

# The New Birth

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I desire to meditate a little on John 3, and its connection with some other parts of scripture; more particularly in reference to the new birth. I desire to do so for the profitable understanding of what the new man is; and the place in which we are set as made partakers of it, as we now are in Christ. I shall necessarily go over some ground with which Christians are familiar, in speaking of such a subject; but this is necessary, in order to connect with it the further developments and distinctions which lead me to treat of the subject.

Many believed in Christ when they saw the miracles which He did, but Jesus did not commit Himself to them. . . . He knew what was in man. (Chap. 2: 23-25.) Their conclusion about Him was a just one, but it was a conclusion drawn by what was in man. It was perfectly worthless; it left man in his own nature, and under the motives, influences, and passions to which he was subject before; nor did it take him out of the domain of Satan, who had power over the flesh and the world. The conclusion was right; but it was only a conclusion: the man remained what he was — unchanged. Jesus, who knew what flesh was, had — could have — no confidence in it.

But Nicodemus (chap. 3), under God's leading, for our instruction, goes a step farther. The others believed it, and left it there. But where the Spirit of God is at work, it always produces wants in the soul, craving and desire after that which is of God and godly; and so the sense of defect in ourselves. There is at once, instinctively too, the consciousness that the world will be against us; consciousness too of its opposition and scorn. Nicodemus comes by night. There was a want of something better in his soul; but his being a ruler and especially an ecclesiastical ruler, made it more difficult for him to go to Christ. The dignity of one set to teach is not a facility for going to learn. However, conscience urges him to go, and he goes; the fear of man makes him afraid, and he goes by night. How poor is that dignity which tends to hinder one learning of Christ! Nicodemus, though spiritual craving had led him to Christ, goes on the same ground in his enquiry as those who had no such want at all. "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." (Ver. 2.) It was a conclusion drawn from proofs, perfectly just, but that was all. Still he wanted something from Him who shewed them; but he took for granted that he was, as a Jew, a child of the kingdom, and would have teaching. The Lord meets him (for he was sincere and known of Him) at once, by declaring that the whole ground he was on was wrong. *He* did not teach flesh, nor had He come to do so. God was setting up a kingdom of His own. To see this, a man must be born again, completely anew. The kingdom was not yet come visibly, not with observation; it was there among them; but to see it a man must have a wholly *new* nature. Nicodemus, arrested by the language, does not understand how this could be, stops as a human reasoner, though sincere, at the present difficulty, and in truth does not see the kingdom.

189 But two great truths had been brought out here already. First God is not teaching and improving man — as he is. He sets up a kingdom, a sphere of power and

blessing of His own; there He acts. And secondly, man must have a new nature or life. He must be born again, in order to have to say to God who so works. Flesh cannot even perceive the kingdom. Both facts are of supreme importance. A new divine system is set up where the blessing is — a new nature is needed in order to have to say to it.

But the Lord does not leave the enquiring Nicodemus here. He shews definitively the way of entering into the kingdom: "a man must be born of water and of the Spirit" (ver. 5) — of the word and Spirit of God. The word of God — the revelation of God's thoughts — must operate in the power of the Spirit, judging all in man — bringing in God's mind instead of his own (supplanting it by God's), and an absolute new life from God, in which these thoughts have their seat and living reality — a new nature and life. It is not that two births are here, but two important aspects and realities in being born again. "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth" (James 2: 18); "that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5: 26); "ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." (John 15: 3.) It is — not teaching flesh, which has its own thoughts, but — supplanting all its thoughts by God's. We are born of water. Next, it is a nature coming from the Spirit "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3: 6.) Everything born follows — is of — the nature of that which begets it. So here: the water acts on man as man, his person is not changed; but the Spirit communicates a new life, which is of itself [the Spirit] — just as flesh's nature is flesh — in that which is born of it. We have now, not flesh taught; but the thoughts of God, operative in power, and the partaking of the divine nature which is imparted by the Spirit — the mind and nature of God vitally communicated to us. This is my life, as mere flesh was before.

190 This clearly opens out the blessing to Gentiles. "Marvel not" (said the Lord to Nicodemus), "that I said unto thee, Ye [Jews] must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth . . . so is *every one* that is born of the Spirit." (Chap. 3: 7-8.) The sovereign communication of a new nature (needed by the Jew, as much as by the Gentile, when we come to his nature), as an entirely new thing, a new nature given — in which the man thenceforth lives with God — is as applicable to a Gentile as to a Jew. For thus a man, as to his life, is neither [Jew nor Gentile]. "He is born of God." This truth is here not unfolded; only the groundwork is laid down for it. The far deeper truth of the fact of the divine life, and that sovereignly imparted, is what is taught: only the other is directly implied.

This again stops Nicodemus. He does not come forward with "We know;" he must be silent to learn. And now some other truths come out which associate us with heaven. But first the Lord shews, what Nicodemus ought to have known, that, as to even earthly promises, the testimony of God was clear, that Israel had to be born again, born of water and of the Spirit. Chapter 36 of Ezekiel is clear as to this:

"But I had pity for mine holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the heathen, whither they went. Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went. And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall

be sanctified in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you. And I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall receive no more reproach of famine among the heathen. Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations. Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord God, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel." That is, to enjoy the blessings of God's promises in the land Israel must be born of water and of the Spirit — must be cleansed according to God's thoughts and be renewed by the Spirit of God. The statement of the Lord is more simple, more full and absolute, because He is laying down the truth in itself, how man can enter into the kingdom, and, therefore, brings out the need of the communication of a wholly new life in terms — with the blessed assurance, that it is a being really born of the Spirit, so as to partake of the nature of Him of whom we are born. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (Ver. 5.) But Nicodemus, as the teacher of Israel, ought to have known that such a change was needed for Israel, in order to partake of their earthly blessings with God.

191 But this brings out the difference of the Lord's instructions and their character here from the way in which the prophet had spoken of the matter. He had stated it prophetically, as the practical operation of Jehovah's grace; and that was all right and in its place. But the Lord had another kind of knowledge. The prophecy had perfect divine authority, because the prophet said what he had been inspired to say. But the Lord knew the things themselves, in their very nature. He could tell absolutely what was needful for God, because He was God and came from God. This is indeed divine teaching, teaching of infinite price. We learn from Him, who essentially knew it, what is needful for God. It tells us what the Christian is. He has the knowledge of God from God Himself, according to His own nature, and is partaker of that nature — in order to know it, and to be able to enjoy it — without which he does not know it; and this brought down in man to us. But as the Lord spake that which He knew, so He testified that which He had seen. He could tell of the heavenly glory and what became it, what was needed to have a part in it. Man did not receive this testimony. The human mind understood human things — what was heavenly and spiritual not at all. That which was heavenly and spiritual was darkness and foolishness to it. Those who received this witness were born again. (Chap. 1: 12, 13.)

192 Let our hearts dwell a little on this blessed truth. In Christ we have One fully revealing God Himself. His words told *His* nature, the nature of God Himself; told it to man, so as to reveal what was needed in man in order that he might have to do with God in blessing, but told it directly, fully. His words were a revelation of the divine nature, which He knew. We are in the full light, with God Himself. We have — not merely

messages, however true, and however blessed it be to have them from God, but what leaves nothing behind — the revelation of God Himself, and in His nature; so that what is perfect in blessedness is revealed, and revealed perfectly. Here it is nature first of all, then the fact of what He had seen; but it is the competency of witness specially which is expressed in this verse. But this necessarily leads to the nature of the things. No prophet could say "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen." (Ver. 11.) God revealed future things to them, or sent messages to the people; and they announced the one and the other. But if Christ announced what He knew, and testified that which He had seen, these were necessarily heavenly things. Of course He knew what had been foretold of God; but, in speaking of the nature needed in order to have to say to God, and of that which He knew and had seen, He goes beyond that to that which is *above*. Thither consequently He leads us. "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven." (Ver. 13.) No one had gone up to bring down word of what was there. But He came thence; and He could tell perfectly what was there, and was *ever* there, for He was God. But this divine knowledge was knowledge for man; for it was the Son of man had it. Heaven and man were connected in the person of Christ. If man out of Christ — as all yet were — had not in any sense entered there, still there was One who was in His person the revealer of that which was heavenly. But *how* could man — who could not, even if a teacher of Israel, understand the reality of the new nature (even as needed for the known earthly things), for he thought in the old nature — understand heavenly things? But this brought out another truth, the necessary door of what was heavenly; but *if so*, it is the open door to *every one* that should believe. Not only was it necessary to be born again, even for earthly blessings, but there were further counsels of God.

193 The Son of man — for Jesus was more than Messiah — must, in the counsels of God and in the need of man, be lifted up, rejected from this earth. But this lifting up was His rejection by the world. Christ could not (for man was a sinner) take His place as Messiah in blessing to Israel. He was to suffer in the character in which He had to say to all men, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness" (ver. 14); so, instead of a living Messiah, they were to have a rejected dying Son of man. The cross was healing saving power for man. Whoever believed in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life; for God so loved the world — an immense truth then, which opened the way to the fullest display of God and of grace, if one should not rather say it was such. It was an efficacious work of God (not to fulfil prophetic promises merely, but) to bring to God, "that whosoever believed in him" (this Son of man) "should have everlasting life." It was needed. Atonement must be made — redemption must be accomplished-if sinful man was to have to say to a holy God. If there was a revelation of the divine nature, and man's partaking of it was connected with his having to say to God, there must be atonement as well as a new birth. The Son of man — He who as man was to have in man's nature the inheritance of all things, and who took up man's cause — must be lifted up, like the serpent in the wilderness, made sin for us, that men may look on Him and live.

This met the need of man, but it was only one side of the truth. When men rest here, they see what meets the holy nature and judgment of God, but God stands as a holy Judge; nor does this therefore give full liberty to the soul. It is the propitiatory, the needed side of Christ's death. But how did this come about? It was that God so loved the world,

that the Son of man who must be lifted up was the Son of God whom He had given in love. God so loved that He gave. Thus, though propitiation was needed, love was the source of all; the holiness of God's nature, His righteous judgment, maintained as regards sin; but His love manifested. The Son of man was Son of God — both with a view to one wondrous object — that sinful man, whosoever believed in Jesus, should have eternal life. This was the final test of man too. We have thus the nature of God revealed; and a twofold work wrought which, while it fits man to enjoy that nature by his being born of it, glorifies it too in all its character: so that the gift of eternal life maintains and displays the love and holiness and righteousness of God. And this is what is essential and blessed. But the full peculiar dispensed character of this, as wrought out in grace, is not brought out here: and it is this which I would now endeavour to bring out, the gracious Lord helping me.

194 If the Son of man was lifted up, died to bring us to God, where and how is life? It is in resurrection. This too leads us to another important element of truth. If risen, I am risen from the dead. I have died in Christ. This, we shall see, has a double character. I may look at myself as having no spiritual life — hence as dead in trespasses and sins; or I may look at myself as alive in sin and the flesh, and then I speak of having died to it. Christ could speak of a new nature needed in order to enter the kingdom; but He could not then call on any one to reckon himself dead. He could connect that nature with God directly — in the statement of what it was, and what He was; and that was peculiarly suited, as is evident, to His person — a divine revealer of what He knew and of man's partaking of the divine nature. This was indeed the excellent part. But for our deliverance another truth was to be connected with this — the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. We receive Christ as our life: when He has died and risen, He is a life-giving Spirit. Because He lives, we live. He is our life — that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us. But, for sinners to have part in this righteously, and according to God, Christ must make the propitiation, must die. He died to sin once; and now, alive in resurrection, lives to God. We receive Him through the Spirit in our hearts, and have life. "This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life: and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." (1 John 5: 11, 12.) But He whom we receive is the dead and risen One, our life — the true "I" in which I say of sin, this is no longer I. "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." In us this is the life of Christ as risen from the dead — the power of life in resurrection. We are alive for faith, only in and by Him, though the flesh be in point of fact there; yet I do not own it as alive and part of myself, but only as an enemy which I have to overcome. Thus in Romans 7: 5 we find, "When we were in the flesh;" and in Romans 8: 9, "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you." Many other passages illustrative of this point will come before us in pursuing our subject.

195 I have said, that this view of the divine life in resurrection comes before us in two ways in scripture. Man may be viewed either as alive in sin; or as dead in sin. His flesh is alive and active as regards evil; it is utterly dead as regards God — not one movement of soul in the natural man towards Him. The epistle to the Romans presents the former view; that to the Ephesians the latter. They coalesce in presenting the man as risen with Christ; though the epistle to the Romans barely reaches this ground, but just

touches on it. Their epistle teaches fully Christ's being raised by God the Father, but only just touches on our being alive to God. The Ephesians saw, as regards the doctrine of their epistle on this point, Christ as dead, and the sinner dead in sin (chap. 2: 1); and both raised up together. This flows from Christ's being seen exalted on high and the Church united to Him. Man is not contemplated doctrinally as wickedly living in sin (although the fact is recognized), but in the full apprehension of his state in relation to God — he is dead in sin. And the whole condition of the Church is the result of the same power being exercised in raising Christ Himself and every believer spiritually. (Chap. 1, 2.)

In the epistle to the Romans, Christ is seen risen from the dead, but not ascended (save an allusion in one verse of chapter 8), because the object is to shew the putting away of the old state, and the introduction in life and justification into the new — not the glorious results, save in hope. Man's guilt is largely proved. Christ has died for us; but Christ has risen also, for our justification; we are justified — dead to sin and alive to God — delivered from the law.

The epistle to the Colossians is between the two in doctrine. It views man as living in sin, but the Christian as having died and as now quickened with Christ. Our new nature there, as born of God, takes, when our condition is fully displayed, the character of our having died and risen again with Christ, and even of our sitting in heavenly places in Him.

But my object now is, our condition in life. Let us recall, that Christ as thus risen is our life. The work of atonement must have been accomplished, or no sinner could have been united with Him. He could have given no life according to God to any. The corn of wheat would have abode alone. Not that life and the power of life was not in Him, but that the righteousness of God would have been in abeyance.

But that work has been accomplished; and now Christ — not the first Adam — is my life as a believer. But then I say, When I *was* in the flesh. I am not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. The first Adam in his sin and responsibility is not my standing before God at all; but the second, who has become my life. I am in Him as my righteousness: He is in me as my life. *Now* I say, I have died to sin; I am crucified with Christ; I am alive to God through Jesus Christ. "In that he died, he died unto sin once; but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves." (Rom. 6: 10, 11.) This is what Paul insists on in Romans 6. "We were baptized into his death" (ver. 3); "planted together in the likeness of his death." (Ver. 5.) We are dead to sin. "If we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him." (Ver. 8.) Hence (for, as I said, the apostle only just touches this ground) we are to reckon ourselves alive to God through Him. (Ver. 11.) So in the epistle to the Galatians, "Christ liveth in me." (Chap. 2: 20.) "The Spirit is life because of righteousness." (Rom. 8: 10.) But we are not said to be risen with Him.

196 And remark in the elements even of this doctrine, necessarily from its very nature we are not called to die to sin. No such thought is in scripture. We are called upon, as alive in Christ, to mortify every movement of sin; but not to die to it. We are alive in Christ who has died, and we are viewed as *dead*; and called upon to view ourselves as dead, because Christ who is our life has died. "I am crucified with Christ." (Gal. 2: 20.) "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh." (Chap. 5: 24.) "Reckon yourselves to be

dead." (Rom. 6: 11.) "Ye have been planted together in the likeness of his death." (Ver. 5.) "Buried with him unto death." (Ver. 4.) "Ye are dead." (Col. 3: 3.) Such is the uniform language of scripture. All the sentimental talk about crucifying being a lingering death is the setting aside the plain and imperative sense of these passages. "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." (Gal. 2: 20.)

We have died in Christ: this is the doctrine of scripture.

The Epistles to the Galatians, the Romans, and the Colossians, &c., all alike teach this and press it on Christians. I am wholly delivered from the whole system in which I lived as alive in the flesh. So the apostle appeals, "If ye be dead with Christ . . . why, as though alive [living] in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?" (Col. 2: 20, 21.) This is life then (being born of God) as possessed by the Christian, now that Christ has died, and become, as risen, his life.

197 The Epistle to the Ephesians goes a step farther. It does not, as I have said, view Christ as alive in blessed love and godliness, and man in sin; but man dead in sin, and Christ is first seen as dead, which was for and to sin. That is, the apostle sees man down in the ditch and grave of death through sin, and Christ has come down into it in grace, where man was by sin. But so He has put away the sin as guilt, and come down to save and redeem out of that condition: God raises up both by the same power. "What is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe . . . which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places." (Eph. 1: 19, 20.) Of "His great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ." (Chap. 2: 4, 5.) Thus we are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." (Ver. 10.)

Thus as chapter 3 of John's Gospel taught us the nature of the life which we receive (that as born of the Spirit it *is* spirit — divine, morally speaking, in its nature), so do the epistles shew to us the position in which the possession of this new life places us, inasmuch as it is the life of Christ risen, after being delivered for our offences and having died to sin once. And what is the consequent effect as to our relationship to sin and to God? The Epistle to the Romans, as indeed that to the Galatians, teaches us that we have died with Christ, and that we are to reckon ourselves dead to sin, that our old man has been crucified with Him; but that we are alive to God; that it is not we that live, but Christ that lives in us. The Epistle to the Colossians teaches us that we have died with Christ, and that we are risen with Him; and further that, when dead in sins and the uncircumcision of our flesh, God has quickened us together with Him, having forgiven us all trespasses — brought up from the dead with Christ into newness of life as to ourselves; but, according to the blessed efficacy of His death, entirely forgiven all the sins and state of sin in which we were till thus raised, consequent on the efficacy of His death. This last point the Epistle to the Ephesians takes up fully and exclusively, and shews us quickened with Christ and raised out of the death of sin by the same power which raised Christ Himself. It is not merely the divine nature become our life, but death to sin, life to God; raised up, forgiven, and accepted, as in the state in which He is as risen yea, sitting in heavenly places in Him. The nature is divine. That is supremely excellent; but, by death and resurrection having come in and our being united to Christ, our whole relative condition is changed; we are not, for God and for faith, accounted as

alive in the old man; we are not in it at all, we have put it off. It is (for the reckoning of faith, and that according to the possession of and being alive in a new life) dead and gone. We are in Christ, and Christ is our life: alive in Him and alive in what He is alive to — to God. Our standing is not consequently in the first Adam at all. We have died as in the first Adam to all that he is; we are alive in the last Adam, the Lord Jesus, according to all the acceptance in which He now lives before God.

198 Thus chapter 3 of John's Gospel teaches us the intrinsic excellency of the life we receive of God, and shews it in direct connection with what is divine, Christ speaking what He knew and shewing that we must have a nature from God, and fit for God Himself. Christ speaking thus, that which He knew is of the deepest interest — the direct communication of what is divine. This life is there shewn in its nature and origin as contrasted with flesh. Its proper character and excellency is more seen in John. The Epistle to the Ephesians however confirms it in result: "That we should be holy and blameless before him in love." (Chap. 1: 4.) But in its condition and state, the epistles are more full as to this life. There — inasmuch as Christ died — living in the life of Christ we are [looked at as] dead to sin, the life being a new thing wholly distinct from the old man, and we alive in Christ. We are not in the flesh; we have died and are risen again. Being regenerated is being dead and risen again; for we receive Christ as life. It is having left Adam, his nature and fruits, condemnation, death, and judgment behind; and being, as delivered from all these things, in necessary and righteous acceptance, according to Christ's acceptance before God. The natures are distinct. I am not in the flesh; I have died; I am risen again; I am accepted in Christ risen; I am partaker of the divine nature and to enjoy its fulness in God.