

THE CHRISTIAN RACE AND OTHER SERMONS

BY

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II

REGENERATION

(sermon 1 of 3)

“Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”—JOHN iii. 3.

IF the Bible be false, as some proud men have dared to say, there is no occasion for keeping one day in the week holy, there is no use in honouring church and making a profession of religion; we are no better than the beasts that perish, and the best thing a man can do is to eat and drink and live as he pleases. If the Bible be only half true, as some unhappy people strive to make out, there is no certainty about our everlasting souls: Christianity is all doubt and dimness and guesswork, we can never know what we are to believe as necessary to salvation, we can never be sure that we have got hold of the words of eternal life. Give up your Bible, and you have not a square inch of certainty and confidence to stand on: you may think and you may fancy and you may have your own opinion, but you cannot show me any satisfactory proof or authority that you are right; you are building merely on your own judgment; you have put out your own eyes, as it were, and, like one in the dark, you do not really know where you are going.

But if, beloved, the Bible be indeed the Word of God Himself and altogether true, and that it is so can be proved by witnesses without number; if the Bible be indeed true and our only guide to heaven, and this I trust you are all ready to allow, it surely must be the duty of every wise and thinking man to lay to heart each doctrine which it contains, and while he adds nothing to it, to be careful that he takes nothing from it.

Now, I say that on the face of the Bible, when fairly read, there stands out this grand doctrine, that we must each of us between the cradle and grave go through a spiritual change, a change of heart, or in other words be born again; and in the text you have heard read the Lord Jesus declares positively, without it no man shall see the kingdom of God.

Sinner, man or woman, mark that! no salvation without this new birth! Christ hath done everything for thee; He paid the price of our redemption, lived for us, died for us, rose again for us; but all shall avail us nothing, if there be not this work in us: *we must be born again*.

Now, beloved, I desire to speak to you freely and plainly about this new birth, in two or three sermons, as a thing absolutely necessary to salvation; and today, at least, I shall try to show you from my text two things: *first*, the reason why we must all be born again, and *secondly*, what the expression to be born again means; and the Lord grant that the subject to which I am going to call your attention for two or three Sunday mornings may not be listened to and soon forgotten, as a light and indifferent matter—but carried home and thought over, and blessed to the conversion of many souls!

I. Why, then, is this change of heart so necessary? The answer is short and simple. Because of the natural sinfulness of every man's disposition. We are not born into the world with spotless, innocent minds, but corrupt and wicked, and with a will to the thing which is evil as soon as we have the power; and the Scriptural account is true to the letter—we are all conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity. I need not stop now to tell you how all this came to pass; I need only remind you that in the beginning it was not so. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were created holy, harmless, undefiled, without spot or stain or blemish about them; and when God rested from His labour on the seventh day, He pronounced them, like all His other works, to be very good. But, alas for us! Adam, by transgression, fell, and lost his first estate; he forfeited the likeness of God in which he had been made; and hence all we, who are his children, come into being with a defiled and sinful nature. We are fallen, and we must needs be raised; we have about us the marks of the old Adam—Adam the first, earthly and carnal—and we must needs be marked with the marks of the Second Adam, the Lord Jesus, which are heavenly and spiritual. Do any of you feel a doubt of this? Consider only what we are by nature.

By nature we do not see Christ's spiritual kingdom upon earth; it is all hid from our eyes. Men may be sharp and knowing in worldly matters, they may be wise in the things of time; but when they come to religion, their understandings seem blind, there is a thick veil over their hearts, and they see nothing as they ought to see.

So long as they are in this natural state it is in vain they are told of God's holiness and God's unchangeable justice, His spiritual law and His judgment to come, their own enormous deficiencies, their own peril of destruction—it matters not; it all falls flat and dull upon their ears; they neither feel it nor care for it nor consider it, and in a few hours they are as though they had never heard it. It is to no purpose, while in this condition, that Christ crucified and His precious atonement are set before us; we can see no form nor beauty nor comeliness about Him; we cannot value what He has done, and, as far as we are concerned, the wisdom and the excellence of the Cross, which Apostles gloried in, seems all thrown away. And why is this? Our hearts want changing. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned." This is the true account of all that weariness and lifelessness and carelessness which we so often see in the worshippers of God's house; this is the secret of that awful indifference about spiritual things which prevails so widely both among rich and poor, and makes the Gospel appear a sealed book. It comes from the heart. Some always fancy they want learning, some they have no time, some they have very peculiar difficulties which no one else in the world has; but the truth lies far deeper, They all want new hearts. Once give them new natures, and you would hear no more about learning, or time, or difficulty. Every mountain would be levelled and every valley filled up, that the way of God might be prepared.

But again. By nature we do not love the laws of Christ's spiritual kingdom. We do not openly refuse to obey them, we should be angry with any one who said we had thrown them aside, but we have no love to them and delight in them; it is not

our meat and drink to do our Father's will. Oh no! by nature we love our own way and our own inclinations, and that is our only law. We bring forth fruit unto ourselves, but not unto God. Our own pleasure and our own profit take up all our attention, and as for Him who made us and redeemed us, too many do not give Him the very leavings of their time. By nature we do not measure ourselves by God's standard: who ever takes the Sermon on the Mount as his rule of character? Who ever admires the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the hungerers and thirsters after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the men who are persecuted for righteousness' sake? These are all people whom the world despises, they are as nothing by the side of the jovial and light-hearted, the men who love strong drink and are held to sing good songs; and yet these are the persons whom Jesus calls blessed. What natural man judges of sin as Jesus teaches us to judge? how few look on drunkenness and fornication as damnable sins!—yet the Bible says they are. How few consider anger without cause as bad as murder, and wanton looks as bad as adultery!—yet Jesus says they are. Where are the men who strive to love their enemies, who bless those that hate them, and pray for those who spitefully use them?—yet this is the rule that Jesus has laid down. And why is all this? You see there must be something radically wrong. By nature we do not lay ourselves out to glorify God with our bodies and spirits, we take no pleasure in speaking to each other about Him, the concerns of this world have a hundred times more of our thoughts; and few indeed are the parties where the mention of Christ and heaven would not stop many mouths, and make nearly all look as if the subject was very uncomfortable. And why is all this? Some talk of bad example having done them harm, and some say they have had a bad education, but the evil is far more deeply seated; that which is born of the flesh is flesh, it comes from the carnal unrenewed mind, and the remedy wanted is change of nature. A corrupt tree can only bring forth corrupt fruit; the root of the mischief is the natural heart.

Once more. By nature we are altogether unfit for Christ's kingdom in glory. The lives which we are in the habit of leading, and the practices we are fond of indulging, and the tastes we are always seeking to please, and the opinions we hold, are all such as prove we have no natural meetness for the inheritance of the saints in light. They do not follow after holiness in all their walk and conversation. Then what place can they occupy in that blessed abode where there shall enter in nothing that defileth, nor whatsoever worketh abomination?—how shall they stand in His presence, who chargeth even His angels with folly, and in whose sight the very heavens are not pure! They do not take pleasure in the exercise of prayer and praise on earth; and how could they enjoy the employments of that glorious habitation, where they rest not day nor night worshipping and crying "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come." They do not count it a privilege to draw nigh to God through Jesus Christ, to walk with Him, to seek close acquaintance with Him; and where would be the comfort to them of dwelling for ever in the presence of the Lord God and the Lamb? They do not strive to walk in the steps of holy men of old, they do not take example from the faith and patience of the saints; and with what face then would they join the society of just men made perfect?—with what salutation, af-

ter a life spent in pleasing the devil and the world, would they greet Abraham and David and the Apostles and all that blessed company who have fought the good fight? Alas! beloved, a natural man in heaven would be a miserable creature,—there would be something in the air he could not breathe, the joys, the affections, the employments would be all wearisome to him, he would find himself unfitted for the company of the saints, as a beast is unfitted on earth for the company of man; he would be carnally minded, they would be spiritually minded, there would be nothing in common. I know there are vain dreamers who fancy death will work an alteration, that they may die sinners and rise again saints; but it is all a delusion, there is no work nor device nor knowledge in the grave; if we die spiritual we shall rise spiritual, if we die carnal we shall rise carnal, and if we are to be made fit for heaven our natural hearts must be changed now on earth.

In short, beloved, the plain truth is, that by nature men are all dead in trespasses and sins, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world, prisoners in the hand of Satan, in a state of miserable condemnation, spiritually dark, blind, and sleeping; and, worst of all, they neither know nor feel it. The cold corpse in the grave does not feel the worms that crawl over it; the sleeping wretch who has unawares drunk poison does not know that he shall wake no more; and so also the unhappy man who is still unconverted cannot understand that he is in need of anything. But still, every natural man in the sight of God is dead while he liveth; his body, soul, and mind are all turned aside from their proper use, which is to glorify God, and so he is looked upon as dead. And this either is the state of every single soul among us at this minute, or else it used to be. There is no middle state; we cannot be half-way, neither dead nor alive; we were dead and have been brought to life, or we are now dead, and the work is yet to be done. Nor yet is this doctrine for publicans and harlots only: it is for all without exception; it touches high and low, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, old and young, gentle and simple; all are by nature sinful and corrupt, and because they are so Jesus tells us solemnly not one shall enter into the heavenly rest without being born again.

Beloved, this sounds strong; it seems a hard saying, perhaps. That is not my affair; I am set to preach Christ's Gospel and not my own. Search the Scriptures, and you will see it is true.

II. The second thing for your consideration is the exact signification and force of that peculiar expression "to be born again." It is a change by which we once more recover something of the divine nature, and are renewed after the image of God. It is a complete transforming and altering of all the inner man; and nothing can more fully show its completeness and importance than the strong figure under which Jesus describes it: He calls it a **NEW BIRTH**. We have all been born once as men, but we must see to it we are born again as true Christians. We have been born once of the seed of Adam; woe to us if we are not born the second time of the seed of God! We have been born of the flesh, we must also be born of the Spirit. We are born earthly, we must also be born heavenly; we are born corruptible, we must also be born incorruptible, for our natural birth is not a whit

more necessary to the life of the body than is our spiritual birth necessary to the life of the soul.

To be born again is as it were to enter upon a new existence, to have a new mind and a new heart, new views, new principles, new tastes, new affections, new likings and new dislikings, new fears, new joys, new sorrows, new love to things once hated, new hatred to things once loved, new thoughts of God and ourselves and the world and the life to come and the means whereby that life is attained. And it is indeed a true saying that he who has gone through it is a new man, a new creature, for old things are passed away,—behold, he can say, all things are become new! It is not so much that our natural powers and faculties are taken away and destroyed; I would rather say that they receive an utterly new bias and direction. It is not that the old metal is cast aside, but it is melted down and refined and remoulded, and has a new stamp impressed upon it, and thus, so to speak, becomes a new coin.

This is no outward change, like that of Herod, who did many things and then stopped, or of Ahab, who humbled himself and went in sackcloth and walked softly; nor is it a change which can neither be seen nor felt. It is not merely a new name and a new notion, but the implanting of a new principle which will surely bear good fruit. It is opening the eyes of the blind and unstopping the ears of the deaf; it is loosing the tongue of the dumb, and giving hands and feet to the maimed and lame,—for he that is born again no longer allows his members to be instruments and servants of unrighteousness, but he gives them unto God, and then only are they properly employed.

To be born again is to become a member of a new family by adoption, even the family of God; it is to feel that God is indeed our Father, and that we are made the very sons and daughters of the Almighty; it is to become the citizen of a new state, to cast aside the bondage of Satan and live as free men in the glorious liberty of Christ's kingdom, giving our King the tribute of our best affection, and believing that He will keep us from all evil. To be born again is a spiritual resurrection, a faint likeness indeed of the great change at last, but still a likeness; for the new birth of a man is a passage from death to life; it is a passage from ignorance of God to a full knowledge of Him, from slavish fear to childlike love, from sleepy carelessness about Him to fervent desire to please Him, from lazy indifference about salvation to burning, earnest zeal; it is a passage from strangeness towards God to heartfelt confidence, from a state of enmity to a state of peace, from worldliness to holiness, from an earthly, sensual, man-pleasing state of mind to the single-eyed mind that is in Christ Jesus. And this it is to be born of the Spirit.

Beloved, time will not allow me to go further with this subject today. I have endeavoured to show you generally why we must all be born again, and what the new birth means; and on Sunday next, if the Lord will, I purpose to show you the manner and means by which this new birth usually comes.

It only remains for me now to commend this matter most solemnly to your consciences. Were it a doctrine of only second-rate importance,—were it a point a man might leave uncertain and yet be saved, like Church government or election,—I would not press it on you so strongly; but it is one of the two great pil-

lars of the gospel. On the one hand stands salvation by free grace for Christ's sake; but on the other stands renewal of the carnal heart by the Spirit. We must be changed as well as forgiven; we must be renewed as well as redeemed.

And I commend this to you all the more because of the times you live in. Men swallow down sermons about Christ's willingness and Christ's power to save, and yet continue in their sins: they seem to forget there must be the Spirit's work within us, as well as Christ's work for us—there must be something written on the table of our hearts. The strong man, Satan, must be cast out of our house, and Jesus must take possession; and we must begin to know the saints' character experimentally on earth, or we shall never be numbered with them in heaven. Christ is indeed a full and sufficient title to heaven; but we must have about us some meetness and fitness for that blessed abode.

I will not shrink from telling you that this doctrine cuts every congregation in two; it is the line of separation between the good fish and the bad, the wheat and the tares. There is a natural part in every congregation, and there is a spiritual part; and few indeed are the churches where we should not be constrained to cry, Lord, here are many called, but very few chosen. The kingdom of God is no mere matter of lips and knees and outward service—it must be within a man, seated in the best place of heart; and I will not hesitate to tell you I fear there are many living members of churches who are exceedingly dead Christians.

Examine yourselves, then, I pray you, whether you are born again. Have you good solid reasons for thinking that ye have put off the old man which is corrupt, and put on the new man which is created after God in holiness? Are ye renewed in the spirit of your minds? Are ye bringing forth the fruits of the flesh or the fruits of the Spirit? Are ye carnally minded or heavenly minded? Are your affections with the world or with God? Are ye natural men or are ye spiritual men? Oh! but it were no charity in me to keep back this weighty truth; and it will be no wisdom in you to put off and delay considering it.

Are ye born again? Without it no salvation! It is not written that you may not, or yet that you will have some difficulty, but it is written that you cannot without it see the kingdom of God. Consider with yourselves how fearful it will be to be shut out; to see God's kingdom afar off, like the rich man in the parable, and a great gulf between; how terrible to go down to the pit from under the very pulpit, well satisfied with your own condition, but still not born again. There are truly many roads to perdition, but none so melancholy as that which is travelled on by professing Christians—by men and women who have light and knowledge and warning and means and opportunity and yet go smiling on as if sermons and religion were not meant for them, or as if hell was a bed of roses, or as if God was a liar and would not keep His word.

Are ye born again? I do not want to fill your heads, but to move your hearts; it is not a matter of course that all who go to church shall be saved; churches and ministers are meant to rouse you to self-inquiry, to awaken you to a sense of your condition; and next to that grand question, "Have you taken Christ for your Saviour?" there comes the second point, "Are you born again?"

Beloved, if you love life, search and see what is your condition. What though you find no tokens for good: better a thousand times to know it now and live,

than to know it too late and die eternally!

Praised be God, it is a doctrine bound round with gracious promises: no heart so hard but the Holy Ghost can move it; many a one could set his seal to that, and tell you that he was darkness, darkness that could be felt, but is now light in the Lord. Many of the Corinthians were bad as the worst among you, but they were washed, they were sanctified, they were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. Many of the Ephesians were as completely dead in sins as any of you, but God quickened them, and raised them up, and created them anew unto good works. Examine yourselves and draw nigh to God with prayer, and He shall draw nigh to you; but if ye ask not, ye shall not have.

As for me, I make my supplication unto God, who can make all things new, that His Spirit may touch your hearts with a deep sense of this truth, for without it my preaching is vain; that there may be a mighty shaking and revival among the dry bones; that you may never rest until you are indeed new men and can say, Verily we *were* dead but we are now alive, we *were* lost but we are now found.