

# The New Birth

*“...Ye Must be Born  
Again”*

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The subject of the new birth is brought before us in the Word of God principally in the third chapter of John's Gospel wherein he records the visit of Nicodemus, ***“a man of the Pharisees”*** and ***“a ruler of the Jews”*** to the Lord Jesus Christ. He came in the dark, and that was not only true literally, it was true spiritually, so that the Lord chided him, ***“Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?”*** (v10). He was in the dark concerning vital matters of the soul and its need before God; but there is every reason to believe that, inasmuch as he was a genuine seeker, the Lord's teaching brought light and ultimately life to his soul through a new birth (John 7:45-52; 19:38-42).

At first Nicodemus was somewhat vague and cautious in his approach, but the Lord swept aside his caution and drove straight home to the vital point. We sometimes wonder why the Lord was so abrupt with Nicodemus, but it is always good and necessary to get to the point.

It is probable that the Lord Jesus was only too well aware that this man was relying on the position and privileges he was brought into by natural birth, racial descent from Abraham and consequent covenant relationship with God as one of the chosen nation of Israel.

He is therefore told without prevarication that all he is by natural birth is meaningless in the vital matter of a living relationship to God. The only thing which can bring him into such a living relationship with God is a new life, a spiritual life and not a mere natural life. This, the Lord tells him, is as necessary for him as it is for all other men, whatever they may be by nature. He is told in no uncertain terms, and most emphatically, **“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (v3).

Like all pious Jews, Nicodemus was expecting the coming of Messiah, and maybe was wondering if this was He. He would have been awaiting Messiah’s kingdom, but all too probably was thinking of it as a political kingdom, bringing deliverance from Gentile overlords, a temporal kingdom in which all of Abraham’s seed in the nation of Israel could expect to participate regardless of their spiritual condition.

So he has to be told that the kingdom of God brought in by Messiah is a spiritual kingdom, one which can be entered only by a new birth, not a natural birth, but a spiritual birth. But for this, a man could not even see the kingdom of God. And this is true for all men, Jews or Gentiles, cultured or ignorant, religious or profane. Natural birth, human descent, national privileges count for nothing: the new birth is the one vital necessity. A man must be born again, born anew, born from above, if he is to see God’s kingdom.

The expression used by the Lord is very striking. The Greek word translated in English Versions **“again”** is **“anōthen”**. Originally it meant “over” or “above” and is so translated in verse 31. It is used in this sense in the New Testament in Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; John 19:23 (translated “from the top”); James 1:17; 3:15,17 (“from above”).

Twice in the New Testament it has a temporal sense, “from the first” (Luke 1:3), **“from the beginning”** (Acts 26:5). In Galatians 4:9 it occurs in conjunction with another word, **“palin anōthen”**. The AV (KJV) renders this “again” but this is the meaning of **“palin”** alone. **“Anōthen”** here signifies “anew” which should be added and this is important. The Galatians were seeking to return to bondage, but to a quite new and different bondage. They had been delivered from the bondage of idols, and were now turning to the bondage of the law of Moses.

Whatever the significance the Lord had in mind in using the word, Nicodemus understood it in the weakest sense, “again”, and so we have his fatuous question about entering into his mother’s womb a second time and being born. This would be to “be born again” but would solve nothing, for this would be to be born once more of the flesh, which could not impart spiritual life. Man needs a new kind of birth, to be born of the Spirit; so the Lord is teaching that Nicodemus needs not merely to be born again, but to be born anew, born of the Spirit, in other words, born from above, **“born ... of God”** (See Ch. 1:13).

The fact is that since the day of Adam’s fall the whole human race, being born with a fallen, sinful nature, is in a state of spiritual death, and is quite incapable of real fellowship with, or vital relationship to, a holy God. Many different expressions are used throughout Scripture to teach this, especially in the New Testament; man’s state by nature of spiritual death and his need of a new life from God to bring him into relationship with God, into His kingdom as His true subjects or into His family as His true children. The new birth is one of several such ideas or expressions.

This whole idea of man’s natural state of death and spiritual need of divine life is especially difficult for religious people to grasp, for they think they are already God’s servants and even God’s children, either by birth and training or by a reformation of life. It takes much enlightenment, much humility, true conviction and genuine repentance before they can realize their need and enjoy God’s remedy.

We can well understand, then, Nicodemus being taken aback and confused not only by the Lord’s direct dealings but also by the truth of the new birth itself. As was so often seen in the Lord’s life and teaching, His hearers put a natural and materialistic construction on His words.

We wonder if there is not a tinge of either irony or flippancy in Nicodemus’ response, but the Lord reacts patiently and gives him to understand what we have already observed, that such a second birth would solve nothing even if it were possible; man needs a new sort of birth, a spiritual birth, because what he needs is spiritual life to remedy his natural state of spiritual death. To be born of the flesh can only produce flesh, however many

times repeated. It can only result in the possession of a sinful nature, and a mortal natural life, which cannot afford entrance into God’s kingdom, either now spiritually (v5), or in the future physically (1Cor. 15:50). Only a new divine life imparted by the Spirit of God can meet a dead sinner’s need and put him right with God.

The Lord tells Nicodemus not to marvel at the truth that for him as for all men, even good living, sincere and religious men, a new birth is absolutely essential. It was the complete, un-thought of newness of such an idea that left Nicodemus wondering and perplexed. He could not understand the idea, it left him puzzled and marvelling.

Considerable difference of judgement has always existed regarding the Lord’s words, **“Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit”**, and ritualists have been quick to see in the words a reference to baptism, or at least to the sprinkling of infants which they wrongly consider to be baptism.

Without entering into the controversy we might note a number of points:

1. Later the Lord speaks twice of being **“born of the Spirit”** without any reference to water (vs. 6,8). This clearly rules out the idea that being born of water and being born of the Spirit are two different experiences. Clearly to be **“born of water and spirit”** (as we should literally read) is the same as being **“born of the Spirit”**. If the water refers to baptism, all the baptized and only the baptized are thereby born anew, an idea too absurd and manifestly false to need refutation. Either we must take the water to represent the Spirit (“born of water even (the) Spirit”) or else regard the water as figurative of something which is included in being born of the Spirit, either generally, spiritual cleansing or specifically, the word of God (See James 1:18; 1Pet. 1:23).
2. Since it is not possible to be literally “born of water”, we are not obliged to take “water” literally however much we may prefer literal meanings where possible.
3. No further reference to literal water or baptism is found in the Lord’s teaching as he continues to explain the matter to Nicodemus.
4. He rather indicates that the means of new eternal life is personal faith in Himself and not submission to any

ordinance. (See vs. 15,16 and 18). And this accords with what has already been taught in this book in Ch. 1:10-13.

5. Nicodemus is chided for not knowing these things. Seemingly he should have learned the lessons of those Old Testament Scriptures which speak of the need of “cleansing”, “washing”, “water” etc. for right relationships with God. (See e.g. Psalm 51:7-10; Isaiah 1:16; Jer. 4:14; Ezek. 36:25-27; also the need for a spiritual recreation). Psalm 51 speaks of both, first washing and cleansing then spiritual renewal, and so does Ezekiel 36:25-27. Anyone familiar with these two passages, especially if personally convicted before God by the truth of them, would have little difficulty with the Lord’s words, “born of water and Spirit”, even though they are unusual, in fact unique.

6. And we have even less excuse today for misunderstanding, for we have before us a Scripture like Titus 3:5, **“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”**. Of itself “the washing of regeneration” might mean either “the washing which produces regeneration”, which is how the ritualist would wish to interpret it, or “the washing produced by regeneration”. We have only to look at the next expression, “the renewing of the Holy Ghost”, and ask ourselves the question, does this mean “the renewing which produces the Holy Spirit”, or “the renewing produced by the Holy Spirit” to get the matter settled. Paul is speaking of a washing effected by regeneration, and a renewing effected by the Holy Spirit.

It is, as in Psalm 51 and Ezekiel 36, first the negative side of the new birth, the **“putting away of the filth of the flesh”** (1Pet. 3:21), where it said specifically that this is what baptism does not do, then the positive side, the renewing or recreating of the spirit by the Holy Spirit. This, we believe, is what the Lord is speaking of, the spiritual all-over washing or bathing and the spiritual quickening or renewing experienced by believers in Christ when they are **“saved”**.

Although water does sometimes figure the Holy Spirit (e.g. Isa. 44:3; John 7:38-39), as the Lord proceeds to speak of the Spirit, He uses the figure of the wind rather than water (v8). And this reminds us of another Scripture in Ezekiel, chapter 37, where again we are reminded of the need,

even in Israel, of a spiritual quickening a “regeneration”, before Israel can be restored to God. It is striking that the only references to regeneration in the New Testament are Titus 3:5 alluded to, and Matthew 19:28 which refers to the new birth of the nation of Israel.

The ways of the wind are mysterious; it cannot be seen but it can be experienced, and the results of it are visible and unmistakable. So with the new birth, we cannot see a person being born of the Spirit, but there are very obvious and visible results. This is the line of teaching taken up by John in his first epistle. He uses the expression **“born of God”** and lists several vital evidences of new birth, apart from which any profession must be rejected as false. The one **“born of God”**:

- 1John 2:29 – Practises righteousness
- 1John 3:9 – Does not practise sin
- 1John 4:7 – Loves
- 1John 5:1 – Believes that Jesus is the Christ
- 1John 5:4 – Overcomes the world
- 1John 5:18 – Does not continually sin

In His explanation to Nicodemus, however, the Lord does not develop this line of truth. He rather goes on to expound, in those precious and memorable verses which follow, that God, in His wonderful love to a perishing world, gave His only and unique Son to come into the world, and as the Son of Man, to be lifted up upon the cross, as Moses lifted up a serpent of brass, to be made sin for us, that all who look to Him by faith in obedience to Divine instructions, should receive new life, divine life, eternal life. This is how the great necessity of the new birth becomes both a great possibility and a glorious opportunity, available not only to Israel but to the **“whosoever”**.

Here is the wonderful, almost unbelievable, answer to Nicodemus’ question, **“How can these things be?”** Alas, that many should love their sins, and others cling to their own supposed righteousness, and reject the glorious light of the gospel, preferring darkness.

But, as we have already remarked, Nicodemus went on to show that he benefited from his visit to the Lord, and heeded His direct and faithful teaching; and countless thousands since have followed his example and experienced for themselves a “new birth”.