



*A Ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

The New Birth



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What is meant by *new birth* and *born again*? Jesus used these terms to introduce a radical concept when He talked with Nicodemus in John 3:1-10, the definitive passage on the subject. Drawn to Jesus' miracles and curious about the kingdom He taught, Nicodemus came to inquire of Christ:

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" (vv. 1, 2).

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was likely zealous for ritual and purity according to the Mosaic law. Being a ruler of the Jews — probably one of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Israel's supreme religious body — made him an elite among elites. We infer, then, that Nicodemus was given to religious piety, that he had done everything the law required of him. All this makes his meeting with Jesus highly significant.

Since Jesus was no champion of the Jewish establishment, Nicodemus' meeting with Him was a daring move; he used the cover of darkness to keep it private. We may surmise that he came prepared to ask the Lord about Himself, His ministry, and especially about the central theme of His teaching: the kingdom of God. If so, this explains Jesus' strategy in responding to Nicodemus.

Bypassing His guest's polite comments and addressing what He knew was on Nicodemus' mind, Jesus went straight for the spiritual jugular:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3).

Entry to God’s kingdom

In these words we find the first clue to the notion of new birth: It’s the means by which one can “see” (become part of, participate in) the kingdom of God. And what is that kingdom in the teaching of Christ? To begin with, for Jesus it is that spiritual realm in human hearts and lives where God is king and where His will is done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10; Luke 17:20, 21).

Jesus taught not only that we may enter God’s spiritual kingdom by the new birth today but also that one day the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, over which He will reign forever — literally (Revelation 11:15). Until that day arrives, the kingdom of God exists now, in a spiritual sense, through His rule in the lives of those who have been born again, thus becoming part of God’s kingdom — His family of faith on earth.

The kingdom of God, therefore, is a present reality, and Jesus is emphatic (“most assuredly”) that to see and enter it, one must experience new birth. To Nicodemus, Jesus said that being born again is the one and only entry point into the life of God’s kingdom, now and for eternity.

End of self-effort

Based on the “holy man” profile of Nicodemus, we also extract from Jesus’ statement that new birth pointed him to something utterly different than good moral standing and self-effort. It’s been said that religion is about human attempts to reach God, while the Christian gospel is about God’s effort to reach humanity. Jesus invited this deeply religious leader to stop counting on his good works, to come to the end of the law as a means of righteousness, and to enter into kingdom life through spiritual rebirth.

This concept escaped Nicodemus. The Greek term Jesus used to express new birth is *gennethe anothēn*, which means “born from above” — a reference to its supernatural element. But Nicodemus thought in purely natural terms and thus missed the point Jesus sought to make. On a different frequency than Christ, he responded:

“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (v. 4).

So Jesus repeated His first crucial statement, changing only two or three of His previous words:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (v. 5).

Water and the Spirit

Here Jesus expanded on *born again*, saying that it means being born of *water* and of the *Spirit* — two words rich with biblical

overtones. In Scripture, *water* often points to spiritual cleansing in connection with what's written. A young man's way can be cleansed when he heeds God's word (Psalm 119:9). And the church is cleansed when Christ washes her with water by the word (Ephesians 5:26). Other texts (Psalm 19:7; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23) also link our spiritual rebirth to the written Word. God's Word applied to human hearts by the Holy Spirit is life changing. Further, we recall the importance of water baptism as public testimony of our sins being washed away (forgiven) through Christ's blood (John 1:33; 3:22; Acts 2:38; Revelation 1:5). All of this was probably on Jesus' mind when He spoke of water in connection with the new birth.

What about His inclusion of "and the Spirit" with water in verse 5? Elsewhere in John's Gospel (7:37-39) water is linked with the Holy Spirit. There the Spirit is described as living water, even as life itself. Mention of the Spirit in John 3:5, then, is surely a declaration that the new birth happens when, and only when, the Holy Spirit of God and Christ come to dwell in the human heart and spirit by faith in God's Word.

A passage written by Paul pulls together most of what we have said so far. In Titus 3:4, 5, the new birth is called *regeneration*; our personal effort is excluded. The roles of water and Spirit are captured by the apostle:

But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done [personal effort], but accord-

ing to His mercy He saved us, through the washing [water] of regeneration [new birth] and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

When we believe and receive the good Word of God's loving mercy in the Savior's death and resurrection, we are born again — regenerated from above!

Better grasp ahead

In John 3 Jesus further helps our understanding:

“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’” (vv. 6, 7).

Even if it were possible to reenter a mother's womb and be born a second time (as Nicodemus surmised), that way of being born again would still be “of the flesh,” for that which is born of the flesh is flesh. The *born again* Jesus requires is spiritual — inward — and is experienced only by the coming of the Spirit into our hearts, for that which is born of the (Holy) Spirit is (our human) spirit.

To illustrate, Jesus called attention to the nature of wind:

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (v. 8).

Neither wind nor the Holy Spirit can be seen or controlled, but their effects are seen and felt, to be sure.

The new birth may be described in general terms, but its dynamics defy human

explanation. It is the work of the Holy Spirit on the inside — the spiritual side — of each person who receives it. Like the effects of the wind, the evidence and impact of the new birth will be seen in the lives of those born again.

Before and after John 3

This conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus may have lasted for hours. It didn't end with a "Got it!" from Nicodemus. Instead, he remained baffled and asked, "How can these things be?" (v. 9).

Jesus' reply ("Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?" v. 10) is a stark reminder that grasping the truth about new birth can be more difficult for religious folks than for the irreligious, chiefly because the new birth is what *God* does, not something more *they* need to do. This seems to have been Nicodemus' main obstacle to grasping the concept.

As a "teacher of Israel" he should have understood it sooner, recalling that the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e., Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 32:39, 40; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:25-27) prophesied of God's plan to change the minds and spirits of His people by giving them heart transplants — i.e., the new birth.

Since the completion of New Testament Scriptures, we have even more witnesses than Nicodemus had from which to learn of the new birth — others beyond John 3:1-10 explored above. For example, we read how God raised us from among the spiritually dead, gave us new life, and seated us with

Christ in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:1-7). And we read how God made new persons — new creations — of us, how He empowers us for the new life in Christ and to serve in the newness of the Spirit (Romans 6:4, 11; 7:6; 8:10, 11; 12:2; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:22-24).

Further, John's first epistle speaks much of what being born again means for those who experience it (2:29; 3:9, 14; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). First John says that those who are born of God do not sin (KJV and NKJV). Comparing these texts with 1:8-10, we conclude that John means they don't choose to sin, or practice it.

Now hear it from Peter's pen: *Regeneration* is a formal term for the birth from above by which we become new people in Christ (1 Peter 2:2), and *sanctification* is the growth by which regeneration continues (2 Peter 3:18).

(*Note:* Some Bible students have taught that the new birth will not occur until the resurrection at Christ's return, when believers are raised with new, immortal bodies fit for God's eternal kingdom. It is true that the future change for Christians will be glorious indeed. Equally true is the fact that Scripture points to faith, conversion, and spiritual transformation here and now as fulfillment of the new birth Jesus taught to Nicodemus.)

Summary through key questions

Who needs the new birth? All human beings, born of the flesh and not reborn, are like walking dead people. They are dead

in their sins, facing the penalty of eternal death at the end. If they are to know the Lord of life and enter the realm of new life for time and eternity, they must be born again — of the Spirit.

Who promises and provides the new birth? The consistent testimony of Scripture is that the new birth is the work of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — not the work of men, women, boys, or girls.

What is the new birth? It is that miraculous event or experience in which sin-dead people enter into faith, repentance, and new life, thereby becoming part of God's eternal kingdom. The *what* of the new birth is that fallen human beings are again made partakers of the Divine nature (2 Peter 1:3, 4).

How can anyone be born again? The new birth cannot be reduced to a formula or bought (or obtained) at a price. Instead, it comes from above through the Spirit's application of God's good Word to human hearts. The crux of John 3:16, spoken by Jesus to Nicodemus in their new birth dialogue, is that "whosoever believes" in the only begotten Son, whom God lovingly and lavishly gave to die for our sins, shall not perish but shall live everlastingly. If this conviction grips you permanently as the primary truth about God's grace, you've got it: You've been born again from above!

Just as we played no part in our old first birth, we play no part in our new second birth. The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the deep to bring order out of chaos and breathe life into the dust Adam was, making him a living soul (Genesis 1:2ff; 2:7).

Similarly, the Spirit of God moves in our hearts and brings a new creation out of the old, sinful man: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Earlier in John’s Gospel, it is written:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (1:12, 13).

It cannot be said more plainly: The new birth is the work of God’s Spirit, and no human can tell you exactly how.

How can we know that we have been born again? The epistle of 1 John answers in three ways: if we believe Jesus is the Christ (5:1); if we practice righteousness, not sin (3:9, 10); and if we love other people, starting with our brethren (vv. 14, 15).

Where does the new birth occur? It occurs not in the body but in the human spirit — the heart and life of the one who receives it (Ezekiel 36:25-27; John 3:6).

When does it happen? It happens at the time of faith and repentance, when the Spirit of God regenerates someone previously dead in trespasses and sins, raising that one with Jesus Christ and seating them with the Lord in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:1-7).

Why does God provide for our new birth? The answer is highlighted in James 1:17, 18:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word

of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

James reminds us that all the blessings we enjoy come from God in whom there's nothing false. He brought us forth — gave us new birth — of His own will (not our own), by the word of truth, that we might be to Him a kind of firstfruits — that we would become all He intended us to be before sin entered the picture.

The *why* of the new birth, then, is so that God will not be outdone and the Devil will not have the last word. His deception of Adam and Eve in the garden is now overridden by the salvation of those of Adam's race who are born again through this marvelous provision of God: the new birth. In this way God is creating a people for His own possession, described as "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, [to] proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). And this we will do throughout eternity, for the life of the kingdom into which the born again enter will never end.

Believe and receive

Whether you read this as a seeker or as one familiar with religious matters, the bottom line is the same. We are all broken by sin, but our gracious God provides for our redemption: "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). The entry point into this eternal life is the new birth. It's not about trying harder or living better;

it's the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, applying the saving power of God's Word in Christ, making dead people alive, saving religious people from the need to trust their good works, making Jesus the center of their hope and joy.

This precious provision is available to you. Trust Jesus. Invite Him into your heart and life. Something new will begin, and you'll never be the same.



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