

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Great Salvation: New Birth

My earliest memory is of knowing the thrill of being able to see over the top of the dining table for the very first time, without being lifted up. Mind you, I was on tiptoe. Perhaps, because of that, I am always interested in people's early memories.

For instance, I could ask you, "What did it feel like when you were first able to crawl? Or stand? Or walk? Or talk?" Going further back still, I could ask, "What did it feel like when you were born?" Even further back, "What went through your mind when you were in your mother's womb?" "Shall I be born today? Tomorrow? How much longer shall I have to wait?" Or even "I've been waiting here long enough. I'm absolutely fed up. If nothing happens today, I've decided I'll definitely be born tomorrow."

To any of these questions you might well answer, "Don't be ridiculous! Such things were entirely outside of my personal power and control. You cannot possibly expect me to know anything about things that happened so early in my life, before I could be expected to have any conscious part in what was going on." Quite so. Yet, it was exactly this kind of concept that the Lord Jesus introduced into an important conversation He had with a man called Nicodemus.

Born again?

The story is told in John 3. Nicodemus was a very religious man who evidently wanted to have a debate about religion with Jesus, the Son of God. Perhaps Nicodemus was a little unsure whether it was the right thing to do. Perhaps he was just a little ashamed of being seen having anything to do with this itinerant preacher who had no official standing or status. At all events, we read that he came to Jesus by night. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again." Nicodemus was absolutely astounded. "Whatever do you mean?" he replied. "Born again? How can I, a grown, adult man, be born again? How can I possibly go back into my mother's womb and start life again."

Why we need a new start

Patiently, Jesus explained to Nicodemus the meaning of the illustration. That explanation is amplified by other things expressed by various New Testament writers. For a start, Nicodemus had to learn that, religious though he might be, his human nature was completely ruined by sin. Sin is the greatest pollutant there is in the universe. Nothing causes corruption as severely or as completely as sin. Sin is dirty. Sin is unclean. Sin is defiling. Sin wrecks everything that is good and clean and pure. The human nature we have inherited from Adam has been so riddled through by sin that every part of the being is affected. A completely new start is necessary. Fundamentally, as far as our relationship with God is concerned, we cannot see straight, we cannot think straight and there is nothing in our power that we can do about it. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." (John 3:3). If anything is going to be done to put matters right, it will have to be begun by God.

There is no doubt that what the Lord Jesus was telling Nicodemus was that religion, in itself, is no remedy for sin. In fact, nothing that Nicodemus could do, or say, or think, could put right with God the results of sin. What a hard lesson for a fine, upstanding man like Nicodemus to have to learn. Of course, if that was true for Nicodemus, it is just as true for you and me.

Apart from the Lord Jesus Himself, no one who has lived on earth has ever, in himself or herself, been good enough to meet God's requirements. Why? Because of sin. We read in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." That is, not one of us can reach the absolute standard of conduct required by God.

Incapable

Going on from there, you might well say, "Hold on. If Nicodemus was in a situation he could do nothing to put right, what was the point of telling him, Ye must be born again?" Very good. That is the whole point. The statement "Ye must be born again" is just that. A statement of fact. It was certainly not a challenge to Nicodemus exhorting him to "be" born again, or "get" born again. At the same time, it is a statement which God can use to produce, by the power of the Holy Spirit, a sense of spiritual need. Under the hand of God, this may well lead to the spiritual blessing of the

individual concerned. It may well be a very fine distinction to draw, but I am firmly convinced that it is a necessary one. Nicodemus was as incapable of doing anything about his spiritual condition before God as a new born baby is of having any conscious part in its own conception and birth.

A new start begun by God

Perhaps we are now beginning to see why the Lord Jesus used such an unusual kind of illustration to make plain to Nicodemus the terrible spiritual condition of man without God. Sin has caused such havoc that man is incapable of doing anything to get on proper terms with God. A new start, a spiritual start, is certainly necessary. But, the only kind of new start which is of any use or value at all is a start which is begun by God.

Incidentally, as the years go by, I have become increasingly glad that everything vital about my salvation begins with God. From start to finish, everything is of God. Every link in the chain of salvation has been forged by God. Of course, once I am saved, there is a great responsibility laid on me to live a consistent life as a committed Christian, but that is another story. As we read so often in the Bible, "Salvation is of the Lord." Just think about it for a moment. The strength of a chain is limited by the strength of the weakest link in that chain. How glad we can be that the chain of salvation is absolutely secure because it all depends on the work of God through Christ. If any part of any link in the chain of salvation depended on me, or even you, it wouldn't last five minutes. It would be doomed to disaster from the outset. Let's face it. We are all terribly inconsistent and unreliable. Any scheme of salvation that depended on anything that we did or had to do would give us no assurance at all. Happily, we read in Titus 3:5, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to God's mercy He saved us." This is why we can say, "We have no fear of the day of judgment." (1 John 4:17). But we must not digress.

Any good news?

At this stage, you might well say, "All right. You've told me the bad news. Is there any good news?" Oh, yes indeed! The very good news is that the good news is even better than the bad news is bad. God has done for us what we could never have done for ourselves.

God's work

In John 1, we are definitely told that this new start, if it has happened at all, has been brought about by God. "The children of God", we are told in verse 13, "have been born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." That is, the new start, called the new birth, is not the product of man's will, man's ideas or man's activities, but the work of God Himself. This may not be what we want to hear, but the Bible is quite clear on the matter. Apart from these important scriptures in John's Gospel and the Epistle of James, there are several assertions in 1 John that Christians are born of God.

God uses His word

The question then arises, if God has done for us what we could never have done for ourselves, how has He done it? The Bible makes it very plain. In effecting this new birth, God has used the agency of Holy Scripture, that is, His own Word, the Word of God, the Bible. Very often, in the Bible, God uses the medium of water as an illustration of the cleansing properties of the Word of God. For example, in John 15:3, we read of Jesus saying to His disciples, "Ye are clean through the Word that I have spoken unto you." In connection with the new birth, the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born of water, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." (John 3:5). Both James and Peter, in their Epistles, stress the same important truth, that it is the scriptures that God uses to bring about the new birth. There is also a rather subtle verse in Titus 3:5: "God has saved us by the washing of regeneration." That golden chain of salvation involves a cleansing action which clears the decks completely. It deals with all our sins. It removes the effect of the corruption caused by sin. It sets us off on a completely new spiritual life which God has begun in us.

Power

God, then, is the source, the origin of the new birth. The Word of God is the agent that God uses to produce the new birth. What, then, or rather Who, is the power for such a mighty work? The answer could not be plainer. The only power that could bring about such a mighty work is the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. Once more, let us test what we say against the plumbline of scripture.

Note this. Everything that is worthwhile, everything that brings glory to God and blessing to the Christian receives the concerted attention of all persons of the Godhead - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In general, God the Father is the source or origin of it. The Lord Jesus, the Son, died at Calvary to provide the righteous basis and foundation for it. The Holy Spirit is the only power by which or rather by Whom the work is made effective in our souls. He is also the only power by Whom what has been done for us and in us can be intelligently appreciated and enjoyed by us. The record

of the words of the Lord Jesus to Nicodemus, John 3:5 tells us, "Except a man be born of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." Similarly, Titus 3:5 states, "God has saved us by the renewing of the Holy Ghost."

We can, therefore, have complete confidence in the mighty work of new birth, because it is all of God. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, all deeply involved. Since God has done the work, no one can undo it. It is a work which withstands any and every test and abides forever.

Effect of new birth

Having satisfied ourselves as to the origin of new birth, the agent used and the power that has made it effective, the next sensible question is, what is the result or effect of new birth? We learn Titus 3:4-7, that a new nature has been imparted to us by the washing of regeneration. We have been brought into a new state by the renewing of the Holy Ghost. A new power has been shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour. In 2 Peter 1:4, we learn further that we are made partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. Happy results indeed of the new birth.

Putty?

Now, for consistency and balance, we need to spend a few moments looking at the other side of the same coin. If we accept what has been said so far, does it not seem that we have had no choice at all in the matter? Are we not as passive and uninvolved as if we were putty in God's hand, to be manipulated and pushed into whatever shape or mould God chooses? Mind you, if that were the case we couldn't grumble one little bit. Drawing heavily from the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, the warning is given in Romans 9:20-21, "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast Thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?"

The right balance

I have always found it safe and right and wise to keep the balance in this way. As to my responsibility before God, it is right for me to acknowledge that my sinful ways and deeds mean that I deserve nothing but judgment. As far as blessing is concerned, I am wise and right to give all the credit to God.

Two things are perfectly plain. God does not force a person to believe the gospel if that person does not wish to do so. Neither does He prevent from believing anyone who really wants to do so.

Our responsibility

As to responsibility, every one of us shall give account of himself to God (Romans 14:12). Each one of us is personally and individually accountable to God for each and every sin we have committed against Him. Without outside help we are heading towards judgment and condemnation.

Our condition before God

As to blessing, there is nothing we can do to put matters right. As we learn in Luke 14:21, as far as gaining blessing is concerned, we are poor, crippled, lame and blind. Poor, in that we cannot pay for it. Crippled, so that we cannot work for it. Lame, in that we need to be carried. Blind, so that we need guidance every step of the way. Such is our comprehensive position and condition before God. However, when we were without strength, wonder of wonders, Christ died for the ungodly. (Romans 5:6). Verse 8 of the same chapter tells us, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Once our spiritual position and condition have been made plain to us, from scripture, "we are without excuse," as we read in Romans 1:20, and "guilty before God" (Romans 3:19). Happily, the same book tells us in 10:9-10, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thine heart that God has raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." This is exceedingly clear. It is the right thing to do to believe that Jesus died for our sins, as a willing substitute on our behalf. It is right, too, to see that God raised Him from the dead to demonstrate that the price of redemption had been fully paid. It is also right to make open confession of Jesus as Lord, owning His full authority over us.

Contradiction?

How, then, do these two aspects of salvation come together? Indeed, can these two aspects come together? Indeed, they can and they do. Let us turn back to John 1. Verses 12 and 13 tell us, "As many as received Him, to them gave

He power to become the children of God, even to them that believe on His Name, which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." There is no contradiction. A sense of sin and unworthiness in us recognises the need of salvation. It leads us to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the One Who died for our sins. This in no way contradicts or displaces the sense of wonder in our souls that when we were so saturated and permeated with sin that we were completely helpless spiritually, without even an awareness of spiritual need, God in His wonderful love did for us what we could never do for ourselves. In believing the gospel of our salvation we seize upon the remedy that God Himself has provided for us.

The need was ours. The work was Christ's. The plan was God's. How grateful we should be. Let me say again. We are wise to recognise that the blame, the responsibility for the position in which we find ourselves is all ours. We are doubly wise in giving to God the credit and the praise for giving us a new start. That is the truth, the joy and the wonder of new birth.

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