

The New Birth

Sermon by Rev. Donald Beaton Macleod

Preached at Inverness Communion, on Friday 24 June 1994

Text: "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," John 3:3.

We see that Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus by night and acknowledged that He was a teacher come from God, and could not do the miracles which He did except God were with Him.

The Saviour immediately answers Nicodemus and sets his greatest need before him - his need of the new birth. Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," And the Saviour is saying to us from His exalted glory, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." And surely we ought to lay this matter to heart when He is testifying to the truth of it by those words, "Verily, verily", or, "Truly, truly."

It is very evident from what follows in this chapter that the Saviour began to instruct Nicodemus in the things concerning the Kingdom of God. What a blessed instructor Nicodemus had, for He was one who knew all things.

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, a Pharisee and a "teacher in Israel"; yet it is evident from what the Saviour said to him that he had not yet learned the ABC of true religion. We ourselves will never learn even the ABC of true religion until we come face to face with this: "Verily verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the, kingdom of God." The Queen of Sheba came from a far country to hear the wisdom of Solomon; how much more should we go to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is greater than Solomon, to be taught by Him, Who can teach like Him, when He teaches poor sinners?

We now desire to notice in connection with the text: **first**, the *absolute necessity of the new birth*: **secondly**, the *nature of the new birth*, and **thirdly**, the *evidence of the new birth*.

First: the necessity of the new birth. Before coming to address this matter directly, we ask three questions which are not easy to answer. First, how far in sin

can a person go and yet be saved? Surely that is a solemn question indeed! It is clear from the Word of God that there were those who went to great lengths in sin and yet were saved. One of those was King Manasseh who made the streets of Jerusalem run with the blood of the saints; who introduced all manner of evil and idolatry to Jerusalem and Judea; who opposed the worship of God, and slew the prophets. Great was his enmity to the true worshippers of God. Yet we are told that when he was taken away as a prisoner from his own land, he was brought to repentance and returned a different person. He had gone very far in sin; yet the Lord had mercy upon him and made him “a new creature” and an heir of everlasting life. But while that was true of Manasseh, others went far in sin and were never saved. Therefore, the case of Manasseh ought to be no encouragement to anyone to go on in sin.

His case is indeed an instance which may give encouragement to a soul ready to perish, and who finds himself sin-laden and guilty. It gives encouragement to hope that the Lord might yet look their way, though they have a load of sin and guilt that is ready to sink them to a lost eternity. But we know that though Manasseh himself was saved, the sins of which he was guilty sealed the fate of the people of Judah. (2 Kings 21:11,12), They were to go into captivity for seventy years, and all on account of the wickedness of Manasseh.

Another person who went far in sin is the thief on the cross. He spent his life in godlessness, and he was now reaping the wages of his sins in being put to death by crucifixion. He was crucified beside the Saviour as He suffered on the Cross of Calvary, and we know what took place there. The thief became a subject of saving grace, and began to rebuke the other thief who was crucified. Also, he came to the defence of Jesus. He could say of himself and the other thief that they were receiving the due reward of their sin, but of Jesus he had to say, “This man hath done nothing amiss.” His request to the Saviour was, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” and he received the answer, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

As with the case of Manasseh, so with the case of the thief on the cross: there is no encouragement given to sinners to go on in their sins and carelessness, until they are on the very brink of the eternal world. For though you should say to

yourself, "Here is a thief who at the very end of his life got mercy," you must remember that the other thief neither cried for mercy nor received mercy. And while the instance of the thief who obtained mercy may be of encouragement to a poor soul on the brink of a lost eternity, it gives no encouragement to any sinner to go on in sin.

How far in sin may a person go and yet be saved? Let us not put it to the test. The sins of which we are already guilty are sufficient to sink us forever to the lowest hell. Therefore, we are not to take strength from these or any other instances to go on in the way of sin and evil. We must lay to heart our own great need of a saving change, of being born again.

There is another question. How far may a believer go on in backsliding? What a solemn question this is! And what a searching question it is for a soul in a state of backsliding! What solemn instances there are of those who went very far in backsliding from God. It is often true of those in a state of backsliding that they now have no assurance of their hope. They fear that the backsliding is a state from which there is no return. They cannot talk themselves out of it, the Lord must rescue them from that state. David himself who had been raised so high, went down far in his backsliding; yet the Lord looked upon him in mercy. It was said to him, "The Lord hath put away thy sin," But because of his sin, trouble was to be in his house.

What of Solomon himself? His heart was carried away by the heathen wives whom he married. Were it not for the record of the word of God on him we would be ready to wonder what was the end of Solomon.

How far may a believer go in backsliding? Let none think of putting it to the test. Let us flee from backsliding. Let us heed the call of God to return. This is His message to the backslider always, "Return O backslider."

Now, to return to Nicodemus, he professed religion and yet needed to be born again. Therefore, we may ask, How far can a person go in the profession and practice of religion but yet be lost at last? We have some very solemn instances of those who for many a day made a profession of religion, and engaged in the practices of religion, but yet were cast off at last. King Saul at times almost appeared to be one of the true people of God. He prophesied among the prophets. And after he had been pursuing David, and David showed mercy to him,

he seemed to speak to David with great contrition, and to mourn over his folly. Yet he went on in his sins, and perished in his sins.

We have the most outstanding case of all in Judas Iscariot. We have no indication in Scripture that any of the other disciples were pointing at Judas Iscariot and saying, "He is not a true disciple." He engaged in the duties of religion, and held a place in the visible church as a disciple of Jesus Christ among His close band of followers. Yet the time came when Judas Iscariot betrayed his Master to His enemies for thirty pieces of silver, and then went and destroyed himself when he saw what he had done.

Another solemn example of how far some may go in the profession and practice of religion and yet be lost is seen in the cases of those who shall say to the Saviour, "Have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name done many wonderful works?" What shall the Saviour say to such? "I never knew you, depart from me all ye that work iniquity."

Surely these examples ought to make all the more real to us what is brought before us by our text - the absolute necessity of the new birth "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Of course, none of those who perished after a profession of religion were ever born again, for when the Lord does this work, it is a work that is done forever; and that soul, now in Christ, is secure forever.

So a person may go far in the profession of religion and yet perish. John Bunyan saw that there is a way to hell even from the very gate of heaven. How searching these things are, on this day set apart for self-examination¹. They show us the absolute necessity of the new birth. Nothing else will do. If we come short of this, we come short forever. If this great change be not wrought in us, then we shall be lost forever. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." What need we have of examining ourselves to see if the Lord has wrought this work in us. The great question for each one should be, "Am I born again?" Without this all is vain. The question is not, "How high a profession in religion do I make?" We may make a very high profession in religion; we may be accepted by the people of God as one who has experienced the new birth; but the question must be, "Am I born again?" The question is not, "How diligent have

¹ Friday, the day of self-examination of a Communion season.

I been in religious duties,” or, “What knowledge do I have of the doctrines of God's Word,” but, “Am I born again?” The Saviour had to say to Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God!” The soul is wholly unable to understand the spiritual and eternal things of the kingdom of God Apart from being born again; born from above.

Let us go on, **secondly**, to the nature of the new birth. Very clearly it is a great and radical change; a change of passing from death to life, and from darkness to light. What a great difference there is between these opposite things! So, the change that is wrought in the soul in the new birth is very great. It is the work of God, not the work of man. It is a mighty work.

It is also an inward change by the divine implanting in the soul of a new nature - By nature we are fallen, depraved and sinful; nothing will suffice but the receiving of a new heart. “A new heart also will I give you,” the Lord is saying in His word, “and a new spirit will I put within you,” We need to be changed at heart. A superficial. outward change will avail nothing. We need this inward, spiritual, gracious change within, in which the soul is quickened into newness of life and delivered from the bondage of sin and death. It is a change in which light penetrates into the soul, which is darkness itself, and which transforms the soul. It is a change whereby the will is renewed and the affections set on things above.

What power in heaven or on earth can effect this change in your soul or mine? How may we be changed so radically that we become what we were not? Well the Scripture makes it plain that the agency by which this change is brought about is God the Holy Ghost. He is a divine person, one who is very God of very God. He alone can effect this mighty change, the new birth, in our souls. It is not the mere influence which effects this change; it is this glorious, divine person, the Holy Ghost, by His almighty power.

The greatness of this change may be reckoned in this way: we know the great wonder that was performed in creation when God brought all things into being by the word of His power. We look with wonder upon creation, and say, “Surely it is the handiwork of God!” Well, It is clear that the new birth is a greater and more glorious work than the creation of the whole universe. To create a soul anew in Christ Jesus, to deliver it from the darkness in which it is held and bring it into light, requires the almighty power of God.

It is also a secret work; a hidden work in the soul of a poor sinner. We see this from what the Saviour declares, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

So, the soul is now brought to see the kingdom of God. What a blessed day for a poor sinner when that work is wrought in him or her. What a blessed day. when the Lord comes to the soul dead in trespasses and in sins, quickens that soul by His almighty power, and brings it alive from the dead. It is a spiritual resurrection from the grave of spiritual death. It is a creative act of the God of heaven in the soul of a poor sinner.

We said that this is the great question, "Am I born again?" What a great question it is when you consider the nature of the new birth. You must ask, "Has this necessary, radical, secret change been wrought in me by the power of God the Holy Ghost. Without it I have nothing; all my religion is vain. My hope is gone if I am not a subject of the new birth. Let me have as much religion as I wish, it all goes for nothing if this is not done."

What a high thing it is to profess that the Lord has wrought this change in the soul. On the other band, what a solemn thing it is not to profess that this change has been wrought in one when it has been wrought. What dishonour to Him that wrought this great work! There are two sides to it. One side is the solemnity of professing true conversion. The other side is the solemnity of denying it when the Lord hath wrought this work in us.

This great work is bound up with the effectual calling of sinners from darkness to light. We know that a preparatory work, that is, conviction of sin, runs before. We know also that there are convictions that never end in conversion. When a sinner is being convinced of his or her sin, it is not possible to distinguish between that conviction by the Spirit of God which is the preparatory work in the soul, and the common convictions and strivings of the Spirit. The only way they can be recognised as the effectual striving of the Spirit is when they issue in salvation. Therefore, how tender we ought to be with regard to the strivings of the Spirit of God with us. How solemn when the Lord is speaking to us, convincing us of sin, and bringing us to see that we are sinners who are lost, ruined and undone. Yet, we cannot deliver ourselves from the curse of the broken Jaw.

What a wonderful day it is for the sinner, when he or she is brought from the bondage of sin and unbelief into the light and liberty of the gospel, through the effectual working of God's Spirit in them, and through the gospel being made a living word to them. They are enabled, through the quickening power of the Spirit of God, to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered in the gospel. "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power." The soul is made willing to embrace what he was unwilling to embrace before, that is, Christ in the gospel. The soul now has an eye to see the glory that it had no eye for before - the glory of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The soul now has the opening of the understanding, the renewing of the will, and the outgoings of the affections. The affections are drawn out by the cross of Christ so that the soul is brought to close in with Jesus Christ in the everlasting gospel.

We must ask ourselves therefore, "Do we know anything of this closing in with Jesus Christ in the gospel, constrained by the mighty power of God, by the effectual working of His Spirit in us? Are we new creatures in Christ Jesus?" If so, the beginning of likeness of Christ has been imprinted upon our souls. When the Lord comes to work effectually by His grace and in His sovereignty, He delivers the soul, and imprints His own image on it.

Let us go on to consider, **thirdly**, the evidences of the new birth, that is, how we are to know that we are born again. One thing is true concerning the grace of God in the soul of man: it cannot be hid. You cannot hide it: it will manifest itself. The woman who touched the hem of Christ's garment wanted to hide, but she could not be hid because she had received the blessing. If you received the blessing, you cannot hide it away. Surely it would not be to the glory of Him who wrought such a work in you, that this would be your mind. Certainly, grace will manifest itself in one way or another so that others will see that a work has been wrought in that person, or that some good thing is in his heart toward the Lord God of Israel.

In bringing the soul into newness of life and living union with Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God shows the soul its need of Christ by showing its sinner-ship and guilt. Now if we have come to embrace Jesus Christ as our own personal Saviour, He is precious to us, "Unto you therefore which believe he is precious." Christ is a precious Saviour to His people; as the Psalmist said,

"Whom have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone?"

And in the earth whom I desire besides thee there is none.”

Can you put your amen to that? Great is the preciousness of the Lord Jesus Christ to the living soul, for the soul is united to Him by bonds that shall never be broken throughout time or eternity; bonds of the covenant which is ordered in all things and sure.

Those who are born again are like the blind man who had been healed. When the Pharisees were challenging him about the Saviour, he had to say “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.” Can we say with regard to our souls, “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind now I see.” If you have been brought out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son, this, among many other things, will be true: the world itself will be a new place to you. (We do not mean the world lying in wickedness but the world that God created by His almighty power), You will see differently from how you saw it before. You will see the glory of God in it. You will think you have entered into a new world altogether. “How did I never see it like this before?” Because you were blind, and now you see.

Those who are delivered out of Satan's dark kingdom by being born again are brought into the school of Christ. Therefore, you have to ask yourself if you are in the school of Christ. Is He your teacher, your leader, your guide? Is He daily instructing you in the things that belong to His kingdom and glory?

The new birth also evidences itself by the exercise of the graces of the Spirit in the soul, for in the day of regeneration the beginning of every grace is implanted in the soul. As it is true of the sinner that the seed of every sin is in his heart, so in the new heart is implanted the seed of every grace - love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. These fruits of the Spirit are evidences, when they evidence themselves in the heart and life of the believer, that he has been brought out of darkness into God's marvellous light, and that he is on the way to the celestial city.

You may say with regard to the grace of love, “Oh where is the evidence in me of love to Jesus Christ? How little love I show to Him who showed such love to me; who loved me and gave Himself for me. Where is the return of that love?” Well, if you mourn over your lack of love to Him, that is an evidence of your love to Him. This is not what you desire: that your love would be cold. You desire that your

love would be stirred up; that you would be embracing Him, and that you would be embraced by Him in His love.

So, it is also with regard to these other graces of the Spirit. The people of God have to mourn how little progress they have made in the life of faith. They are called to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, but they say, "I am making no progress at all." We say there is another way to look at it and it is this: what progress are you making in the knowledge of yourself? You will never progress in the knowledge of Christ but in the measure that you progress in the knowledge of yourself. The more you find sin within you, the more you will realise your need of Christ to be all and in all to you; your Saviour, your Deliverer, your Lord.

In the born-again person there is also the crucifying of the flesh with the affections and lusts. The soul desires to put on the Lord Jesus Christ; to put on holiness without which no man shall see the Lord, The soul desires to die daily unto sin and to live unto righteousness. Is that process of sanctification, which is carried on in every soul in which the work of regeneration has been wrought, going on in your own soul? If so, it shall be perfected at death, for "the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness."

There is another way by which you may test if you are born again. What of a conflict within? When the new nature is implanted, the remnants of corruption remain in the soul, and therefore there is a conflict in that soul. A war is going on, the flesh lusting against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. Is that going on in you? Are you finding that you have to cry with the apostle, "Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death"? And can you say, "I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord"?

What a blessed people they are in whom this conflict is, for the conflict will not end with the victory of the flesh but with the victory of the spirit over the flesh, Christ has conquered all the powers of evil and darkness, and therefore His people, through Him, shall have the victory over all enemies within and without. They shall give a shout of victory when they finish their course. They shall finish their course with joy because they have overcome, and overcome in the strength of their glorified Lord.

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, ye must be born again."

May the Lord bless His word to us. Let us pray.