinguished Professor, Nicodemus.

If we were describing him in today’s terms we would say he was Rabbi Maimonides, Dr. Carl Barth, and Mother Theresa all wrapped in one.

He was the best example of a highly educated and also deeply devout man.

As to **why** he came to Jesus we can't be certain, but implicit in his opening words is the question, "Who are you Jesus?"

The author's account of this meeting undoubtedly leaves out part of the conversation, but in the text, Jesus doesn't respond directly to the question.

Instead, he goes directly (pun intended) to the heart of the matter.

He tells this eminently religious man, (3:3) "I tell you the truth, **no one** can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Nicodemus acted like this was a puzzling statement when, in response, he asked Jesus, (3:4) "How can a man be born when he is old?... Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

But I think the truth is that to Nicodemus, Jesus statement was not so much puzzling as it was shocking, even impertinent.

For Jesus was saying in essence, that even **you** Nicodemus, even **you** cannot be part of the Kingdom of God unless you are born again.

Even you, Nicodemus, cannot have the relationship with God you think you have unless this new birth takes place.

**In these first verses of John chapter 3 Jesus is expressing the absolute necessity of new birth in order to be in right relationship with God, in order to be a Christian.**

It's important to consider what Jesus means by a couple of the words or concepts he introduces here.

This English translation, "born again," is from two Greek words meaning to be born and anew or, more importantly, again from above.

It obviously true this new birth chronologically follows the first physical birth, but the concept does not so much emphasize chronology as it does the character or the quality of this new birth – it is from above, it is from God.

Verse 5 corroborates this when Jesus uses different words to describe this being "born."

There he speaks of it as being born of the Spirit or consistent with the earlier John 1:13, where the author described it as being born of God.

The term “born again” has become so common-place in our language that I think we would better convey the right meaning if we regularly spoke of this as being “born from above.” Are you a “born-from-above” Christian?

But back to our story: Jesus says in essence, “Nicodemus, in spite of all your learning and piety, you must be born from above!”

Why? Because without it, (verse 3) you “cannot see the kingdom of God” or as Jesus says it in verse 5 “you cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

What is “kingdom of God” business?

When we hear the word “kingdom” we most likely first think of territory or geography – “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

But we can just as correctly focus on the king’s reign, his right to rule.

The Kingdom of God would then be where God rules, where God is king.

Now, we understand from the Bible that God is already King of the whole universe because he created everything and sovereignly controls all things to the conclusion that he desires.

And it is also true that when Jesus comes again he will rule as King of kings and Lord of lords and yes even over all geography (Daniel 7:27).

But here Jesus is speaking of God’s reign in our lives now (John 18:36).

Jesus elsewhere (Matthew 13) said the Kingdom of God is like a mustard-plant seed or like yeast in bread – it continually expands or permeates until it takes over the whole.

But it begins with God’s reign in one person after another.

Does God reign as King in your life?

Or are you like the rebellious vassal who **says** “God is king” but runs his own kingdom?

So in these early verses of chapter 3, Jesus is saying that for anyone to belong to God, to be part of where God reigns, and to be part of God’s good plan for the future, they **must be born from above**.

Listener, you might think that you have your relationship with God all “wired together.”

You go to church, you believe the right things and you aren’t as bad as some people you know.

You even prayed the prayer of asking Jesus into your heart when you were a kid.

You’ve been baptized, catechized and confirmed.

Or as Jesus said it, “Yes, Reverend, Doctor Nicodemus, you may have the ultimate religious pedigree but hear me, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”

Now for you who like to pick at nits, when Jesus refers both to water and the Spirit, he is not referring to two births, as he will in the next verses (physical and spiritual), but he is here referring to one birth, the same birth he has been describing all along – spiritual birth from above.

If you need more on that, the commentaries have enough on the subject to put you to sleep. (See Carson, et al. for a fuller description of the alternatives suggested and why this is the best explanation)

Now again, the main point is that **if you haven’t been born from above you aren’t a Christian** in spite of all your religious beliefs and religious activity.

This birth from above is the very essence of the Christian faith.

No other religion even suggests such an experience.

All other religions count on us *to do something to be worthy* of a positive relationship with God or with whatever else they believe is the unifying principle of life.

But for it to be genuine Christianity, Jesus says we must be born from above.

You may think I have taken too long to make such an obvious point.

But I have emphasized this because I think it is *easy for us to assume that being born from above and being saved are synonymous.*

But they are not.

Being saved and being born from above are experientially coincident and necessarily connected but they are not the same. Let me explain.

The word “saved” includes much more than **when** we become a Christian, it includes our on-going maturing in the faith, called sanctification, and it eventually includes our glorification in the resurrection.

But the word “saved” certainly includes the initial becoming a Christian.

So we are correct when we say that when someone trusts in Jesus they are “saved.”

And that “saved” means they have been saved **from** the power and penalty of their sinfulness and their sins.

And, positively, he or she is “saved” **for** life with God now and forever.

But when we say “born again” or, more importantly, “born from above” we are speaking instead of **a crucial part of the way** whereby we are “saved.”

**It seems to me that begs the questions, “How is a person born from above and what is this birth from above?”**

I think it is important to note that Jesus never told Nicodemus that he had to do something to be born from above.

He **did** tell him he must **be** born from above but he **never** said Nicodemus should do something to make that happen.

In fact Jesus makes a specific point of showing how **incapable** Nicodemus is to produce birth from above.

He said in verse 6 “Flesh gives birth to flesh, **but** the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”

Human life can bring about human life but it takes the work of God’s Spirit to bring about this birth from above.

We remember what John wrote in chapter 1:12-13 and especially v13: **children (of God) born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.**

This birth from above is not a human action – this is God’s action.

As one author said it, “It is a foreign invasion... (Burge, 126)

Jesus illustrates that this is not our doing, by referring to the wind.

John 3:8 “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Certainly John is suggesting there is a mystery to it but more importantly, as we can’t control the wind, so we cannot control the work of the Spirit.

We don’t give new birth to ourselves and we don’t even initiate it.

We **can’t** make it happen, not by obedience, not by faith or anything, because until God acts we are spiritually dead.

So what **is** this birth from above?

**This birth from above is a spiritual ability that wasn’t there before.**

Many people **hear** the gospel of Jesus but only those who are born from above can respond.

Many years ago one author said it this way: “The preacher of the word, be he ever so powerful, can cast this seed (the Word of God – the Gospel of Jesus) only into the ear; his hand/voice reaches no farther; and the hearer, by his attention, may convey it into his head; but it is the supreme Father above, who carries it into the heart, the only soil wherein it proves lively and fruitful.” (Leighton, 105)

The Westminster Shorter Catechism captures this new life work of God’s Spirit this way:

It “is the work of God’s Spirit whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills, he both persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ as he is freely offered to us in the Gospel.”

This is what the Apostle Paul also taught:

Ephesians 2:4-5 “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, **made us alive with Christ** even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved.

Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and countless others taught this doctrine. (R.C. Sproul in “Regeneration Precedes Faith” <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/sproul01.html> )

In our text Jesus chided Nicodemus for not understanding these things because Nicodemus should have known the Old Testament prophecies.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;** I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And **I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees** and be careful to keep my laws.”

Again, it is only those who God brings to life, who are born from above, who then have the spiritual ears to hear and the spiritual ability to respond.

**“Now wait a minute,” you ask, “are you saying we have nothing to do with being saved?”**

No I’m not saying that at all.

But I **am** saying we contribute nothing to being born from above.

Remember what I said earlier, “new birth” and being “saved” are not synonymous.

Being “saved” is the product of new birth.

- God said in Isaiah 66:9 “Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery?”
- Jesus said in John 6:37 “All that the Father gives me will come to me...”

**“Okay,” you ask, “but what part does our faith have in our being saved?”**

It has **much** to do with being saved.

All through this text, Jesus, and the author John, tell Nicodemus and us to believe.

But understand what Jesus is teaching; we can only believe when we have been born from above, when we have been given the ability to truly believe Jesus.

It is very important that we define this “believing.”

In the Bible we are told that many people, including the Devil himself, believe in Jesus.

This only means, however that many people, even most of us in this church, mentally agree with the facts of Jesus deity and his work on the cross and in the resurrection.

We believe in him, at one level, in the way that we also believe in Abraham Lincoln or Mother Theresa.

But there is another kind of believing that the Bible speaks of; it is the believing of embracing, of trusting, of betting our lives and eternities on Jesus.

It is the believing of trusting him to the extent that we truly follow him, altering our lifestyles to obey him.

It is the believing that even discomfort, even discrimination, even persecution for his sake is worth it, because he is life.

That kind of belief, that trust, only comes when God has caused us to be born from above thereby enabling us to see what we could not see before and trust him, whom we could not trust before.

Author and former White House attorney, Charles Colson, in his book *Born Again*, describes his own experience.

Amidst the Watergate scandal of the Nixon administration, Colson sought out the counsel of his friend Tom Phillips, President of the Raytheon Corporation.

One night, Phillips pulled out C.S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity* and read, to Colson, the chapter on pride.

Colson writes, "Sitting there on the dimly lit porch, my self-centered past was washing over me in waves. It was painful. Desperately I tried to defend myself.

After more conversation about Christ, Tom finally asked Colson if he was ready to trust Jesus.

Colson dodged the question but Phillips prayed for him before he left:

"Lord, we pray for Chuck that you might open his heart and show him the light and the way..."

I think another way of saying that is, "Lord, cause him to be born from above that he may truly believe and respond.

Colson left, but in his car even before pulling out of the Phillips' driveway, Colson broke down and sobbed.

At first he wondered aloud to himself what kind of weakness this was.  
Then he realized that he wanted to pray.

He writes, “With my face cupped in my hands, head leaning forward against the steering wheel, I forgot about machismo, about pretences, about fears of being weak. And as I did, I began to experience a wonderful feeling of being released. Then came the strange sensation that water was not only running down my cheeks but surging through my whole body as well, cleansing and cooling as it went. They weren’t tears of sadness and remorse, nor of joy – but somehow, tears of relief. And then I prayed my first real prayer, “God, I don’t know how to find you, but I’m going to try. I’m not much the way I am now, but somehow I want to give myself to you.” I didn’t know how to say more so I repeated over and over the words, “Take me.” “That night something inside me was urging me to surrender.”

From *Conversions* 258-265

God caused Chuck Colson to be born from above and then he believed.

And having **been** born from above by God’s sovereign and gracious intervention, Colson then realized his deep need and reached out to Jesus to meet that need – that’s faith in Jesus.

It “is the work of God’s Spirit whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills, he both persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ as he is freely offered to us in the Gospel.”

When does it change in us from the mere belief of mental assent to the belief of authentic trust in Jesus?

I think the Bible teaches that it changes with being born from above.

It is in part a mystery – a change brought about by God’s secret and sovereign will.

We can’t make it happen, we don’t know exactly how it happens, but we know it when it has happened.

C.S. Lewis had come a long way in his thinking about God from atheism to Theism – to belief in God.

But he was still not a Christian.

He did begin to regularly attend church for the preaching of the Scriptures.

The teaching of Jesus as God in human flesh sank into his mind; he believed at one level.

Lewis then describes, from his own experience, what Jesus meant by being born from above and the faith that flows out of that new birth.

“I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade (Zoo) one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought, nor in great emotion. “Emotional” is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events (of life). It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake...” I do believe! (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 211- 224 also in *Conversions*, 199-204)

For many there was an “Aha!” moment, that time when it all made sense, when you finally realized that you do trust Jesus.

For others, as for me, there was no moment I can remember but more like Lewis’ I became aware that I was awake; I **do** trust him.

John 3:16 is a powerful and precious truth and probably the most well-known verse in the Bible, but I think verses 14-15 are the highpoint of Jesus’ remarks to Nicodemus.

John 3:14-15 “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

With these verses and John’s commentary that follows in verses 16-21, **what we believe** becomes the focus.

1500 years earlier, in the Sinai desert, the Israelites had been inundated by poisonous serpents. Hundreds of the people were dying.

God told Moses to make an image of a snake and lift it up on a pole. The people were then told to look at that snake to be spared.

And in their desperate need, they trusted God and looked to God's provision for them.

Jesus told Nicodemus that likewise Jesus must be lifted up so that those who truly trust in him may have eternal life.

Surely John's readers would remember the pole on which Jesus was lifted up – the cross.

So even while Nicodemus could not yet understand all that Jesus meant by these words, he could certainly know that Jesus was saying that he, Jesus, was the source of life.

I'm reminded of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:18 "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

**What I want you to think about again is that this whole "faith" idea is not just faith in faith or even faith in the truthfulness of certain historical facts but is faith in Jesus – "that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."**

It's all about Jesus!

It is trusting Jesus that leads to eternal life. The life is in him!

All of Scripture is about him.

In chapter 1, John reminded us that Jesus created us.

Jesus chose Israel to be the forerunner of his saving work.

And when Jesus came he showed that he was the fulfillment of Israel's story.

Like the people of Israel, he was exiled in Egypt, he crossed the Jordan, he was tempted in the desert, he is the tabernacle, the temple of God, and he is the King.

He is the fulfillment of David's prophecies of a betrayed, beaten, crucified sacrifice.

The Apostles Peter, Paul and others repeat again and again how Jesus "in his life, death and resurrection is the culmination of the story of Israel.

"When we trust Jesus, we are united to him.

As one author put it, “His ancestors become ours, his life is our life, his sacrificial crucifixion is our crucifixion, his resurrection is our resurrection...” (Russell Moore “The Gospel’s Bigger Idea” in Touchstone, October 2008)

The promise that Jesus makes, and John repeats, is that “Everyone who believes in him may have eternal life... “Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life... “Whoever believes in him is not condemned.”

John 3:15, 16, 18

The great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Do I this day believe that Jesus is the great Prophet anointed of God to reveal to me the way of salvation? Do I accept him as my teacher and admit that he has the words of eternal life? If I so believe, I shall obey his gospel and possess eternal life. (And) do I accept him to be henceforth the revealer of God to my soul?”

And “do I firmly believe that Jesus was ordained to offer his one sacrifice for the sins of mankind, (and that by that one offering) he has finished the atonement and (fully satisfied Divine justice)? Do I accept his atonement as atonement for me, and receive his death as (the atoning sacrifice) upon which I rest my hope for forgiveness of all my (sins)?”

And “Is Jesus, who is now exalted in heaven, who once bled on the cross, is he King to me? Is his law my law? Do I desire to submit myself entirely to his government? Do I hate what he hates, and love what he loves? Do I live to praise him? Do I, as a loyal subject, desire to see his kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven?” (From Charles Spurgeon “Faith and Regeneration” sermon #979)

sermon #979)

That’s what it means to trust Jesus.

The Bible says in 1 John 5:1 “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...”

The first evidence of being born from above is faith, complete reliance upon Jesus.

How do you know if you have been born from above?

Let me ask you, are you ***physically*** alive? How do you know?

There are evidences of life – breathing, thinking, and acting.

Are you ***spiritually*** alive, have you been born from above? How do you know?

1 John 2:29 “Everyone who does what is right has been born of him...”

3:9 “No one who is born of God will (carelessly) go on sinning, because he has been born of God.”

4:7; “Everyone who loves has been born of God.”

And again 5:1, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.”

One author last year cited research from several organizations and people that tell us that, “Born Again Christians are Just as Likely to Divorce as are Non-Christians.”

- “Only 9 percent of evangelicals give substantially to God’s kingdom work.
- “Of 12,000 teenagers who took the pledge to wait for marriage, 80% had sex outside marriage in the next 7 years.
- “Twenty-six percent of traditional evangelicals do not think premarital sex is wrong.
- “White evangelicals are more likely than Catholics and mainline Protestants to object to having black neighbors.”

He went on to say, “In other words, the evangelical church as a whole in America is apparently not very unlike the world. It goes to church on Sunday and has a veneer of religion, but its religion is basically an add-on to the same way of life the world lives, not a radically transforming power.”

(John Piper sermon from Nov 18, 2007)

He concluded with this: “The Bible says that this research is not finding that born again people are permeated with worldliness; but the research is finding that the church is permeated by **people who are not born again**.

Piper, Nov 18, 2007

Please hear me, I don't believe the Bible is challenging the Christian who is convicted of his sin and is striving by God's grace to overcome it.

I'm not talking about the Christian who struggles with some sin but knows it is sin and desires to be rid of it.

I'm not talking about the Christian who knows how far short they fall of what they ought to be and wishes to grow.

But I **AM** talking about the self-satisfied person who calls himself a Christian because he's part of the right religion or he has prayed the right prayer, or he has invested his time or money in religious activities, or he tries to live a moral life BUT he or she is not truly trusting and following Jesus and frankly doesn't much care - until today.

Today God has begun to stir something in you.

The Spirit of God is pricking your conscience and pointing you to Jesus.

The Word of God about Jesus is making sense to you and begging for a response.

Might that be the sounds of being born from above I hear?

And how do you respond? Trust him, believe him, and tell him.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Do you trust him? You have been born from above!

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## Additional Notes

### **Testimony of John Bunyon**

Bunyon, author of *Pilgrims Progress* and many other books spoke of his own experience in the book *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Bunyon had heard about Jesus all his life. And having been taught well from the Bible, he also knew his own sinful habits and nature. He worried deeply about his relationship with God. In fact it often plagued him. He would sometimes take great heart in reading about God's love but other times would drop into despair at his own sinfulness.

"But one day, as I was passing into the field, with my conscience bothering me, this sentence from the Bible fell upon my soul, "Your righteousness is in heaven." And I thought I was with the eyes of my soul seeing Jesus standing at the Father's right hand, standing there as my righteousness, so that wherever I was or whatever I was doing, (others) could not say to me, "He wants you to be good enough," for Jesus was right there beside him... My righteousness was Jesus Christ. At that, the chains fell off my legs indeed; I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my doubts also fled away.... Now also I went home rejoicing..." (in *Conversions*, 48-53)

### **Running Commentary on John 3:1-21**

A working outline of 3:1-21:

3:1-10 The new birth is essential for spiritual life. We are headed for eternal destruction without it no matter how religious we may be. That is what God says.

But please notice that Jesus does not tell Nicodemus to be born again, he doesn't ask Nicodemus to make himself reborn.

3:11-15 Jesus is the source and object of that new birth, that new life. It's all about Jesus –our “new birth” link to him, as our new life, by the Spirit. (see Touchstone article; see

3:16-17 God's loving purpose is not to condemn but to save.

3:18-21 The response of faith/trust and the result in a changed life contrasted with unbelief

John 3:1 “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>Jn 3:2</sup> He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know 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.”

“Now” is an adversative (like “but”) drawing a connection to what was written before.

John 2:23:25 “While he (Jesus) was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. 24 But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. 25 He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. John 3:1 “NOW...”

The implied question in 3:1-2 has to do with Jesus' identity – “Who are you?”

He gives Jesus credit for the unusual things he has been doing (miracles) but not too much credit. We know God is with you in some unusual way but who are you really?

Jesus is not talking to a radical atheist but to a religious agnostic.

I grant you that I'm using the word “agnostic” more broadly than its specific definition. It is not that he doesn't believe in God but he doesn't think it is possible to know God through Jesus.

There are many who I call practicing agnostics in the world. They might believe there is a God but they withhold judgment about Jesus, about resurrection, about life hereafter and about anything that gives specificity to God's relationship to them. Their belief in God is so general as to be irrelevant to anything in life or death.

**Jn 3:3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."**

Jesus is here confronting one of the most religious of people – a Pharisee and religious teacher – The distinguished reverend doctor Nicodemus.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he can't enter the Kingdom of God without being "born again."

"When Jesus uses the word "unless" in speaking to Nicodemus, He is stating what we call a necessary condition. A necessary condition is an absolute prerequisite for a desired result to take place. We cannot have fire without the presence of oxygen because oxygen is a necessary condition for fire.

R. C. Sproul "The New Genesis" <http://glenwoodhills.org/etc/printer-friendly.asp?ID=248>

"Nicodemus, you can't see these things because you are dead to them. These are not the kind of things that natural man can understand. There comes a time in a person's life when they must decide. Fact gathering is reasonable but at some point indecision is a decision.

**"born again" or born "from above" – Certainly the phrase means both that this is something new and that the something new is from God and by God's action.**

This new birth is not principally about being a baby or young child who is humble and open – this new birth is about a transformation, a new life from God. God has to do something new in the person, as new as the first birth.

This is not a call for our reformation to be eligible for God. This is a call for a transformation that is so radical a change that it can only be described as "new birth."

Nicodemus was locked into his own theories about life and even about God. (See C.S. Lewis' atheism). He was a professional observer not an open seeker.

New birth, faith, declared not guilty (justification), union with Christ, etc. all happen simultaneously rather than in a experiential sequence. There is a theological logic to their sequence but the experience is more simultaneous.

Nicodemus, not even you with your knowledge, your piety, and your standing in the community escapes this need for a totally new work of God in your life to be able to experience the Kingdom of God.

**Jn 3:4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"**  
 Nicodemus' response is crassly literal. Is he scornful of Jesus' prior words? Whatever his motivation to respond in this way, it is clear that Nicodemus understood Jesus to be saying that some new experience as radical as physical birth was necessary for a man to see the Kingdom of God. As a man acquainted with the OT prophecies about end times, Nicodemus expected to be part of the kingdom of God. But he expected that participation to be based on his being a Jew and a Jew who practiced his religion. He certainly didn't think he would need anything as radical as a new birth – whatever it meant.

**Jn 3:5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. "born again" or "born from above" becomes "born of the water and the Spirit."**

Neither the culture of John's day nor the OT use the metaphor of water to describe physical birth.

Is born of water a reference to physical birth and born of Spirit to the second birth?

The Greek construction here does **not** favor two births here." (Carson, 191)  
 The entire expression "born of water and the Spirit" is the equivalent of "born again" or "born from above."

Jesus is not here explaining two births but one.

Jesus will tell Nicodemus that he should have understood this – v7 “**you should not be surprised at my saying...**” and v10 “**“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?**”

Why? Because Nicodemus was well trained in the OT Scriptures.

So what in the OT should have informed Nicodemus and now helps understand what Jesus means here?

First of all the people of God are referred to as God’s sons or children implying a begetting of them.

Second, in the OT the Spirit of God is regularly the source of life even from creation itself when the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the deep, etc.

Third, in the OT water is used specifically of cleansing and renewal.

Fourth, when the words “water” and “spirit” come together, as in Ezekiel 36:25-27 they speak of the cleansing from sin that is necessary and the transformation of the heart that enables people to follow God.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

Isaiah 44:3 “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.”

Isaiah brings water and Spirit together to describe the life-giving gifts of God in the new age. (Burge, 116)

**Born of water and spirit refer to the spiritual cleansing and transformation that is necessary to be part of the kingdom of God.**

(See Carson, 195)

Again this is not a reference to two births (one natural and one spiritual) but to the one spiritual rebirth Jesus described earlier.

To John’s readers, “No matter how good your Jewish credentials, you too must be born again if you are to enter the kingdom of God.” (Carson 196)

Jn 3:6 **Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.**

This is not a support of the idea of two births in the previous verse but instead is support of the idea that spiritual transformation by God’s intervention is necessary. Human life can bring about human life but it takes the work of God’s Spirit to bring about new spiritual life.

John's readers will remember what John wrote in John 1:12-13 and especially v13: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> **children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.**

This is not a human invention or action – this is God's action.  
 "It is a foreign invasion... True religion unites humanity with God's powerful Spirit, who overwhelms, transforms and converts its subject. (Burge, 126)

Jn 3:7 **You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'**  
 No, Nicodemus should not have been surprised. God had spoken clearly in the OT about the need for a new heart, as we have already seen in Ezekiel and see again in Jeremiah 31:33 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Does faith precede new birth or follow it?

"When God in the riches of his mercy and the greatness of his love and the sovereignty of his grace chooses to regenerate us, he gives us new life by uniting us to Christ. "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 John 5:11). Our first experience of this is the faith in Jesus that this life brings. There is no separation of time here. When we are born gain, we believe. And when we believe, we know we have been born again. When there is fire, there is heat. When there is new birth, there is faith." ... "And if you are not yet born again, hear the call! Hear God's call in this gospel of Christ and believe. If you receive Christ for who he is, you will be saved."

From John Piper "Born Again Through the Living and Abiding Word" Jan 13, 2008

2 Corinthians 4:6 "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," **made his light shine in our hearts** to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Jn 3:8 **The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.**

Jesus is drawing an analogy between the effects of the wind in our everyday experience of the weather and the effects of the Spirit in this new birth experience.

“pneuma” is translated either “wind” or “spirit.” In v8 it is used in two ways – one as the air that blows on us in what we call “wind” and the other as the Spirit of God.

The wind is not controlled by us and to some extent at that time it was not very well understood. People didn’t understand where it came from or where it was going.

So it is with the experience of being born of the Spirit. We don’t understand it fully and we certainly can’t control it.

John 1:12-13 “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—<sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

Jn 3:9 **“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.**

Jn 3:10 **“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?**

Jesus is saying that Nicodemus as a teacher of the OT Scriptures should have known these things. This certainly leads us to believe the OT Scriptures are what help us understand what Jesus means. (Carson, 198)

Jn 3:11 **I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.**

You, Nicodemus, may not know about these things (though you should) but we (matching Nicodemus’ use of “we”) do know about these things and we tell you they are true but you won’t accept the testimony

Jn 3:12 **I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?**

The “earthly” things here are most likely the new birth that Jesus has been explaining. It can’t be natural birth and wind, both of which Nicodemus and others would know. The heavenly things would be the things yet to come.

Jn 3:13 **No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.**

Verse 13 is closely connected to verse 12 to make sense of it.

“except” might better be translated “but” or “but rather.”

Judaism of Jesus’ day was rife with stories of people who had gone into to receive special insight into God’s ways.

Jesus can speak of heavenly things (v12) because no one else has ever gone into heaven and knows what Jesus knows, who came from heaven.

Jn 3:14 **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,** <sup>Jn 3:15</sup> **that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.**

“lifted up” is Greek “hypsoo” meaning lifted up or enhanced, exalted.

John 8:28 “So Jesus said, **“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am (the one I claim to be).**”

John 12:34 **“But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”**

The way Jesus would return to his former glory was by way of the cross.

The cross became the path to glory.

John 17:1,5 **“Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you... And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.**”

The “lifting up” refers not only to his crucifixion but also to his glorification. It is as the crucified savior that Jesus offers the forgiveness of sins; it is as the risen, glorified Lord that he offers life.

It is in the combination of suffering (cross) and exaltation (resurrection/ascension) that God is most clearly seen in Jesus. (Carson, 201)

## **Here John begins his commentary on the issue:**

Jn 3:16 **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**”

Amazing that God would love not only the Jews but others, even people of the whole world regardless of ethnicity. God’s love had never been and was not now only for the Jews.

Also amazing is the fact that God loved the very unlovable world.

The word “world” in John, as elsewhere in the Bible, usually refers to humanity in their sin and rebellion against God.

The world is not lovable. It is not worthy of God's love but of his judgment.

Verse 16 is between 14-15 which speak of Jesus' death and verse 17 which speaks of his incarnation.

Jn 3:17 **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.** Jn 3:18 **Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**

It is **not** that God is our enemy and Jesus is our friend to rescue us from God.

**God** so loved:

Colossians 1:19-22 "For **God was pleased** to have all his fullness dwell in (Jesus),<sup>20</sup> and through (Jesus) to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.<sup>21</sup> Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.<sup>22</sup> But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation..."

Understand that Jesus is God, God who came for you.

Biblical illustrations of God's love:

God's love for Jacob/Israel over nearly 2000 years and yet today.

Hosea's love for a wayward wife.

The father of the prodigal sons.

Over and over again in the Scriptures God has given us analogies, word pictures, examples of his undying love.

The world is condemned already (Romans 1-2) and it is also condemned for rejecting the Son of God.

Not to condemn

But to save

A believer is not condemned

A non-believer is condemned already.

Jn 3:19 **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** Jn 3:20 **Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.**

Condemned – light came but men love darkness and hate the light for fear of exposure.

Jn 3:21 **But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”**

Not condemned – light came and some live by the truth demonstrating that all they do is done through God.

### **From John Piper “What Happens in the New Birth” Nov 25, 2007**

Teaching on the New Birth is unsettling for three reasons:

#### 1) Because of Our Hopeless Condition

When Jesus tells us that we must be born again he is telling us that our present condition is hopelessly unresponsive, corrupt, and guilty... Apart from amazing grace in our lives, we don't like to hear that about ourselves. So it is unsettling when Jesus tells us that we must be born again.

#### 2) Because We Cannot Cause the New Birth

Teaching about the new birth is unsettling because it refers to something that is done to us, not something we do... This is unsettling. We are told that we won't see the kingdom of God if we're not born again. And we're told that we can't make ourselves to be born again. This is unsettling.

#### 3) Because the Absolute Freedom of God Confronts Us

If we are going to be born again, it will rely decisively and ultimately on God. His decision to make us alive will not be a response to what we as spiritual corpses do, but what we do will be a response to his making us alive. For most people, at least at first, this is unsettling.

“What happens in the new birth is not the getting of a new religion but the receiving of a new life.”

“What happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself.”

“In verse 2, Nicodemus says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” In other words, Nicodemus sees in Jesus a genuine divine activity. He admits that Jesus is from God. Jesus does the works of God. To this, Jesus does not respond by saying, “I wish everyone in Palestine could see the truth that you see about me.” Instead, he says, “You must be born again or you will never see the kingdom of God.”

New birth means a new life. But what is that new life. It is Jesus’ life in us. He said, I am the way the truth and the life.

John 5:26 “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.

John 6:47-48 “I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life.

John 6:54 “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

In the new birth we are united to that Jesus in whom is life, spiritual life, life of the new kingdom, eternal life.

John Calvin wrote: “The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself” (Institutes, III, 1, 1).

Faith in Jesus is awakened in our hearts – see “effective calling”

See testimonies of that awakening in Lewis, Colson, Bunyon.

Faith is the way we experience the new birth. I didn’t say that faith produces the new birth but it IS the way we experience it.

From “What Happens in the New Birth part 2” Piper

“We know that the Bible tells us that our old self was crucified (Romans 6:6), and that we have died with Christ (Colossians 3:3), and we are to “consider ourselves dead” (Romans 6:11), and “put off the old self”

(Ephesians 4:22). But none of that means the same human being is not in view throughout life. It means that there was an old nature, an old character, or principle, or bent, that needs to be done away with. So the way to think about your new heart, new spirit, new nature is that it is still you and so needs to be forgiven and cleansed—that's the point of the referring to water. My guilt must be washed away. Cleansing with water is a picture of that. Jeremiah 33:8 puts it like this: "I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me." So the person that we are—that continues to exist—must be forgiven, and the guilt washed away.

### **Faith and Regeneration**

by C.H. Spurgeon

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A Sermon

(No. 979)

Delivered on Lord's-day Morning, March 5th, 1871

At the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington

*In the following sermon, Spurgeon teaches with the correct biblical tension that **saving faith** is both the **duty of man** and is the **gift of God** (through regeneration). Spurgeon's doctrinal position so parallels my own convictions on the matter, that I feel the need to get many essays and sermons like these in the hands of modern evangelicals. The **highlighted** sections of his sermon are concepts that I think are particularly illuminating -JWH*

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Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ **has been born of God**, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. - 1 John 5:1

**FOR THE PREACHER** of the gospel to make full proof of his ministry will be a task requiring much divine teaching. Besides much care in the manner and spirit, he will need guidance as to his matter. One point of difficulty will be to preach the whole truth in fair proportion, never exaggerating one doctrine, never enforcing one point, at the expense of another, never keeping back any part, nor yet allowing it undue prominence. For practical result will much depend upon an equal balance, and a right dividing of the word. In one case this matter assumes immense importance because it affects vital truths, and may lead to very serious results unless rightly attended to; I refer to the elementary facts involved in the work of Christ for us, and the operations of the Holy Spirit in us. Justification by faith is a matter about which there must be no

obscurity much less equivocation; and at the same time we must distinctly and determinately insist upon it that regeneration is necessary to every soul that shall enter heaven. "Ye must be born again" is as much a truth as that clear gospel statement, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." It is to be feared that some zealous brethren have preached the doctrine of justification by faith not only so boldly and so plainly, but also so baldly and so out of all connection with other truth, that they have led men into presumptuous confidences, and have appeared to lend their countenance to a species of Antinomianism very much to be dreaded. From a dead, fruitless, inoperative faith we may earnestly pray, "Good Lord, deliver us," yet may we be unconsciously, fostering it. Moreover to stand up and cry, "Believe, believe, believe," without explaining what is to be believed, to lay the whole stress of salvation upon faith without explaining what salvation is, and showing that it means deliverance from the power as well as from the guilt of sin, may seem to a fervent revivalist to be the proper thing for the occasion, but those who have watched the result of such teaching have had grave cause to question whether as much hurt may not be done by it as good. On the other hand, it is our sincere conviction that there is equal danger in the other extreme. **We are most certain that a man must be made a new creature in Christ Jesus, or he is not saved;** but some have seen so clearly the importance of this truth that they are for ever and always dwelling upon the great change of conversion, and its fruits, and its consequences, and they hardly appear to remember the glad tidings that **whosoever believeth on Christ Jesus hath everlasting life.** Such teachers are apt to set up so high a standard of experience, and to be so exacting as to the marks and signs of a true born child of God, that they greatly discourage sincere seekers, and fall into a species of legality from which we may again say, "Good Lord, deliver us." Never let us fail most plainly to testify to the undoubted truth that true faith in Jesus Christ saves the soul, for if we do not we shall hold in legal bondage many who ought long ago to have enjoyed peace, and to have entered into the liberty of the children of God.

It may not be easy to keep these two things in their proper position, but we must aim at it if we would be wise builders. John did so in his teaching. If you turn to the third chapter of his gospel it is very significant that while he records at length our Saviour's exposition of the new birth to Nicodemus, yet in that very same chapter he gives us what is perhaps the plainest piece of gospel in all the Scriptures: "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 everlasting life." So, too, in the chapter before us he insists upon a man's being born of God; he brings that up again and again, but evermore does he ascribe wondrous efficacy to faith; he mentions **faith as the index of our being born again, faith as overcoming the world, faith as possessing the inward witness, faith as having eternal life—indeed, he seems as if he could not heap honour enough upon believing, while at the same time he insists upon the grave importance of the inward experience connected with the new birth.**

Now, if such difficulty occurs to the preacher, we need not wonder that it also arises with the hearer, and causes him questioning. We have known many who, by hearing continually the most precious doctrine that belief in Jesus Christ is saving, have forgotten other truths, and have concluded that they were saved when they were not, have fancied they believed when as yet they were total strangers to the experience which always attends true faith. They have imagined faith to be the same thing as a presumptuous confidence of safety in Christ, not grounded upon the divine word when rightly understood, nor proved by any facts in their own souls. Whenever self-

examination has been proposed to them they have avoided it as an assault upon their assurance, and when they have been urged to try themselves by gospel tests, they have defended their false peace by the notion that to raise a question about their certain salvation would be unbelief. Thus, I fear, the conceit of supposed faith in Christ has placed them in an almost hopeless position, since the warnings and admonitions of the gospel have been set aside by their fatal persuasion that it is needless to attend to them, and only necessary to cling tenaciously to the belief that all has been done long ago for us by Christ Jesus, and that godly fear and careful walking are superfluities, if not actually an offence against the gospel. On the other hand, we have known others who have received the doctrine of justification by faith as a part of their creed, and yet have not accepted it as a practical fact that the believer is saved. They so much feel that they must be renewed in the spirit of their minds, that they are always looking within themselves for evidences, and are the subjects of perpetual doubts. Their natural and frequent song is—

"Tis a point I long to know,  
Oft it causes anxious thought;  
Do I love the Lord, or no?  
Am I his, or am I not?"

These are a class of people to be much more pitied than condemned. Though I would be the very last to spread unbelief, I would be the very first to inculcate holy anxiety. It is one thing for a person to be careful to know that he is really in Christ, and quite another thing for him to doubt the promises of Christ, supposing that they are really made to him. There is a tendency in some hearts to look too much within, and spend more time studying their outward evidences and their inward feelings, than in learning the fullness, freeness, and all sufficiency of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. They too much obscure the grand evangelical truth that the believer's acceptance with God is not in himself, but in Christ Jesus, that we are cleansed through the blood of Jesus, that we are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, and are, in a word, "accepted in the Beloved." **I earnestly long that these two doctrines may be well balanced in your souls. Only the Holy Spirit can teach you this.** This is a narrow path which the eagle's eye has not seen, and the lions whelp has not trodden. He whom the Holy Ghost shall instruct will not give way to presumption and despise the Spirit's work within, neither will he forget that salvation is of the Lord Jesus Christ, "who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." The text appears to me to blend these two truths in a very delightful harmony, and we will try to speak of them, God helping us.

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God" We shall consider this morning, first of all, *the believing which is here intended*; and then, secondly, *how it is a sure proof of regeneration*; and then, thirdly, dwelling for awhile upon the closing part of the verse we shall show how it *becomes an argument for Christian love*: "Every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him."

## I. WHAT IS THE BELIEVING INTENDED IN THE TEXT?

We are persuaded, first of all, that the believing here intended is that which our Lord and his apostles exhorted men to exercise, and to which the promise of salvation is always appended in the word of God; as for instance that faith which Peter inculcated when he said to Cornelius, "To

him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive the remission of sins;" and which our Lord commanded when he came into Galilee, saying to men, "Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark i. 15). Certain persons have been obliged to admit that the apostles commanded, and exhorted, and besought men to believe, but they tell us the kind of believing which the apostles bade men exercise was not saving faith. Now, God forbid we should ever in our zeal to defend a favorite position, be driven to an assertion so monstrous. Can we imagine for a moment apostles with burning zeal and ardor, inspired by the Spirit of God within them, going about the world exhorting men to exercise a faith which after all would not save them? To what purpose did they run on so fruitless an errand, so tantalizing to human need, so barren of results? When our Lord bade his disciples go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, and added, "he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved," the faith which was to be preached was evidently none other than a saving faith, and it is frivolous to say otherwise. I must confess that I felt shocked the other day to read in a certain sermon the remark that the words of Paul to the jailor "were spoken in a conversation held at midnight under peculiar circumstances, and the evangelist who wrote them was not present at the interview." Why, had it been at high noon, and had the whole world been present, the apostle could have given no fitter answer to the question, "**What must I do to be saved?**" than the one he did give, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.**" It is, I repeat, a mere frivolity or worse, to say that the faith enjoined by the apostles was a mere human faith which does not save, and that there is no certainty that such faith saves the soul. That cause must be desperate that calls for such a defence.

**Furthermore, the faith here intended is the duty of all men.** Read the text again: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." It can never be less than man's duty to believe the truth; that Jesus is the Christ is the truth, and it is the duty of every man to believe it. I understand her by "believing," confidence in Christ, and it is surely the duty of men to confide in that which is worthy of confidence, and that Jesus Christ is worthy of the confidence of all men is certain, it is therefore the duty of men to confide in him.

Inasmuch as **the gospel command, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," is addressed by divine authority to every creature, it is the duty of every man so to do.** What saith John: "*This is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ,*" and our Lord himself assures us, "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God." I know there are **some who will deny this, and deny it upon the ground that man has not the spiritual ability to believe in Jesus, to which I reply that it is altogether an error to imagine that the measure of the sinners moral ability is the measure of his duty. There are many things which men ought to do which they have now lost the moral and spiritual, though not the physical, power to do.** A man ought to be chaste, but if he has been so long immoral that he cannot restrain his passions, he is not thereby free from the obligation. **It is the duty of a debtor to pay his debts, but if he has been such a spendthrift that he has brought himself into hopeless poverty, he is not exonerated from his debts thereby. Every man ought to believe that which is true, but if his mind has become so depraved that he loves a lie and will not receive the truth, is he thereby excused?** If the law of God is to be lowered according to the moral condition of sinners, you would have a law graduated upon a sliding- scale to suit the degrees of human sinfulness; in fact, the worst man

would be under the least law, and become consequently the least guilty. God's requirements would be a variable quantity, and, in truth, we should be under no rule at all. **The command of Christ stands good however bad men may be, and when he commands all men everywhere to repent, they are bound to repent, whether their sinfulness renders it impossible for them to be willing to so or not. In every case it is man's duty to do what God bids him.**

**At the same time, this faith, wherever it exists, is in every case, without exception, the gift of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Never yet did a man believe in Jesus with the faith here intended, except the Holy Spirit led him to do so. He has wrought all our works in us, and our faith too.** Faith is too celestial a grace to spring up in human nature till it is renewed: faith is in every believer "the gift of God." You will say to me, "**Are these two things consistent?**" I reply, "**Certainly, for they are both true.**" "How consistent?" say you. "How inconsistent?" say I, and you shall have as much difficulty to prove them inconsistent as I to prove them consistent. Experience makes them consistent, if theory does not. Men are convinced by the Holy Spirit of sin—"of sin," saith Christ, "because they believe not on me;" here is one of the truths; but the selfsame hearts are taught the same Spirit that faith is of the operation of God. (Col. ii. 2) **Brethren be willing to see both sides of the shield of truth. Rise above the babyhood which cannot believe two doctrines until it sees the connecting link.** Have you not two eyes, man? Must you needs put one of them out in order to see clearly? Is it impossible to you to use a spiritual stereoscope, and look at two views of truth until they melt into one, and that one becomes more real and actual because it is made up of two? **Many men refuse to see more than one side of a doctrine, and persistently fight against anything which is not on its very surface consistent with their own idea. In the present case I do not find it difficult to believe faith to be at the same time the duty of man and the gift of God; and if others cannot accept the two truths, I am not responsible for their rejection of them; my duty is performed when I have honestly borne witness to them.**

Hitherto we have only been clearing the way. Let us advance. The faith intended in the text evidently rests upon a person—upon Jesus. "*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God*" It is not belief about a doctrine, nor an opinion, nor a formula, but belief concerning a person. Translate the words, "*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ,*" and they stand thus: "Whosoever believeth that the Saviour is the Anointed is born of God." By which is assuredly not meant, whosoever professes to believe that he is so, for many do that whose lives prove that they are not regenerate; but, whosoever believes it to be the fact, as truly and in very deed to receive Jesus as God has set him forth and anointed him, is a regenerate man. What is meant by "Jesus is the Christ," or, Jesus is the Anointed? First, that he is the Prophet; secondly, that he is the Priest; thirdly, that he is the King of the church, for in all these three senses he is the Anointed. Now, I may ask myself this question: Do I this day believe that Jesus is the great Prophet anointed of God to reveal to me the way of salvation? Do I accept him as my teacher and admit that he has the words of eternal life? If I so believe, I shall obey his gospel and possess eternal life. Do I accept him to be henceforth the revealer of God to my soul, the messenger of the covenant, the anointed prophet of the Most High? But he is also a priest. Now, a priest is ordained among men to offer sacrifices; do I firmly believe that Jesus was ordained to offer his one sacrifice for the sins of mankind, by the offering of which sacrifice once for all he has finished the atonement and made complete expiation? Do I accept his atonement as an atonement for me, and receive his death as an expiation upon which I rest my hope for

forgiveness of all my transgressions? Do I in fact believe Jesus to be the one sole, only propitiating Priest, and accept him to act as priest for me? If so, then I have in part believed that Jesus is the Anointed. But he is also King, and if I desire to know whether I possess the right faith, I further must ask myself, "Is Jesus, who is now exalted in heaven, who once bled on the cross, is he King to me? Is his law my law? Do I desire to submit myself entirely to his government? Do I hate what he hates, and love what he loves? Do I live to praise him? Do I, as a loyal subject, desire to see his kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven?" My dear friend, if thou canst heartily and earnestly say, "I accept Jesus Christ of Nazareth to be Prophet, Priest, and King to me, because God has anointed him to exercise those three offices; and in each of these three characters I unfeignedly trust him," then, dear friend, you have the faith of God's elect, for it is written, "*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God*"

Now we go a little further. True faith is reliance. Look at any Greek lexicon you like, and you will find that the word *pisteuein* does not merely mean to believe, but to trust, to confide in, to commit to, entrust with, and so forth; and the marrow of the meaning of faith is confidence in, reliance upon. Let me ask, then, every professor here who professes to have faith, is your faith the faith of reliance? You give credit to certain statements, do you also place trust in the one who glorious person who alone can redeem? Have you confidence as well as credence? A creed will not save you, but reliance upon the Anointed Saviour is the way of salvation. Remember, I beseech you, that if you could be taught an orthodoxy unadulterated with error, and could learn a creed written by the pen of the Eternal God himself, yet a mere notional faith, such as men exercise when they believe in the existence of men in the moon, or nebulae in space, could not save your soul. Of this we are sure, because we see around us many who have such a faith, and yet evidently are not the children of God.

Moreover, true faith is not a flattering presumption, by which a man says, "I believe I am saved, for I have such delightful feelings, I have had a marvelous dream, I have felt very wonderful sensations;" for all such confidence may be nothing but mere assumption. Presumption, instead of being faith, is the reverse of faith; instead of being the substance of things hoped for, it is a mere mirage. Faith, is as correct as reason, and if her arguments are considered, she is as secure in her conclusions as though she drew them by mathematical rules. Beware, I pray you, of a faith which has no basis but your own fancy.

Faith, again, is not the assurance that Jesus died for me. I sometimes feel myself a little at variance with that verse—

"Just as I am—without one plea  
But that thy blood was shed for me."

It is eminently suitable for a child of God, but I am not sure as to its being the precise way for putting the matter for a sinner. **I do not believe in Jesus because I am persuaded that his blood was shed for me, but rather I discover that his blood was shed especially for me from the fact that I have been led to believe in him.** I fear me there are thousands of people who believe that Jesus died for them, who are not born of God, but rather are hardened in their sin by their groundless hopes of mercy. There is no particular efficacy in a man's assuming that Christ

has died for me; for it is a mere truism, if it true as some teach, that Jesus died for everybody. **On such a theory every believer in a universal atonement would necessarily be born of God, which is very far from being the case. When the Holy Ghost leads us to rely upon the Lord Jesus, then the truth that God gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him might be saved, is opened up to our souls, and we see that for us who are believers, Jesus died with the special intent that we should be saved.** For the Holy Spirit to assure us that Jesus shed his blood for us in particular is one thing, but merely to conclude that Jesus for us on the notion that he died for everybody is as far as the east is from the west, from being real faith in Jesus Christ.

Neither is it faith for me to be confident that I am saved, for it may be the case that I am not saved, and it can never be faith to believe a lie. Many have concluded rashly that they were saved when they were still in the gall of bitterness. That was not the exhibition of confidence in Christ but the exhibition of a base presumption destructive to the last degree. To come back to where we started from, faith, in a word, is reliance upon Jesus Christ. Whether the Redeemer died in special and particular for me or not, is not the question to be raised in the first place; I find that he came into the world to save sinners, under that general character I come to him, I find that whosoever trusteth him shall be saved, I therefore trust him, and having done so, I learn from his word that I am the object of his special love, and that I am born of God.

In my first coming to Jesus I can have no knowledge of any personal and special interest in the blood of Jesus; but since it is written, "God hath set him forth to be a propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world," I come and trust myself to that propitiation; sink or swim I cast myself on the Saviour. Great Son of God, thou hast lived and died, thou hast bled and suffered, and **made atonement for sin for all such as trust thee**, and I trust thee, I lean upon thee, I cast myself upon thee. Now, whoever has such faith as this is born of God, **he has true faith which is proof positive of the new birth**. Judge ye, therefore, whether ye have this faith or no.

Let me tarry just one minute longer over this. The true faith is set forth in Scripture by figures, and one or two of these we will mention. It was an eminent type of faith when the Hebrews father in Egypt slew the lamb and caught the warm blood in the basin, then took a bunch of hyssop and dipped it in the blood and marked the two posts of his door, and then struck a red mark across the lintel. That smearing of the door represented faith. The deliverance was wrought by the blood; and the blood availed through the householder's own personally striking it upon his door. Faith does that; it takes of the things of Christ, makes them its own, sprinkles the soul, as it were, with the precious blood, accepts the way of mercy by which the Lord passes over us and exempts his people from destruction. Faith was shown to the Jews in another way. When a beast was offered in sacrifice for sin, the priest and sometimes the representatives of the tribes or the individual laid their hands upon the victim in token that they desired their sins to be transferred to it, that it might suffer for them as a type of the great substitute. Faith lays her hands on Jesus, desiring to receive the benefit of his substitutionary death.

A still more remarkable representation of faith was that of the healing look of the serpent-bitten Israelites. On the great standard in the midst of the camp Moses lifted up a serpent of brass; high overhead above all the tents this serpent gleamed in the sun, and whoever of all the dying host

would but look to it was made to live. looking was a very simple act, but it indicated that the person was obedient to God's command. He looked as he was bidden, and the virtue of healing came from the brazen serpent through a look. Such is faith. It is the simplest thing in the world, but it indicates a great deal more than is seen upon its surface:

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One."

To believe in Jesus is but to glance the eye of faith to him, to trust him with thy soul. That poor woman who came behind our Saviour in the press offers us another figure of what faith is. She said, "If I may but touch the hem of his garment I shall be made whole." Taking no medicines, making no profession, and performing no ceremonies, she simply touched the ravelling of the Saviour's robe, and she was healed at once. O soul, if thou canst get into contact with Christ by simply trusting him, though that trust be ever so feeble, thou hast the faith of God's elect; thou hast the faith which is in every case the token of the new birth.

## **II. We must now pass on to show that WHEREVER IT EXISTS IT IS THE PROOF OF REGENERATION.**

There never was a grain of such faith as this in the world, except in a regenerate soul, and there never will be while the world standeth. It is so according to the text, and if we had no other testimony this one passage would be quite enough to prove it. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." "Ah!" I hear thee say, poor soul, "the new birth is a great mystery; I do not understand it; I am afraid I am not a partaker in it." You are born again if you believe that Jesus is the Christ, if you are relying upon a crucified Saviour you are assuredly begotten again unto a lively hope. Mystery or no mystery, the new birth is yours if you are a believer. Have you never noticed that the greatest mysteries in the world reveal themselves by the simplest indications. The simplicity and apparent easiness of faith is no reason why I should not regard its existence as an infallible indication of the new birth within. How know we that the new-born child lives except by its cry? Yet a child's cry—what a simple sound it is! how readily could it be imitated! a clever workman could with pipes and strings easily deceive us; yet was there never a child's cry in the world but what it indicated the mysteries of breathing, heart-beating, blood-flowing, and all the other wonders which come with life itself. Do you see yonder person just drawn out of the river? Does she live? Yes, life is there. Why? Because the lungs still heave. But does it not seem an easy thing to make lungs heave? A pair of billows blown into them, might not that produce the motion? Ah, yes, the thing is easily imitated after a sort; but no lungs heave except where life is. Take another illustration. Go into a telegraph office at any time, and you will see certain needles moving right and left with unceasing click. Electricity is a great mystery, and you cannot see or feel it; but the operator tells you that the electric current is moving along the wire. How does he know? "I know it by the needle." How is that? I could move your needles easily. "Yes; but do not you see the needle has made two motions to the right, one to the left, and two to the right again? I am reading a message." "But," say you, "I can see nothing in it; I could imitate the clicking and moving very easily." Yet he who is taught the art sees before him in those needles, not only electric action, but a deeper mystery still; he perceives that a mind is directing an invisible force, and speaking by means of it. Not to all, but to the initiated is it given to see the mystery hidden within the simplicity. The believer sees in the faith, which is simple as the movements of the needle, an indication that God is operating on the

human mind, and the spiritual man discerns that there is an inner secret intimated thereby, which the carnal eye cannot decipher. To believe in Jesus is a better indicator of regeneration than anything else, and in no case did it ever mislead. **Faith in the living God and his Son Jesus Christ is always the result of the new birth, and can never exist except in the regenerate. Whoever has faith is a saved man.**

I beg you to follow me a little in this argument. A certain divine has lately said, "A man's act of believing is not the same as his being saved: it is only in the direction of being saved." This is tantamount to a denial that every believer in Christ is at once saved; and the inference is that a man may not conclude that he is saved because he believes in Jesus. Now, observe how opposed this is to Scripture. It is certain from the Word of God that the man who believes in Jesus is not condemned. Read John iii. 18, and many other passages. "He that believeth on Him is not condemned." Now is not every unregenerate man condemned? Is not a man who is not condemned a saved man? When you are sure on divine authority that the believer is not condemned, how in the name of everything that is rational can you deny that the believer is saved? If he is not condemned, what has he to fear? Will he not rightly conclude that being justified by faith, he has peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?

Note, secondly, that faith in the fourth verse of the chapter before us is said to "overcome the world." "This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith." What, then, does faith overcome the world in persons who are not saved? How can this be possible when the apostle saith that that which overcomes the world is born of God? Read the fourth verse: "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world:" but faith overcomes the world. **therefore the man who has faith is regenerate;** and what means that but that he is saved, and that his faith is the instrument by which he achieves victories.

Further, faith accepts the witness of God, and more, he that hath faith has the witness in himself to the truth of God. Read the tenth verse of the chapter: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself." It is not said, "He that does this or feels that," but "He that believeth hath the witness in himself," **his heart bears witness to the truth of God.** Has any unsaved man an experimental witness within? Will you tell me that a man's inner experience bears witness to God's gospel and yet the man is in a lost state, or only hopeful of being saved ultimately? No, sir, it is impossible. **He that believeth has that change wrought in him which enables by his own consciousness to confirm the witness of God, and such a man must be in a state of salvation. It is not possible to say of him that he is an unsaved man.**

Again, note in this chapter, at the thirteenth verse, that wherever there is faith there is eternal life; so run the words, "these things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life." Our Lord himself, and his apostles, in several places have declared, "He that believeth on him hath everlasting life." Do not tell me that a sinner who believes in Jesus is to make an advance before he can say he is saved, that a man who trusts Christ is only on his way to salvation, and must wait until he has used the ordinances, and has grown in grace, before he may know that he is saved. No, the moment that the sinner's trust is placed on the finished work of Jesus he is saved. Heaven and earth may pass away, but that man shall never perish. If only one second ago I trusted the Saviour I am safe; just as safe as the man who has believed in Jesus fifty years, and who has all the while walked uprightly. I do not

say that the new born convert is as happy, nor as useful, nor as holy, nor as ripe for heaven, but I do say that the words, "he that believeth on him hath everlasting life," is a truth with general bearings, and relates as much to the babe in faith as does to the man who has attained to fullness of stature in Jesus Christ.

As if this chapter were written on purpose to meet the gross error that faith does not bring immediate salvation, it extols faith again and again, yea, and I may add, our Lord himself crowns faith, because faith never wears the crown, but brings all the glory to the dear Redeemer.

Now, let me say a word or two in reply to certain questions. But must not a man repent as well as believe? Reply: No man ever believed but what he repented at the same time. Faith and repentance go together. they must. If I trust Christ to save me from sin, I am at the same time repenting of sin, and my mind is changed in relation to sin, and everything else that has to do with its state. All the fruits meet for repentance are contained in faith itself. **You will never find that a man who trusts Christ remains an enemy of God, or a lover of sin. The fact that he accepts the atonement provided is proof positive that he loathes sin, and that his mind is thoroughly changed in reference to God.** Moreover, as to all the graces which are produced in the Christian afterwards, are they not all to be found in embryo in faith? "Only believe, and you shall be save," is the cry which many sneer at, and others misunderstand; but do you know what "only believe" means? Do you know what a world of meaning lies in that word? Read that famous chapter to the Hebrews, and see what faith has done and is still able to do, and you will see that it is no trifle. Wherever there is faith in a man let it but develop itself and there will be a purging of himself from sin, a separating himself from the world, a conflict with evil, and a warring for the glory of Christ, which nothing else could produce. Faith is in itself one of the noblest of graces; it is the compendium of all virtues; and as sometimes there will lie within one single ear enough seed to make a whole garden fertile, so, within that one word "faith," there lies enough of virtue to make earth blessed; enough of grace, if the Spirit make it to grow, to turn the fallen into the perfect. Faith is not the easy and light thing men think. Far are we from ascribing salvation to the profession of a mere creed, we loathe the idea; neither do we ascribe salvation to a fond persuasion, but we do ascribe salvation to Jesus Christ, and the obtaining of it to that simple, child like confidence which lovingly casts itself into the arms of him who gave both his hands to the nail and suffered to the death for the sins of his people. He who believes, then, is saved—rest assured of that. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God"

### **III. Now what flows out of this? Love is the legitimate issue! We must love if we are begotten of God all those who are also born of God.**

It would be an insult to you if I were to prove that a brother should love his brother. Doth not nature herself teach us that? Those, then, who are born of God ought to love all those of the same household. And who are they? Why, all those who have believed that Jesus is the Christ, and are resting their hopes where we rest ours, namely, on Christ the Anointed One of God. We are to love all such. We are to do this because we are of the family. **We believe, and therefore we have been begotten of God.** Let us act as those who are of the divine family; let us count it our privilege we are received into the household, and rejoice to perform the lovely obligations of our high position. We look around us and see many others who have believed in Jesus Christ; let us

love them because they are of the same kindred. "But they are some of them unsound in doctrine, they make gross mistakes as to the Master's ordinances." We are not to love their faults, neither ought we to expect them to love ours, we are nevertheless to love their persons, for "whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God," and therefore he is one of the family, and as we love the Father who begat we are to love all those who are begotten of him. First, I love God, and therefore I desire to promote God's truth and to keep God's gospel free from taint. But then I am to love all those whom God has begotten, despite the infirmities and errors I see in them, being also myself compassed about with infirmities. Life is the reason for love, the common life which is indicated by the common faith in the dear Redeemer is to bind us to each other. I must confess, though I would pay every deference to every brother's conscientious judgment, I do not know how I could bring my soul as a child of God to refuse any man communion at my Master's table, who believed that Jesus is the Christ. I have proof in his doing so, if he be sincere (and I can only judge of that by his life), that he is born of God; and has not every child a right to come to the Father's table? I know in the olden times, parent used to make their children go without meals as a punishment, but everybody tell us now this is cruel and unwise, for it injures the child's constitution to deprive it of necessary food. There are rods in the Lord's house, and there is no need to keep disobedient children away from supper. Let them come to the Lord's table, and eat and drink with the Lord Jesus and with all his saints, in the hope that when their constitution bestows strength they will throw out the disease which now they labor under, and come to be obedient to the whole gospel, which saith, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved."

Let me beg the members of this church to exhibit mutual love to one another. Are there many feeble among you? Comfort them. Are there any who want instruction? Bring your knowledge to their help. Are there any in distress? Assist them. Are they backsliding? Restore them. "Little children, love one another," is the rule of Christ's family, may we observe it. May the love of God which has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us, reveal itself by our love to all the saints. And, remember, other sheep he has which are not yet of this fold; them also he must bring in. Let us love those who are yet to be brought in, and lovingly go forth at once to seek them; in whatever other form of service God has given us, let us with loving eyes look after our prodigal brothers, and who knows, we may bring into the family this very day some for whom there will be joy in the presence of the angels of God, because the lost one has been found. God bless and comfort you, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

**Note:** ESV Used for some texts of Scripture

### **The New Genesis** - R.C. Sproul

*Without the presence of the Spirit there is no conviction, no regeneration, no sanctification, no cleansing, no acceptable works . . . Life is in the quickening Spirit.* — W A. CRISWELL

BIRTH and rebirth. Both are the result of the operation of the Holy Spirit. Just as nothing can live biologically apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, so no man can come alive to God apart from the Spirit's work

In His discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus said this about the Holy Spirit:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3)

To be "born again" is to experience a second genesis. It is a new beginning, a fresh start in life. When something is started, we say that it is generated. If it is started again, it is regenerated. The Greek verb *gignauo* that is translated as "generate" means "to be," "to become," or "to happen." Regeneration by the Holy Spirit is a change. It is a radical change into a new kind of being.

To be regenerated does not mean that we are changed from a human being into a divine being. It does mean that we are changed from spiritually dead human beings into spiritually alive human beings.

Spiritually dead persons are incapable of seeing the kingdom of God. It is invisible to them, not because the kingdom itself is invisible, but because the spiritually dead are also spiritually blind.

## REGENERATION AS NECESSARY

When Jesus uses the word unless in speaking to Nicodemus, He is stating what we call a necessary condition. A necessary condition is an absolute prerequisite for a desired result to take place. We cannot have fire without the presence of oxygen because oxygen is a necessary condition for fire.

In the jargon of Christianity people speak of "born again" Christians. Technically speaking, this phrase is redundant. If a person is not born again, if he is not regenerate, then he is not a Christian. He may be a member of a Christian church. He may profess to be a Christian. But unless a person is regenerate, he is not in Christ, and Christ is not in him.

The word unless makes regeneration a sine qua non of salvation. No regeneration, no eternal life. Without regeneration a person can neither see the kingdom nor enter the kingdom.

When Nicodemus was puzzled by Jesus' teaching he replied:

*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?* (John 3:4)

Nicodemus's response almost seems like an attempt to ridicule Jesus' teaching. In crass terms he suggests that Jesus must mean that a fully grown person must attempt the impossible task of returning to his mother's womb.

Nicodemus failed to distinguish biological birth from spiritual birth. He didn't differentiate between flesh and spirit. Jesus answered his response by saying,

*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." (John 3:5-7)*

Again Jesus prefaces His words by saying, "Most assuredly, I say to you . . ." The "most assuredly"— the Hebrew amen, carried over into the New Testament — indicates strong emphasis. That is, when Jesus spoke of regeneration as a necessary condition for seeing and entering the kingdom of God, he stated this necessary condition emphatically. To argue against the need of rebirth to be a Christian, as many of our contemporaries frequently do, is to stand in clear opposition to the emphatic teaching of Christ.

The word cannot is also crucial to Jesus' teaching. It is a negative word that deals with ability or possibility. Without regeneration no one (universal negative) is able to enter the kingdom of God. There are no exceptions. It is impossible to enter God's kingdom without a rebirth.

No one is born a Christian. No one is born biologically into the kingdom of God. The first birth is one that is of the flesh. Flesh begets flesh. It cannot produce spirit.

Later in John's Gospel, Jesus adds this comment:

*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing.* (John 6:2 3)

When Martin Luther was debating whether fallen man is utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit for regeneration, he cited this text and added: "The flesh profits nothing. And that 'nothing' is not a 'little something.'"

The flesh is not merely weak with respect to the power of rebirth. It is utterly impotent. It has no power whatever to effect rebirth. It cannot aid or enhance the Spirit's work. All that the flesh yields is more flesh. It cannot yield an ounce of Spirit. The nothing is not a little something.

Finally Jesus says, "You must be born again." If there is the slightest ambiguity with the use of the conditional word unless, the ambiguity completely evaporates with the word must.

## REGENERATION IN EPHESIANS

In his Letter to the Ephesians the apostle Paul speaks of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit:

*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).* (Ephesians 2:1-5)

Paul provides a graphic description of our spiritual impotence prior to regeneration. He is addressing the Ephesian believers and describing a prior condition in which they all once shared. He adds the phrase "just as the others" (2:3), presumably referring to the whole of mankind.

He declares that this prior condition was a state of death: "You were dead in trespasses and sins." Again, this death is obviously not a biological death, as he enumerates activities that these dead, persons were involved in.

The characteristic behavioral mode of people dead in trespasses and sins is described in terms of walking a particular course. He calls it the "course of this world" (2:1-2). Here the course of this world obviously refers to a course or pattern that is opposed to the course of heaven. The words this world refer not so much to a location as to a style or a point of reference. It involves a this-worldly orientation.

Christians and non-Christians alike share the same sphere of operations. We all live out our lives in this world. The regenerate person's course, however, is guided from above. He has his eye on heaven and his ear attuned to the King of heaven. The unregenerate person is earthbound. His ear is deaf to any word from heaven; his eye is blinded to the glory from on high. He lives as a walking cadaver in a spiritual graveyard.

The course of this world is "out of the way" of God (Romans 3:12). Rather, it follows a path that is "according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2).

The spiritually dead have a master. Their master sets a course for them that they willingly — even eagerly — follow. This master is called the “prince of the power of the air.” This sobriquet of royalty can only refer to Satan, the chief architect of all things diabolical. Paul calls him “the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.” Satan is an evil spirit, a corrupt and fallen angel who exercises influence and authority over his captive hordes.

Paul sets forth a principle of life. We either walk according to the Holy Spirit or we walk according to the evil spirit. Augustine once compared man to a horse who is either ridden by Satan or by the Spirit of God.

Paul continues his vivid description of the regenerate person’s prior unregenerate lifestyle:

*Among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind. (2:3)* The attention now shifts away from the external course and the external influence of Satan to the internal state of the unregenerate person. Again we see this as a universal condition: “Among whom also we all once conducted ourselves . . .” The key descriptive word of this previous internal condition is the word flesh. Here Paul echoes the language Jesus used with Nicodemus.

The word flesh here must not be understood as a synonym for “physical body.” Our bodies per se are not evil, since God made us as physical beings and became a human being Himself. The flesh refers to the sin nature, the entire fallen character of man.

Prior to regeneration we live exclusively in the flesh and by the flesh. Our conduct follows after the lusts of the flesh. That refers not exclusively to physical or sexual appetites but to a pattern of all sinful desires.

Paul caps this universal indictment of our fallen state by adding: “And were by nature children of wrath, just as the others” (2:3). When Paul speaks of “by nature,” he refers to our state in which we enter this world. Biological birth is natural birth. Regeneration is a supernatural birth. Men were not originally created as children of wrath. Original nature was not fallen. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, however, the word natural refers to our state of innate sinfulness.

Every child who enters this world enters it in a corrupt state. David declared, “I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). We are all spiritually stillborn. We are born dead in trespasses and sin. In theology we call this inherent sinful condition original sin. Original sin does not refer to the first sin of Adam and Eve; it refers to the consequences of that first sin, with the transmission of a corrupt nature to the entire human race.

We are by nature “children of wrath.” How different this sounds from the socially acceptable notion that we are all naturally the children of God! This misguided idea is both longstanding and widespread. It is a falsehood that gains credibility by its frequent repetition. If you repeat a lie often enough, people will begin to believe it.

The lie of saying that we are by nature children of God was a lie that distressed Jesus. He was forced to combat it and refute it in His debates with the Pharisees. The Pharisees raged under Jesus’ criticism and said, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father — God.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. . . . He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore, you do not hear, because you are not of God. (John 8:41-47)

Although the Bible acknowledges that God is the Father of all men in the sense of His being the Creator of all men, there is a special sense in which the Fatherhood of God is defined not in terms of biology but in terms of ethics. Obedience is the operative word. In the biblical view, our father is the one we obey. The relationship is established not by biological ties, but by willing obedience.

Since the Pharisees obeyed Satan rather than God, Jesus said of them, “You are of your father the devil” (John 8:44).

In Ephesians 2 Paul speaks both of “children of wrath” (v. 3) and “sons of disobedience” (v. 2). These phrases describe all of us in our natural unregenerate state.

When Paul completes his description of our unregenerate state, he moves abruptly and gloriously into a doxology that praises God for His mercy. The transitional word is the single word upon which our eternal destinies depend. It is perhaps the most glorious word in Scripture, the single word that crystallizes the essence of the Gospel. It is the word but. This tiny conjunction shifts the mood of the entire passage. It is the link between the natural and the supernatural, between degeneration and regeneration: *But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:4-10)*

#### **THE DIVINE INITIATIVE**

Regeneration is the sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit. The initiative is with Him, not with ourselves. We notice that the accent with Paul falls on the work of God, not on the effort of man:

*But God, who is rich in mercy...*

We observe that the Apostle does not write:

But man, out of his goodness, inclines himself to God and raises himself to a new spiritual level.

One of the most dramatic moments in my life for the shaping of my theology took place in a seminary classroom.

One of my professors went to the blackboard and wrote these words in bold letters: **REGENERATION PRECEDES FAITH**

These words were a shock to my system. I had entered seminary believing that the key work of man to effect rebirth was faith. I thought that we first had to believe in Christ in order to be born again. I use the words in order here for a reason. I was thinking in terms of steps that must be taken in a certain sequence to arrive at a destination. I had put faith at the beginning of the sequence. The order looked something like this:

**Faith — Rebirth — Justification**

In this scheme of things the initiative falls with us. To be sure, God had sent Jesus to die on the cross before I ever heard the gospel. But once God had done these things external to me, I thought the initiative for appropriating salvation was my job.

I hadn't thought the matter through very carefully. Nor had I listened carefully to Jesus' words to Nicodemus. I assumed that even though I was a sinner, a person born of the flesh and living in the flesh, I still had a little island of righteousness, a tiny deposit of spiritual power left within my soul to enable me to respond to the gospel on my own.

Perhaps I had been confused by the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic church. Rome, and many other branches of Christendom, had taught that regeneration is gracious; it cannot happen apart from the help of God. No man has the power to raise himself from spiritual death. Divine assistance is needed and needed absolutely. This grace, according to Rome, comes in the form of what is called prevenient grace. "Prevenient" means that which comes before something else.

Rome adds to this prevenient grace the requirement that we must "cooperate with it and assent to it" before it can take hold in our hearts.

This concept of cooperation is at best a half-truth. It is true insofar that the faith that we exercise is our faith. God does not do the believing in Christ for us. When I respond to Christ, it is my response, my faith, my trust that is being exercised.

The issue, however, goes much deeper. The question still remains: Do I cooperate with God's grace before I am born again, or does the cooperation occur after I am born again?

Another way of asking this question is to ask if regeneration is monergistic or synergistic. Is it operative or cooperative? Is it effectual or dependent? Some of these words are theological terms that require further explanation.

### **MONERGISM AND SYNERGISM**

A monergistic work is a work produced singly, by one person. The prefix mono- means one. The word erg refers to a unit of work. Words like energy are built upon this root. A synergistic work is one that involves cooperation between two or more persons or things. The prefix syn- means "together with."

I labor this distinction for a reason. It is fair to say that the whole debate between Rome and Martin Luther hung on this single point. At issue was this: Is regeneration a monergistic work of God, or is it a synergistic work that requires cooperation between man and God?

When my professor wrote, "Regeneration precedes faith" on the blackboard, he was clearly siding with the monergistic answer. To be sure, after a person is regenerated, that person cooperates by exercising faith and trust. But the first step, the step of regeneration by which a person is quickened to spiritual life, is the work of God and of God alone. The initiative is with God, not with us.

The reason we do not cooperate with regenerating grace before it acts upon us and in us is because we cannot. We cannot because we are spiritually, dead. We can no more assist the Holy Spirit in the quickening of our souls to spiritual life than Lazarus could help Jesus raise him from the dead.

It is probably true that the majority of professing Christians in the world today believe that the order of our salvation is this: Faith precedes regeneration. We are exhorted to choose to be born again. But telling a man to choose rebirth is like exhorting a corpse to choose resurrection. The exhortation falls upon deaf ears.

When I began to wrestle with the professor's argument, I was surprised to learn that his strange-sounding teaching was not a novel innovation to theology. I found the same teaching in Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield. I was astonished to find it even in the teaching of the great medieval Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas.

That these giants of Christian history reached the same conclusion on this point made a tremendous impact on me. I was aware that they were neither individually nor collectively infallible. Each and all of them could be mistaken. But I was impressed. I was especially impressed by Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas is regarded as the Doctor Angelicus of the Roman Catholic church. For centuries his theological teaching was accepted as official dogma by most Catholics. So he was the last person I expected to hold such a view of regeneration. Yet Aquinas insisted that regenerating grace is operative grace, not cooperative grace. Aquinas spoke of prevenient grace, but he spoke of a grace that comes before faith, which is the grace of regeneration.

The key phrase in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians on this matter is this: *even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)*. (Ephesians 2:5) Here Paul locates the time when regeneration occurs. It takes place when we were dead. With one thunderbolt of apostolic revelation all attempts to give the initiative in regeneration to man is smashed utterly and completely. Again, dead men. do not cooperate with grace. The spiritually dead take no initiative. Unless regeneration takes place first, there is no possibility of faith.

This says nothing different from what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Unless a man is born again first, he cannot possibly see or enter the kingdom of God. If we believe that faith precedes regeneration, then we set our thinking and therefore ourselves in direct opposition not only to Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, and others, but we stand opposed to the teaching of Paul and of our Lord Himself.

### **REGENERATION IS GRACIOUS**

In Paul's exposition of regeneration there is a strong accent on grace. It is necessary that Christians of all theological persuasions acknowledge willingly and joyfully that our salvation rests upon the foundation of grace.

During the Reformation the Protestants used two Latin phrases as battle cries: sola scriptura (Scripture alone) and so/a fide (faith alone). They insisted that the supreme authority in the church under Christ is the Bible alone. They insisted that justification was by faith alone. Now Rome did not deny that the Bible has authority; it was the sola they choked on. Rome did not deny that justification involves faith; it was the sola that provoked them to condemn Luther.

There was a third battle cry during the Reformation. It was originally penned by Augustine more than a thousand years before Luther. It was the phrase sola gratia. This phrase asserts that our salvation rests on the grace of God alone. There is no mixture of human merit with it. Salvation is not a human achievement; it is a gracious gift of God. This formula is compromised by a synergistic view of regeneration.

It is not by accident that Paul adds to his teaching on regeneration that it is a gracious work of God. Let us look at it again: *But God who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) . . . that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* (Ephesians 2:4-10)

Have you ever second-guessed the Bible? I certainly have, to my great shame. I have often wondered, in the midst of theological disagreements, why the Bible does not speak more clearly on certain issues. Why, for example, doesn't the New Testament come right out and say we should or we shouldn't baptize infants?

On many such questions we are left to decide on the basis of inferences drawn from the Bible. When I am bewildered by such disagreements, I usually come back to this point: The trouble lies not with the Bible's lack of clarity; it lies with my lack of clear thinking about what the Bible teaches.

When it comes to regeneration and faith I wonder how Paul could have made it any more clear. I suppose he could have added the words to Ephesians 2, "Regeneration precedes faith." However, I honestly think that even that phrase wouldn't end the debate. There's nothing in that phrase that isn't already clearly spelled out by Paul in this text or by Jesus in John 3.

Why then, all the fuss? My guess is that it is because if we conclude that regeneration is by divine initiative, that regeneration is monergistic, that salvation is by grace alone, we cannot escape the glaring implication that leads us quickly and irresistibly to sovereign election.

As soon as the doctrine of election comes to the fore, there is a mad scramble to find a way to get faith in there before regeneration. In spite of all these attending difficulties, we meet the Apostle's teaching headon:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Here the Apostle teaches that the faith through which we are saved is a faith that comes to us by grace. Our faith is something we exercise by ourselves and in ourselves, but it is not of ourselves. It is a gift. It is not an achievement.

With the graciousness of the gift of faith as a fruit of regeneration, all boasting is excluded forever, save in the boasting of the exceeding riches of God's mercy. All man-centered views of salvation are excluded if we retain the sola in so/a gratia. Therefore we ought never to grieve the Holy Spirit by taking credit to ourselves that belongs exclusively to Him.

### **REGENERATION IS EFFECTUAL**

Within traditional forms of Arminian theology there are those who agree that regeneration precedes faith but insist that it doesn't always or necessarily produce faith. This view agrees that the initiative is with God; it is by grace, and regeneration is monergistic. The view is usually tied to some type of view of universal regeneration.

This idea is linked to the cross. It is argued by some that one of the universal benefits of the atonement of Christ is that all people are regenerated to the point that faith is now possible. The cross rescues all men from spiritual death in that now we have the power to cooperate or not cooperate with the offer of saving grace. Those who cooperate by exercising faith are justified. Those who do not exercise faith are born again but not converted. They are spiritually quickened and spiritually alive but remain in unbelief. Now they are able to see the kingdom and have the moral power to enter the kingdom, but they choose not to.

I call this view one of ineffectual or dependent grace. It is close to what Thomas Aquinas rejected as cooperative grace.

When I maintain that regeneration is effectual, I mean that it accomplishes its desired goal. It is effective. It gets the job done. We are made alive into faith. The gift is of faith which is truly given and takes root in our hearts.

Sometimes the phrase effectual calling is used as a synonym for regeneration. The word calling refers to something that happens inside of us, as distinguished from something that occurs outside of us.

When the gospel is preached audibly, sounds are emitted from the preacher's mouth. There is an outward call to faith and repentance. Anyone who is not deaf is capable of hearing the words with his ears. These words strike the auditory nerves of the regenerate and the unregenerate alike.

The unregenerate experience the outward call of the gospel. This outward call will not effect salvation unless the call is heard and embraced in faith. Effectual calling refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Here the call is within. The regenerate are called inwardly. Everyone who receives the inward call of regeneration responds in faith. Paul says this:

*Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.* (Romans 8:30)

This passage in Romans is elliptical. That is, it requires that we supply a word to it that is assumed by the text but not explicitly stated. The big question is, Which word do we supply — some or all? Let us try some:

Moreover, **some** whom He predestined, these He also called; **some** whom He called, these He also justified; and **some** whom He justified, these He also glorified.

To add the word some here is to torture the text. It would mean that some of the predestined never hear the call of the gospel. Some who are called never come to faith and justification. Some of the justified fail to be glorified. In this schema not only would calling not be effectual, but neither would predestination nor justification be effectual.

The implication of this text is that all who are predestined are likewise called. All who are called are justified, and all who are justified are glorified.

If that is the case, then we must distinguish between the outward call of the gospel, which may or may not be heeded, and the inward call of the Spirit, which is necessarily effectual. Why? If all the called are also justified, then all the called must exercise faith. Obviously not everyone who hears the external call of the gospel comes to faith and justification. But all who are effectually called do come to faith and justification. Here the call refers to the inward work of the Holy Spirit that is tied to regeneration.

Those whom the Holy Spirit makes alive most assuredly come to life. They see the kingdom; they embrace the kingdom; they enter the kingdom.

It is to the Holy Spirit of God that we are debtors for the grace of regeneration and faith. He is the Gift-giver, who while we were dead made us alive with Christ, to Christ, and in Christ. It is because of the Holy Spirit's merciful act of quickening that we sing sola gratia and soli deo gloria — to the glory of God alone.

#### **Author**

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*This article is taken from Dr. Sproul's book, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Tyndale House: Wheaton, 1979).*

## **Idling life away like an idiot or a madman**

(Joseph Philpot, "[The Soul's Growth in Grace](#)" 1837)

**When one is spiritually reborn**, he sees  
at one and the same moment . . .

God and self,  
justice and guilt,  
power and helplessness,  
a holy law and a broken commandment,  
eternity and time,  
the purity of the Creator, and  
the filthiness of the creature.

And these things he sees, not merely as declared in the Bible, but as revealed in himself as personal realities, involving all his happiness or all his misery in time and in eternity. Thus it is with him **as though a new existence** had been communicated, and as if for the first time he had found there was a God!

**It is as though all his days he had been asleep,**  
and were now awakened; asleep upon the top of  
a mast, with the raging waves beneath; **as if all**  
**his past life were a dream,** and the dream were  
now at an end. He has been . . .

    hunting butterflies,  
    blowing soap bubbles,  
    angling for minnows,  
    picking daisies,  
    building houses of cards, and  
**idling life away like an idiot or a madman.**

He had been perhaps wrapped up in a religious  
profession, advanced even to the office of a deacon,  
or mounted in a pulpit. He had learned to talk about  
Christ, and election, and grace, and fill his mouth  
with the language of Zion.

But what did he experimentally know of these  
things? **Nothing, absolutely nothing!**

**Ignorant of his own ignorance** (of all kinds of  
ignorance the worst), he thought himself rich,  
and increased with goods, and to have need of  
nothing; and knew not that he was wretched,  
and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

## Francis Thompson “The Hound of Heaven”

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
    Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
    Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
    And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
    But with unhurrying chase,  
    And unperturbéd pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
    They beat—and a Voice beat  
    More instant than the Feet—  
    “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

I stand amid the dust o’ the mounded years—

My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.  
 My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,  
 Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.  
     Yea, faileth now even dream  
 The dreamer, and the lute the lutanist.

Strange, piteous, futile thing!  
 Wherefore should any set thee love apart?  
 Seeing none but I makes much of naught" (He said),  
 "And human love needs human meriting:  
     How hast thou merited—  
 Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?  
     Alack, thou knowest not  
 How little worthy of any love thou art!  
 Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,  
     Save Me, save only Me?  
 All which I took from thee I did but take,  
     Not for thy harms,  
 But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.  
     All which thy child's mistake  
 Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:  
     Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"

Halts by me that footfall:  
     Is my gloom, after all,  
 Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?

"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
     I am He Whom thou seekest!