

# *The New Birth in Acts*

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*TEXT: "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a presidential election, both candidates claimed a "new birth" experience. A famous Watergate conspirator has even written a book detailing his new life and "born again" adventure. A recent Gallup Poll disclosed that some forty million Americans profess to having been "born again." In deed and in truth it is a wonderful thing to have a new life—a new life in Christ. Jesus said it and I believe it: "Ye must be born anew" (John 3:7).

Could it be this day that someone deep down in his heart wishes that he could have a new birth? Reflecting on your life and your mistakes, you say to yourself, "I would give a whole world if I could just start again." Then, I bear good news for you—the good news that Jesus Christ has said, "Ye must be born anew." This birth is not physical, not a literal, fleshly birth. But in every way that really counts by the grace of almighty God *you* can be born again spiritually.

## **I. THE ORIGIN OF THE IDEA**

Where did the concept originate? How did it come to be that forty million Americans should lay claim to having been "born again"? The idea arose in John 3. This Scripture tells of a man named Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night. He likely was the most distinguished visitor our Lord ever had. But before the night passed, Jesus said to him, "Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. . . . Ye must be born anew" (John 3:5, 7).

The man who came to Jesus that night in Jerusalem could not possibly have been better born or bred. He was a ruler, a master of Israel, and a voting member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the Jewish nation. In one sense

every Jew in the world was under the domination of the Sanhedrin. Yet, our Lord said to that influential justice, "Ye must be born anew."

The man who came to Jesus by night possessed high moral integrity. He believed that right was always right and that wrong was always wrong. He would have been shocked by many things flourishing in the downtown streets of our American cities. He was the best kind of man Judaism could produce, yet the Lord Jesus Christ knew that his sides were aching and his heart was empty. He said, "Nicodemus, for all of your goodness, you must, nevertheless, be born again."

The man who came to Him that night had an open mind. How refreshing it is to find folks who are open-minded about religion! Nicodemus immediately and forthrightly insisted, "We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him" (John 3:2). An open mind alone, however, will not save your soul. Not until you have closed your mind by setting your heart upon the truth of God do you have hope of everlasting life. So the Lord Jesus said to that distinguished, honorable, open-minded man, "Ye must be born anew."

I admire Nicodemus because he was highly intelligent. Ordinarily, to serve in the Sanhedrin required a knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, history, law, science, magic, and sorcery. Nicodemus would likely have studied at the finest schools, at the feet of the most learned professors in Palestine. Simply knowing something will never save you from sin unless you know Him who is the Lord! So Jesus said to well-informed Nicodemus, "Ye must be born anew."

The man who came to Jesus by night had remarkable courage. How shocked we would be to discover that the mayor of one of our great cities was secretly meeting with Communists. The fact that Nicodemus sought an audience

with Jesus was no less shocking, had it been known in the streets. That a member of the Supreme Court of the land should have counseled with the lowly Nazarene was unthinkable and unbelievable! Yet Jesus insisted, "For all of your courage, for all of your intelligence, for all of your open-mindedness, for all of your goodness, you must still be born again."

## II. THE MEANING OF THE NEW BIRTH

What did Jesus mean? How does it occur? What must I do to be "born again"? May I share with you the steps involved in the new birth with a prayer that you might find new life in Christ.

Jesus said, "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5). What does it mean then to be born again of water and the Spirit?

You cannot know what our Lord meant just by reading John 3:1-8. On several occasions I have preached in India, going from village to village among those poor people, some of whom had never before heard a gospel sermon. I could imagine tearing John 3:1-8 out of the Bible and mailing it to India with instructions to obey John 3:5-7. Would they by reading the conversation with Nicodemus understand the real meaning of the new birth? The answer is no.

How then may we know what Jesus intended? We know because the apostles were guided into all truth (John 16:13) and provided us with a clear explanation.

Being born again was essential to entering the kingdom (John 3:5). But what is the kingdom? It is the church. In Matthew 16:18, 19, the words *kingdom* and *church* are used interchangeably: "And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Paul affirmed his membership in the kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13). It was then in existence and he was part of it. Likewise John the apostle was "in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus" (Revelation 1:9).

## III. ITS MEANING IN ACTS

The church and the kingdom are one and the same. What a man does to enter one he does to enter the other! Remember that Jesus told Nicodemus that a birth of water and the Spirit was necessary to kingdom entrance (John 3:5). How did the Spirit-led apostles interpret this? In the book of Acts there are specific cases showing men and women entering the church or kingdom. Notice Acts 2. Some three thousand Jews, believing in Christ, asked, "What shall we do?" (v. 37). Peter replied, "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (v. 38). They gladly received the Word, were baptized, and added by the Lord to the church (v. 47). Upon their confession of faith in Christ, their repentance and baptism, these three thousand Jews were added to Christ's nondenominational church.

The church is the kingdom. To enter the kingdom requires a birth of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). To enter the church requires faith, repentance, and baptism (Acts 2:38). The two are synonymous—being born of water and the Spirit is believing in Christ, repenting, and being baptized for the remission of sins.

The Acts of the Apostles recounts the conversion stories of the Ethiopian (8), Saul (9; 22), Cornelius (10), the jailer (16), and Lydia (16). In each case, there was faith, turning from sin, and baptism.

The expression "born again" may also be found in 1 Peter 1:23. There we are assured that one is "begotten again, . . . through the word of God," while in John 3:5 we are "born of . . . the Spirit." Both passages have the same primary meaning. The Holy Spirit has given us the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:21). As we learn and obey its teaching, we are "born of the Spirit," "born again through the word of God."

But what is meant in John 3:8, "The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit"? Some understand this to mean that the new birth is a mysterious, better-felt-than-told experience. But not so! We cannot see the wind, but we hear the sound thereof. Nor can we see the Spirit, but we hear His voice, which is the Word of God.

The apostle Paul pinpoints the exact moment in which we are born again in Romans 6:3, 4: "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life." We are buried in baptism and raised "in newness of life." The new life (or new birth) comes when the penitent believer is raised from the water of baptism. At that moment, he is added to Christ's church, the kingdom.

We can have new life in Christ! We can be wondrously born again from above—our sins forgiven and our names written in the Book of Life.

## CONCLUSION

These words of our Lord to Nicodemus echo through the halls of time and are yet binding: "*Ye must be born anew.*"

A ruler once came to the Savior by night  
To ask Him the way of salvation and light;  
The Master made answer in words true and plain,  
"Ye must be born again."

Ye children of men, now attend to the word  
So solemnly uttered by Jesus the Lord;  
And let not this message to you be in vain,  
"Ye must be born again."

O ye who would enter that glorious rest,  
And sing with the ransomed the song of the blest;  
The life everlasting if you would obtain,  
"Ye must be born again."

—Paul Rogers

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