

The Necessity of Rebirth

Scripture reading: "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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. Jesus answered and said to him, Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. 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? Jesus answered, Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again... Nicodemus answered and said to Him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said to him, Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?" (John 3:1-10).

Nicodemus was one of the moderate and more open-minded members of the Sanhedrin in Israel. He was impressed with the ministry of Jesus, particularly with His divine power to do miracles, and wanted to find out more about it. His colleagues hated Jesus, so he decided to approach Him alone at night-time. Nicodemus addressed Jesus on an equal basis as rabbi, but nevertheless recognised the fact that God was with Him. Jesus was not the equal of this Pharisee but far superior to him as He came from above. John the Baptist said: "He who comes from heaven is above all" (John 3:31). The Lord Jesus knew very well that the spiritual problems of Nicodemus were due to his ignorance. He practised a dead, legalistic religion based upon outward acts and rituals, while his heart was cold and far from the Lord.

Jesus quickly came to the point by clearly mentioning the solution to this preacher's problem of a dead form of godliness: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus could not at all understand how a person could be born for a second time as he was thinking about a second physical birth. The Lord Jesus then explained to him that for the second time he had to be born from above, by the Holy Spirit. He had to be quickened spiritually by getting a changed heart. Nicodemus was criticised for not being able to grasp this point. He was an expert on the Old Testament and should have known that God expects a changed heart from His people. Jesus said to him, "Are you the teacher of

Israel, and do not know these things?" He was unable to understand the point made by Jesus because his heart was not correctly inclined towards God.

The most important command which God gave to Israel in the Old Testament is: "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44-45). This command also applies to us in the New Testament (1 Pet. 1:15-16). True holiness which reflects the image of God can only come from the inside, from a changed heart, in which the principles of God's righteousness have been written by the Holy Spirit on the tablets of the heart (cf. 2 Cor. 3:3). It determines the morality of your life, it changes your personality and lifestyle for the better and transforms you into a mouthpiece for the Lord. Holiness cannot artificially be imposed from the outside by observing certain forms of conduct as, functioning in association with a depraved heart, this situation would give rise to hypocrisy. Such a person is like a whitewashed tomb which, from the outside, appears beautiful and even religious, but inside it is full of dead men's bones. Because of his spiritual deadness his outward pretence is false; he maintains double standards and cannot speak on behalf of the Lord. He does not even understand the things of the Lord and has a very limited and distorted understanding of spiritual matters.

There were various prominent believers in the Old Testament whose hearts were changed by the Lord. Hebrews 11 contains a list of honour with the names of heroes of faith from this time. They could all testify of changed hearts: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live" (Deut. 30:6). They received a spiritual heart transplant (Ezek. 36:25-27). But the majority of Israelites often lapsed into evil lifestyles because they did not have circumcised, or changed hearts. In Jeremiah 4:4 Israel is warned to circumcise their hearts to the Lord, lest His fury come fourth like fire because of their evil doings.

A characteristic of circumcised, believing hearts is that such people truly believe in God and His prophets, and walk according to His precepts: "Hear me, O Judah and you inhabitants of Jerusalem: Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets and you shall prosper" (2 Chron. 20:20). There were very few people who had such changed hearts that would enable them to truly believe in the Lord and to love and serve Him. They rather observed the religious

traditions of Israel and only paid lip-service to the Lord. In Isaiah 29:13 the Lord says: "These people draw near to Me with their mouths and honour Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear towards Me is taught by the commandment of men."

The Lord Jesus quoted these words in Matthew 15:8-9 when He addressed Jews of the first century: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." In Mark 7:9 He says: "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition." This was the same message which Jesus also conveyed to Nicodemus since his hypocritical religion was worthless as it only consisted of traditions and laws inherited from his fathers. The Lord demands a changed heart which He alone can regenerate from above when a person turns to Him with a repentant heart because of his sin. Nicodemus was evidently satisfied with his self-justifying form of godliness in which there was no remorse over sin. No wonder he failed to understand that he had to be born again!

Paul also referred to this deep spiritual work which the Lord wants to do for His people, i.e. a change of heart to be able to really love Him: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision which is outwardly in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not of the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Rom. 2:28-29). Of what avail is a good-looking outward life, but inside the person has a dark, unregenerate, unholy and unbelieving heart?

Unfortunately, a dead form of godliness and hypocrisy were also very common phenomena right from the beginning of the New Testament dispensation. Doctrines were observed which did not lead to a thorough change of heart, i.e. rebirth, among people. During the first century, the scribes and Pharisees had no room for Jesus and His righteousness in their theology, and completely rejected Him as Messiah. He did not fit into their legalistic lifestyle, and apart from that He publicly revealed their evil and deceitful hearts. They were stumbling-blocks in the kingdom of heaven as they blocked the way for people to be saved. The Lord Jesus said, "You shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in" (Matt. 23:13).

These false teachers were only looking for converts to traditional Judaism, by instilling their own views and practices into them. Jesus said, "You travel over land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23:15). The Jewish leaders hated Jesus because He called them children of the devil (John 8:44), and also publicly exposed their infidelity and false form of godliness. They wanted to get rid of Him by killing Him. Jesus said to them, "I and my Father are one. Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, Many good works I have shown you from my Father. For which of those works do you stone Me? The Jews answered Him, saying, For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10:30-33).

In many respects we are in the same situation today. There are theologians everywhere in the world who are so strongly opposed to the deity and divine attributes of the Lord Jesus that they don't hesitate to refute His pronouncements and even make blasphemous allegations against Him as a Person. They openly deny the virgin birth of Jesus as they regard it as unscientific to believe such a thing. However, if Jesus was not born from a virgin He was not conceived by the Holy Spirit and therefore not the Son of God – neither would He be God incarnate in the flesh. He would then only be an ordinary human being with a sinful nature. In that case His death on the cross would have no saving power as He would not be the spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As an ordinary mortal He would not have been able to rise from the dead and to ascend to heaven.

What would the Lord Jesus tell the modern scribes if they, like Nicodemus, would enter into conversation with Him on theological issues? He would probably also take a shortcut to the solution of their problem by saying: "You don't have a relationship with the Lord; therefore your hearts are dark, full of evil and unbelief. If you are not born again you cannot see the kingdom of heaven." He would have revealed Himself as God the Son to them, in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9). This would not have fitted into their frame of reference, so they would also have heard the reproach: "You are theologians and teachers and you do not know these things?" Agnostic modernists will have to return to the basic principles of the gospel if they truly wish to be reconciled with God.

The lack of rebirth can in most cases be attributed to the fact that religious traditions are established in which people are only bodily and mentally touched – not spiritually. Outward, bodily rituals are ministered to members of a religious group, e.g. circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament. These are accompanied by teachings and rules which are only mentally memorised and then observed: these are commandments of men which later become traditions that are inherited from one generation to another. However, the essential aspect of spiritual awakening, or rebirth, is absent; consequently, it does not lead to true faith in people's hearts. Israel suffered from exactly the same problem. Paul said: "For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it" (Heb. 4:2). In our time, church members are declared to be saved by virtue of a mere doctrine which is mentally accepted, and then they are confirmed as "believers" in a particular church. But most of these members cannot give testimony of being born again, having changed hearts, since they do not truly believe.

Then there is also the problem of backsliding among those who are truly saved. The Galatians reverted to law observation from a life of faith in the crucified Lord Jesus, by subjecting themselves to circumcision and the observance of the Jewish Sabbath and other legalistic practices. In this way they compromised with their national religion, gloried in their flesh and legalistic works, thereby depriving the cross of Christ from its central place in their life of faith. Paul seriously warned against this tendency: "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4).

Paul's focus remained true. He said to the Galatians: "God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:14-16).

He clearly told the congregation that God looks at their hearts. Whether they were circumcised or uncircumcised Jews, or in a New Testament context baptised or unbaptised, is not really important. The Lord looks at whether they are spiritually new people through regeneration. His peace and mercy are bestowed upon all who

walk according to this rule. That is the rule of regeneration – the rule of the new creation. Only such people in Israel belong to the Lord and are true Israelites, which means “Contenders for God.”

Is your religion based upon the rule of the new creation? Do you have the testimony that your life has changed on a deep, spiritual level, and that the old things have passed away and all things have become new? Paul warned Timothy that, particularly in the end-time, there will be many people who only have an outward form of godliness, but on a spiritual level they will still be dead in their sins and trespasses: “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away” (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

These people do not know the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They have only been baptised and confirmed, but for the rest they live as they please. According to outward criteria such as church rituals and good works they claim to be Christians who are on their way to heaven. But they deceive themselves as they are like the church in Sardis of which the Lord Jesus said, “You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1).

Regeneration refers to the resurrection life of Christ with which we are endued when we are truly saved. Only this gives us a hopeful future: “Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah! By His boundless mercy we have been born again to an ever living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3; *Amplified Bible*). When we become conformed to the death of Christ after putting down the old life, we are spiritually renewed and endued with the resurrection life of the Lord Jesus. We can then walk with Him in a completely new life. Our family and friends will be able to see that our life has fundamentally changed. We can still falter and sin but immediately put the matter straight again and continue to walk in the Spirit – not in the flesh. The Lord transforms us spiritually to be shining lights in the midst of a crooked generation. We distance ourselves from the sins which we have committed in the past and endeavour to become conformed to the image of Christ.

The forgiving of sins and rebirth are closely associated with one another, since the Lord Jesus cleanses us of our sins when He gives us a new life with a new nature through rebirth. The cleansing of our sins is the major purpose for which the Lord Jesus came to the world. John the Baptist said of Him: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This is a vitally important matter as the Bible says that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). The Lord Jesus saves us by having paid the ransom for our sins on the cross in order that we may be born again spiritually and become partakers of His holy nature.

We have to thoroughly realise our problem of sin if we wish to understand why we have to be born again. After the ascension of the Lord Jesus the Holy Spirit was poured out to convict us of our sins and the righteousness of Christ (John 16:8). But He begins with sin – that wall of separation between us and God. We must realise that we were all conceived and born in sin and therefore have a sinful nature. Among the natural, unsaved people there is no one who is just upon the earth – no, not one – all are sinners (Rom. 3:10-12).

Because of the Fall the devil has a direct part in the fact that all people are born with a sinful nature (Rom. 5:12). We are enticed to sinning by depraved, innate inclinations – that is the lust of the flesh. James says: "Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (Jas. 1:14-15). The devil has an ally in people's lives – that is their fallen, sinful nature through which he works. He should be deprived of this ally by us putting down the sinful nature.

Consider the works of the flesh, or the old nature, in your life. Think about all your sinful habits and dispositions. The Lord Jesus said, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34). Peter said, "...for by whom a person is overcome, by him he is also brought into bondage" (2 Pet. 2:19). Sin is habit-forming as it intrudes your entire personality and life and becomes part of it. It is habitual and becomes more severe as time goes on. If you smoke, you must continue smoking, if you drink, you must keep on drinking, if you use drugs you will ever be craving for it, if you get fits of anger which lead to cursing and beating people, you become known as a violent, ill-tempered person. Some men become so aggressive that they even beat their wives. People who entertain unclean, lustful thoughts soon give expression to these

passions and become entangled with a web of sin and extra-marital relations. Unrestrained lusts may even give rise to unbiblical forms of sexuality. Likewise, there is no saturation point to materialism and the feverish pursuit of riches and honour.

What is the solution to all these sinful works of the flesh? We should name our sins when confessing them: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The Lord does not want us to continue sinning, and for that reason He also wishes to cleanse us from the domination by sinful habits. "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Remember that when Christ has delivered us we don't need special sessions for the casting out of demons, inner healing or the breaking of generation curses. Christ's work of atonement on the cross is perfect and complete – He destroys the works of the devil in our lives and gives us power through the Holy Spirit to prevail over sin. We only need to make a full surrender to be cleansed from all sin and unrighteousness.

However, we must go further than merely confessing our sins and also confess our sinful state which is caused by the uncrucified flesh. The old nature must be renounced at the foot of the cross and we must trust the Lord Jesus to put on His holy nature. Paul counselled the saved members of the church in Ephesus: "...that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24).

This is not always a very simple matter as there are deeper levels of surrenders and cleansing that are needed. Not all people are initially aware of all aspects of the flesh and sin that stand between them and the Lord. Our initial surrender to mortify the works of the flesh (Col. 3:5-7) must be followed up. Paul says, "But now you must also put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man" (Col. 3:8-10).

After we have fully put on the new nature, everything possible should be done to keep the old nature in a crucified position so it will not gain control over us again. Jesus says, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his

cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). I have to identify with the cross of the Lord Jesus, by whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world (Gal. 6:14). In this way I am united together with Christ in the likeness of His death and also of His resurrection (Rom. 6:5).

What will happen if I compromise by allowing and condoning sin in my life with the excuse that we are all sinners? Then the flesh, or old nature, is not really in a crucified position, thereby rendering me completely unfit to work for the Lord: "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" Gal. 5:17).

This is a checkmate situation and a recipe for spiritual disaster. In course of time the flesh and its sinful deeds will get the upper hand, causing such a person to backslide and end up in the position of the lost son. To him there was only one solution and that was to return to his father with the confession of his sins. Let us rather walk in the Spirit in accordance with the principles of the new life, then we will never fulfil the lust of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

One of our rules as born again Christians is that we should not sin. John says, "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2). That is not to say that we will never again sin, but if we do sin it should be regarded as a spiritual defeat in our lives by which we grieve the Holy Spirit. When it does happen we must immediately approach the Lord's throne of grace to confess and forsake our sins. Never accept your sin by making peace with it, and never conceal it in secrecy: "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Prov. 28:13).

Follow the guideline of 1 John 1:7 in your life: "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." The word "cleanses" is written in the continuous tense of the Greek verb, which means that if we follow the Lord with undivided heart and walk in the light, we will experience the continuous cleansing from sin by His blood. But this advantage is not enjoyed by people who wilfully, persistently and against their better judgment live in sin. They do not walk in the Spirit but give free reign to

the flesh. Such people are on a downward course to self-destruction, because when sin is full-grown it brings forth death. We cannot live lives which are under the domination of sin, and then die justified.

Trust the Lord to cleanse you with His blood and fill you with His Holy Spirit so you may be able to stand against all temptations to sin. Stand fast in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not again become slaves of sin. After we have entered in through the narrow gate of regeneration to walk on the narrow way the Holy Spirit is always there to strengthen us daily and to lead us into the eternal truths of God's Word. Persevere on this new and living way and never look back after you have put your hand to the plough (Luke 9:62).

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