

## Chapter Three

### Born Again:

#### What it is and How it Happens

In the last chapter we learned that all of us come into the world with a sin nature. All of us are sinners. And even when we try to justify ourselves and tell ourselves that we are not as bad as the other guy, we know in our hearts that we are not what we should be. In moments of complete honesty we judge ourselves and find ourselves guilty.

For example, there was a story in The Chicago Tribune about the rise of atheist groups on college campuses.<sup>1</sup> The article featured a group at Northern Illinois University. When the students were interviewed the conversation was about how good and moral atheists are in general. They talked about how religion has often given people an excuse to do bad things. Later, the discussion turned to all the evil things atheists have done. Finally, one student concluded that given the opportunity and power people are just inherently evil.

When push comes to shove all of us understand the truth of Proverbs 20:9 which says, “Who can say, I have made my heart pure: I am clean from sin?” And remember, sin is the root cause of all of our troubles and sorrows, every evil act and ultimately death. But there is hope! We can overcome the power and penalty of sin by the miracle of the new birth—being born again.

When we come to God through faith in Jesus Christ we are not just forgiven of our sins (as wonderful as this is) we receive a new, special quality of life. The very life of God is implanted within us. So, let’s read the Word of God to see what happens to us when we are born again.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “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.”

---

<sup>1</sup> “Young and Atheist” Chicago Tribune, Sunday, April 11, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

<sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’  
(John 3:1-7)

I ‘ve mentioned this before, but let’s review, because the information is relevant. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. This means he was a very religious man. And the reason why he was a very religious man is the same reason why some people go into science, or art, or politics, or philosophy, or business, or whatever area of life and work. We are all looking for three things: truth, goodness and beauty.

This is because we are all made in the image of God. And God is true, good and beautiful. But sin has disfigured that image in all of us. Nicodemus saw truth, goodness and beauty in Jesus Christ. And he wanted to know how he could have what Jesus had. Jesus knew this and said if Nicodemus wanted truth, goodness, beauty, if he desired everlasting life in the kingdom of God, he needed to be born again.<sup>2</sup>

This tells us that trying to be a good person, even trying to be good with all your strength, is not enough to save you from the power of sin, which distorts truth, goodness and beauty, or from the penalty of sin which is to perish. The reason for this is because, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” and our flesh, our nature is tainted by sin. And left to our own fleshly moral strength we all fall short of the glory of God.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is true even for all of the Old Testament believers. They believed God and were justified and saved by their faith. But to enter the coming kingdom of God they must be born of the Spirit of God. They must be transformed. And they will. In Ezekiel 37:13-15 God declared that when he raises His old covenant people up from the dead He will put His Spirit within them. Then they too will be re-born, transformed and inherit everlasting life.

What happens in the new birth is not just a repair or rehabilitation of your life, it is the creation of new life within you. There is a new disposition, a new temperament, a new nature or quality of character in you that will reflect the holiness, righteousness and goodness of God. Let me show you how I know this.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.  
(John 3:3-6)

What does it mean to be "born of water and the Spirit"? Some people think that the phrase "born of water" refers to your first birth and the "water" of the amniotic fluid. But this cannot be the case, because in verse 6 Jesus said, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh." And we are in need of a new birth, not just a repair of the first birth.

Others teach that "born of water" refers to water baptism. But being born again has nothing to do with a religious ritual. People were being water baptized when Jesus taught that we need to be born again. The answer to what it means to be "born of water and the Spirit" is found in God's promise in the old covenant of the new covenant. This is why Jesus answered Nicodemus' question about being born again the way he did.

Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"  
<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?  
(John 3:9, 10)

As a master teacher of God's Word Nicodemus should have understood the biblical reference to which Jesus was referring. The passage of Scripture is in Ezekiel. In these Scriptures God is telling the prophet what he will do for His people in the new covenant.

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land.

<sup>25</sup> Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

<sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

<sup>27</sup> I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*.

(Ezekiel 36:24-27)<sup>3</sup>

When our Lord Jesus referred to water and the Spirit he did not mean literal water, but the need for spiritual cleansing; the forgiveness of our sins. Let's read again what God said to Ezekiel

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

(V. 25)

But not only are we washed and cleansed from our sins, we are given a new heart, a new nature. God's Spirit is in us giving us a new birth.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My

---

<sup>3</sup> See also Jeremiah 31:31-34

statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*.  
(v. 26, 27)

This is the most glorious promise in the Old Testament concerning the miracle of the new birth. The heart stands for our nature. The Spirit indicates the governing power of our new heart and mind. So, in verse 25 there is forgiveness: "I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean."

In verse 26 there is the new birth or regeneration: "I will give you a new heart." And in verse 27 we have the gift of God's Spirit bringing the inner desire to do God's will: "I will put My Spirit in you." All of this is the gracious work of God when we trust Him concerning our need to be saved by Jesus Christ. Nicodemus should have grasped this concept to which the Lord referred.

The New Testament uses the same imagery. In Ephesians 5:26 we are told that Jesus Christ made the bride, the church, holy, "with the washing of water by the word." And here is what the apostle Paul wrote to Titus.

For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.

<sup>4</sup> But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, <sup>5</sup> not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> [which] <sup>4</sup> He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.  
(Titus 3:3-7)

We are saved not by our own good works, not by our moral achievements, but through the love and kindness and mercy of God. We have experienced a "washing of regeneration." The Greek word for "regeneration" is

---

<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit is not a person in the Godhead. It is the power and life force of God Himself.

*palingenesia*<sup>5</sup> and it means new life, a new birth to a better, higher quality of life. We have also experienced a “renewal of the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word for “renewal” is *anakainosis* which means to be made new, not in the sense of new in time, but new in quality. It is a better, more excellent kind of life, because it is the life of God, the divine nature in you. The Holy Spirit is not being renewed in you; the Spirit is doing the renewing.

As 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares, when you are born again you have become a “new creation.” There is in you now the ability to see truth, goodness and beauty in God, to love and enjoy Him. The fruit of the Spirit is your character—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And how are we born again? What means does God use to bring about faith and the new birth? He uses His Word and His Spirit. Let's read what the apostle James wrote about this.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. <sup>18</sup> Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. (James 1:17, 18)

Peter wrote the same thing.

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, <sup>23</sup> having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever (1 Peter 1:22, 23)

When we hear the Word of God and believe it we are given faith to be born again. And we become the first-fruits or the beginning of the total new creation to come. And we have the ability to love fervently with a pure heart.

---

<sup>5</sup> This Greek word is also used in Matthew 19:28 to refer to the regeneration or new birth of the world when the kingdom of God is established upon the earth.

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites,<sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.  
(1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Here again we see the image of being washed. Being sanctified, we are made holy and set apart for God. Being justified we are free from all the guilt of sin. What a tremendous miracle this is to go from being a sinner to a saint, a holy one! But now we need to learn to think and feel and behave like holy ones. We need to put off the first birth and put on the new birth. So the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians,

But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.<sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds,<sup>10</sup> and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him  
(Colossians 3:8-11)

Just as a baby is born complete, but immature, so we are born again complete. But we need to mature in our faith and behavior and thinking. This means we must feed on the Word of God to grow. The apostle Peter wrote "as new born babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby."<sup>6</sup>

But the new birth happens instantly when you believe. You may not know when that moment of new life occurred. The confession to trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, believing that God raised him up from the dead may have been made quietly in your heart. Or perhaps for months or even years you fought a

---

<sup>6</sup> 2 Peter 2:2

battle between the world and the Word of God. Or you may know exactly when it happened.

Everyone is on a journey in life. That journey may be sad, or bad, or good, but that road brought you to the point of salvation. The Bible says in Acts 17 that God even has us born in a certain place and at a certain time to help bring us to faith. John 3:16 says,

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

And Romans 10:9-13 declares,

For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

<sup>11</sup> For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." <sup>12</sup> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. <sup>13</sup> For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

The new birth is the greatest miracle in the world. And the love, grace and mercy of God flows out to everyone if you will receive it.