

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE NEW BIRTH?

JOHN 3:3-8

by Pastor Bill Parker

One of the most misunderstood subjects in the Bible is the new birth. In the 1970's we heard so much about "born-again Christians." A woman even stated on a TV program that she had been a Christian for over 20 years and had not been born again yet. Of course this is impossible. There are no other kinds of Christians than born-again Christians. And if you have not been born again you are not a true Christian. Let's consider what it is to be born again, and what actually happens when a person is born again. In *John 3* the Lord Jesus Christ is speaking to a man named Nicodemus, and He tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. Without being born again, born of the Spirit of God, it is impossible for a sinner to savingly see (understand) or enter the kingdom of God. Let's consider several things in this issue of the new birth.

I. THE NEED OF THE NEW BIRTH.

- *John 3:3 -- Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. {4} Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? {5} Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. {6} That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

Nicodemus is representative of all sincere, moral, dedicated religionists who are going about to do their best to obey God's commands, to avoid sin, and to do the best they can to please God. Christ told him, and in essence, tells all of us, "**YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN.**" Why? It is because "*that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*" That which is born by natural birth is born in a state of guilt, defilement, and condemnation as children of wrath. That which is born of the Holy Spirit, born again, is born into a state of grace, justification, and eternal life, as children of God.

There are only two states in which all sinners without exception exist before God. Christ calls the first state **FLESH**. It is the state into which **ALL** of us are born by natural generation in Adam as guilty, condemned, defiled sinners, owing a debt to God's law and justice, unable to save ourselves, and unwilling to be saved **God's** way. Christ calls the other state **SPIRIT**. It is the state into which **SOME** are born by a miraculous birth of the Holy Spirit. This is the state of saved, justified, sanctified, redeemed sinners, who, by the power of God, have sought and found salvation **GOD'S WAY**, based solely upon the merits of the righteousness of Christ freely imputed and received by faith. God's elect pass from the state of **FLESH** (lost) into the state of **SPIRIT** (saved). The **NEW BIRTH** is the passage between these two states. This new birth includes everything necessary, as ordered by God, to bring sinners from death and condemnation to spiritual life and justification. This is God's way of saving sinners by His sovereign power and grace. If there is no new birth, there is no salvation. So --

- *John 3:7 -- Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.*

II. THE NATURE OF THE NEW BIRTH?

The new birth involves two operations of God the Holy Spirit. These operations are both necessary in salvation, not as causes or grounds of salvation but as the means by which God brings His people from condemnation to salvation. The new birth is the work of God the Holy Spirit **IN** a sinner, i.e., it a subjective work of grace by which God the Holy Spirit imparts or infuses the graces and principles of spiritual life and faith within a sinner. None of the work of the Holy Spirit **IN** a sinner forms any part of the ground or cause of salvation. God's sovereign, unmerited love is the only cause of salvation, and Christ's work **FOR** sinners is the only ground of salvation. The work of the Holy Spirit **IN** sinners in the new birth is the fruit and effect of Christ's righteousness wrought out **FOR** sinners. The work of the Holy Spirit in sinners does not remove the guilt of sin or entitle them to the whole inheritance of eternal life. Christ's righteousness alone does this! One of the main evidences of the new birth is when a sinner sees that Christ's righteousness alone entitles him to the whole inheritance of eternal life. Christ must have the preeminence. Christ told His disciples that the main work of the Holy Spirit is to point sinners to Him and to show them the value of His blood and righteousness --

- *John 16:14 -- He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you.*

Consider these two operations of the Holy Spirit in bringing about the new birth.

A. REGENERATION.

- *Titus 3:4 -- But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, {5} Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, BY THE WASHING OF REGENERATION, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; {6} Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour;*
- *2 Thessalonians 2:13 -- But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through SANCTIFICATION OF THE SPIRIT and belief of the truth:*

A sinner is regenerated by Holy Spirit when he is quickened or made alive **spiritually** by the Holy Spirit. This is the first subjective work of the Holy Spirit in God's elect. It is a sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit without the use of any means whereby He in time applies to each one of God's elect in each successive generation what Christ has merited and secured for them in spiritual life. This is necessary because by nature we are born **SPIRITUALLY DEAD**(*Eph. 2:1,5*). Spiritual death is both legal and moral. **Legally**, it is how we are born guilty, under God's wrath, owing a debt to God's law and justice we are unable to pay --

- *Romans 3:10 -- As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:*

This verse does not say none **appear** righteous unto men. It does not say none are religious and moral. It says by nature **THERE ARE NONE RIGHTEOUS**. No person born of Adam, by nature, or by practice, **POSSESSES A RIGHTEOUSNESS EQUAL TO THE DEMANDS OF GOD'S HOLY LAW AND INFLEXIBLE JUSTICE**.

Morally, spiritual death concerns how we are born in Adam as spiritually kin to Satan. All who are born of Adam not only have his guilt imputed to them, but they also by natural birth inherit a fallen, corrupt nature from Adam which consists in the sinful principles and powers of darkness -- self-righteousness, self-love, and religious pride. This dominates the thinking of all natural men and women who have not been born again. It controls their whole way and tenor of life, whether moral or immoral, religious or irreligious. This does not mean all are openly immoral and unconcerned about religion. Even as depraved sinners we, like Nicodemus, before being born again, are able to perform duties of religion and morality to make us appear righteous.

In salvation, both legal and moral spiritual death are remedied. Legally we come from condemnation to justification based on the righteousness of Christ imputed (charged to our account). This righteousness is the merit of Christ's whole work of redemption for His sheep. It is the "***righteousness of God***" revealed in the Gospel, and it is the only ground of salvation. Immediately, even simultaneously, as the fruit and effect of Christ's righteousness, we are quickened by the Spirit of God. This is when the Holy Spirit imparts or gives us a new principle of life and faith, the very life of God which is in Christ. We are made alive in Christ (***1 Cor. 15:22***). This is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Again, it is vital that we understand how none of the work of the Holy Spirit in us forms any part of the ground of our salvation. Regeneration, faith, repentance, humility, love, are all the work of the Holy Spirit in us. But none of these remove God's wrath, gain God's favor, or entitles us to any part of the whole inheritance of eternal life. Only Christ's righteousness imputed removes God's wrath, gains God's favor, and entitles us to the whole inheritance of eternal life. All the work of the Holy Spirit in us is the fruit of Christ's righteousness imputed to us. Again, the main work of the Holy Spirit in us is to cause us to value Christ and His righteousness as the only ground of our salvation and final glory.

B. CONVERSION.

- ***Titus 3:4 -- But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, {5} Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, AND RENEWING OF THE HOLY GHOST; {6} Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour;***

- *2 Thessalonians 2:13 -- But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the spirit and BELIEF OF THE TRUTH: {14} WHEREUNTO HE CALLED YOU BY OUR GOSPEL, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Conversion is the next operation of the Holy Spirit in the new birth. Conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit empowering the instrument of the Gospel to bring a sinner to salvation. God the Holy Spirit is the sovereign Agent. The Gospel is the effectual instrument, and the mind is the place where this operation takes place in order to bring that sinner's affections and will to submit to God's truth. This is the heart upon which the Holy Spirit operates. Conversion takes place in a sinner when the new principle of life given in regeneration acts upon hearing God's Gospel -- His promise to save sinners and entitle them to the whole inheritance of eternal life based on the imputed righteousness of Christ. In this sense the Gospel is the "*power of God unto salvation*" (*Rom. 1:16*). The convinced sinner, under the influence of the new principle of spiritual life acts by exercising saving faith in Christ and true repentance. Where righteousness is imputed, faith is always **immediately** given to receive it. Conversion is where regenerated sinners come to faith in Christ and plead His righteousness as the only ground of salvation. It is when we see God honored as both a just God and a Savior based on the righteousness of Christ. Then, by faith, we repent, change our minds concerning who God is and concerning ourselves as guilty sinners in need of a righteousness we cannot produce. We change our minds concerning Christ and the ground of salvation. We become ashamed that we ever thought salvation or any part of it was conditioned on ourselves. We, therefore, renounce all efforts at religion and morality before saving faith as being dead works and acts of open idolatry.

Both of these operations together, regeneration **and** conversion, make up the new birth. They are both the fruit of Christ's righteousness imputed, the only ground of salvation. In the new birth, regeneration comes first, because there must be life before there can be faith. No sinner will be converted until he is quickened. Quickening is an act of God the Holy Spirit without the use of any means. It is the act of a sovereign God who is the only source and originator of salvation. It is not the work of men, nor is it conditioned on anything done by men or in men. Regeneration does not come as the result of hearing the Gospel. Apart from regeneration no sinner will receive the Gospel savingly. The new birth does not come as the result of sinners exercising faith,

nor does it come as the result of man exercising his will toward God --

- *John 1:12 -- But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: {13} Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*
- *John 3:8 -- The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.*
- *Romans 9:16 -- So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.*

Any notion of free will that even implies that the new birth is conditioned on the sinner's will is not of God. It is works salvation and dishonoring to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. "*Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" (Rom. 10:17). This *hearing* only comes by the power of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.

Conversion comes by means of *the word of God*. Again, this is God's Gospel -- His promise to save sinners and entitle them to the whole inheritance of eternal life based on the righteousness of Christ --

- *John 3:5 -- Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be BORN OF WATER and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

Some say the *water* here refers to our physical birth and that Christ is telling Nicodemus simply that sinners who are born in sin naturally (*born of water*) must be born again by the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God. But I believe that the "*water*" here is symbolic for the Gospel. Again, the sovereign Agent in the new birth is God the Holy Spirit. The instrument of the new birth is the Gospel --

- *1 Peter 1:23 -- Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. {24} For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: {25} But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.*
- *James 1:18 -- Of His own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*

A very, very important truth we must remember is that regeneration and conversion are always together in the new birth. Regeneration and conversion can be distinguished, but **they cannot be separated**. A sinner cannot be regenerated and not as a result be converted. By the same token, a sinner cannot be converted without having already been regenerated. Regeneration must come first, but conversion comes immediately with it and as a result of it. This means there are no regenerated sinners who do not believe the true Gospel and who have not repented. By the same token, there are not believers who have not been regenerated. Consider the following verses -

- *John 3:18 -- 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.*
- *John 3:36 -- He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and **HE THAT BELIEVETH NOT THE SON SHALL NOT SEE LIFE; BUT THE WRATH OF GOD ABIDETH ON HIM.***

These verses tell us that the main evidence of condemnation and wrath is unbelief of the Gospel. A person who is regenerated is a child of God, one who has been justified, from whom the wrath of God has been removed. How could a person be a regenerated child of God and still be condemned and under God's wrath? This is impossible. The Primitive Baptist denomination and other false Christians who want to say they and others were saved in ignorance of the true Gospel and who want to speak peace to themselves and to others who are not submitted to the righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel claim they can be and were regenerated before they ever heard the true

Gospel. This is impossible. God the Holy Spirit does not regenerate sinners under the preaching of a false gospel. God the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. He sovereignly and effectually works in the context of and by means of the truth, beginning with the truth of the Gospel. So as regeneration comes first and then conversion, never go against God's clear testimony by claiming that a person can be regenerated and years later be converted. Regeneration and conversion are always together. There is not new birth without regeneration, and there is no new birth without conversion. Those who have spiritual life imparted will evidence that life by faith in Christ and true, Godly repentance.

III. THE WAY OF THE NEW BIRTH.

Consider *John 3:8*.

- *John 3:8 -- The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

Now consider *John 3:14-15*.

- *John 3:14 -- And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: {15} That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

Many use *John 3:8* to prove how God is sovereign, and how He gives or withholds life according to His will. THIS IS TRUE, but to use this verse to promote a fatalistic attitude towards the new birth is wrong. A false preacher once attacked what he called *Calvinism*, and specifically the doctrine of invincible calling, by saying, "Nowhere in the Bible does God tell you to wait on a work of the Holy Spirit before you believe." He was not attacking God's truth but a straw man of his own raising. God does not tell anyone to wait for anything to believe. He tells all who hear the Gospel that NOW is the day of salvation, and He commands them to believe and repent. He does tell us that all who do believe and repent are born again by the Spirit of God.

Some imply by their confusion over the new birth that, "If I'm born again, it's God's fault; if I'm not born again, it's God's fault." Some say, "We're not in the birthing business. We cannot tell sinners how to be born again." It is true that we cannot tell anyone how or when God the Holy Spirit is sent of Christ to impart that principle of life. But the whole point of *John 3:8* is that new birth is only known by its evidences, and sinners are commanded and fully warranted to seek both the means and the evidences of the new birth.

A. THE MEANS -- THE GOSPEL IS THE ONLY MEANS BY WHICH THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL CONVERT A SINNER WHOM HE HAS QUICKENED.

Sinners are commanded and warranted to seek out and find the Gospel. Christ told His disciples, "*The TRUTH will make you free*" (*John 8:32*). This is a specific truth, the truth of the Gospel wherein Christ's righteousness is revealed as the only ground of salvation to the exclusion of all that self-righteous men and women think contribute to their salvation.

- *John 3:19 -- And this is the condemnation, that LIGHT is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. {20} For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.*

The *light* is the Gospel that reveals the only way of salvation based on the righteousness of Christ, and exposes all the efforts of men and women to save themselves as evil deeds, not because they are immoral and insincere, but because they are the fruit of unbelief and self-righteousness. Again, no sinner will be born again where the Gospel is not preached. Always remember that God the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. Although regeneration is an act of the Holy Spirit without any means, conversion which comes immediately with regeneration and as a result of regeneration comes only under the Gospel.

B. THE EVIDENCES -- The first evidences of the new birth are faith in Christ and repentance from dead works and former idolatry. All of God's elect have been redeemed by Christ. In each successive generation, Christ's righteousness will be imputed to them, and, as a result, they will be born again. This means they will be brought under the Gospel, and they, by the Spirit of God, will be quickened and brought to faith in Christ and to true repentance.

- ***John 3:16 -- For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. {17} For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. {18} 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.***

God is going to save mankind through a remnant of chosen sinners who believe His promise of salvation conditioned on Christ alone. They will come to be ashamed of having sought to establish a righteousness of their own. They will possess the Son by faith (***1 John 5:12***). This truth does not shut any sinner out of the kingdom of God. Sinners shut themselves out by unbelief. All sinners who hear the Gospel are commanded and fully warranted to believe God's promise, to receive Christ and His righteousness, and to reject everything else as far as the ground of salvation is concerned. No one is warranted to ever seek to find out whether they are one of God's elect or whether or not they have been born again apart from the means of the Gospel, believing that Gospel, and repenting from former idolatry and dead works.

Remember, ***"that which is born of flesh is flesh."*** This state is evidenced mainly by ignorance and unbelief of God's Gospel, God's way of salvation. It is evidenced by man's insisting upon judging saved and lost based on Satan's lie and speaking peace where there is no peace. This is walking after the flesh, seeking to establish their own way, their own righteousness before God. All by nature are idolaters who worship and promote a god who cannot save. All who think that they are saved based on anything other than the imputed righteousness of Christ are idolaters. How can we say this? It is because the only true God has excluded everything from the GROUND of salvation except the imputed righteousness of Christ received by faith.

But, ***"that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."*** This state is evidenced first by belief of God's Gospel, His promise of salvation conditioned on Christ alone. This is saving faith. It is evidenced secondly by repentance from former idolatry and dead works. This is repentance that springs from saving faith. It is a change of mind concerning God and the only ground of salvation, wherein a sinner sees that Christ's righteousness alone can remove God's wrath and gain God's favor, and all our efforts aimed at this are dead works and acts of open idolatry. It is evidenced when a saved sinner ceases to judge based on Satan's lie and ceases to speak peace where there is no peace and begins to judge based on God's truth and speak peace only when God's

testimony will support it.

All this takes place when a sinner is given spiritual life by the Spirit of God and is convinced "of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8-11). God the Holy Spirit uses God's truth in the Gospel to change our standard of judgment in all these areas. Then the convinced sinner believes God's Gospel. A sinner who refuses to believe the Gospel is not born again. If that sinner continues in unbelief, he will surely perish. We see from God's testimony that what most people think of as saved and unsaved is not at all the right view. Most people think of unsaved people as immoral and irreligious. They think of saved people as moral and religious. But the Bible tells us that the unsaved include moral religionists such as Nicodemus (*John 3*) and immoral persons such as the Samaritan woman (*John 4*). Anyone who does not believe the Gospel is unsaved (*John 3:36*).

We are to tell all sinners without exception that they are just as responsible and fully warranted and commanded to seek the means and evidences of the new birth as much as they are commanded not to commit adultery or murder. We are to tell them that God will save them for Christ's sake alone. God will save any sinner, all sinners, who come to Him seeking justification and life based on the righteousness of Christ alone. These are the ones who have been born again by the Spirit of God.