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"NEW BIRTH," "QUICKENED," "QUICKENED TOGETHER WITH CHRIST"

Ι

It is in our Lord's conversation with Nicodemus, as narrated in John 3., that the need of the New Birth is so strongly insisted on. The Saviour's words upon this momentous subject are exceedingly plain, and leave no room for doubt or argument. The need, moreover, is universal. If any individual under the sun would see and enter into the kingdom of God, he must be born again. The "must" is most emphatic. The devout Pharisee, orthodox in what he holds, and the rigid Ritualist, scrupulous in what he observes, must alike be born again, or remain ever blind to the kingdom of God, and outside its hallowed pale. From the application of the Lord's words no child of Adam is exempt.

The doctrine of the New Birth receives a very suited and significant introduction at the close of the preceding chapter, and to overlook this is to miss much. When Jesus was at Jerusalem many believed on Him, we are told, when they saw the miracles which He did; but Jesus did not commit Himself unto them. Why not? The answer is, that He knew what was in man. Their faith, if indeed it could be called by that name, rested on outward evidence. influenced their judgment but did not stir their It was therefore worthless, in that it conscience. left them exactly where it found them. Conversion is not a mere intellectual change, even when it is a change in one's thoughts about Christ. An atheist might examine the historical evidence in favour of Christianity, and be convinced by it, and be but little the better. So the men of Jerusalem saw the miracles

which Jesus did, and were persuaded that His mission was heavenly in its origin. But Jesus did not trust them. He knew, if others did not, what was in man. Every spring of his moral being was under the eye of Christ. He discerned what was there, and needed no one to tell Him that the very men who accredited Him to-day might crucify Him to-morrow. Man, unregenerate, was not to be trusted, and the Saviour knew it well.

The personal presence of the Son of God upon earth manifested what was in man. The Old Testament Scriptures told, in many a sorrowful story, that the whole head was sick, and the whole heart faint; but not until that blessed One was here had man fully displayed himself. Then he did. No heart, no room for Christ had he. Nor was that all, as His crown of thorns and cross can witness. It is to the tragic scenes of Calvary we must turn, to the cruel wrongs connected with them, if we would learn what was in man. Who is there that can contemplate those scenes as the display of what man is, and wonder at the words, "Ye must be born again"?

It is by the power of the Spirit of God, in conjunction with the Word, that men are thus new-born. "Born of water and of the Spirit," are the Lord's own words. Some have sought to make the water here to be actual water in order to support the deadly theory of baptismal regeneration. But is not water spoken of symbolically all through the Gospel of John, save as in such passages as admit of no dispute? It is impossible to deny that it is so in chapters 4. 14, and 7. 38. And in chapter 13., where the Lord enjoins His disciples to wash one another's feet as He had washed theirs, no one can suppose that feet-washing with actual water is intended. Why, then, should it not be symbolic in chapter 3. 5? Moreover, the Word is elsewhere expressly mentioned in relation to the New Birth. "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (I Peter I. 23). "Of His own will begat He us with the Word of truth" (James I. 18). These passages shed light on that with

which we are now dealing, and show the sense in which the Lord speaks of water. It is the water of

the Word (Eph. 5. 26).

And if "the Word of truth" is the instrument which the Holy Spirit employs, bringing that Word home in quickening power to the individual, it is evident that this is not apart from faith; for how shall the Word profit if it be not thus received? If souls are born again without faith, then are they born again without the Word. But it is not so, for the Word is that which produces faith simultaneously with the communication of divine life. And the faith and the life are both of the Spirit of God.

It is important to see that what is begotten in the soul is of the nature of the One who begets. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit, even as that which is born of the flesh is flesh. The life thus communicated is of the order of Him who communicates it. Its nature is holy, and in the things of the Spirit it delights. Hence in I John 3. 9, where the one born of God is looked at in relation to the new nature, it is said, "Whoever has been begotten of God does not practise sin, because His seed abides in him, and he cannot sin, because he has been begotten of God." Between that which is born of the flesh and that which is born of the Spirit there is nothing in common. The mind of the flesh is ever at enmity against God. Between it and the new nature there is perpetual antagonism, even as Paul says in his allusion to Ishmael and Isaac, "But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now " (Gal. 4. 29).

II

The truth of the New Birth did not necessarily assume men to be dead, though in point of fact they were so. The generations that lay in the loins of Adam fallen were all dead, in a moral sense, though the reality of their condition only came fully out when Christ was here on earth. New Birth rather supposes men to be corrupt, blind-their nature

poisoned at its very source. But in John 5. the Lord is presented as the quickening Son of God, and men are viewed as dead. To the Son, as man, the Father had given to have life in Himself (ver. 26). In the power of this life the Son could and did quicken others in the exercise of His sovereign will (ver. 21). "The hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live." Thank God, that hour is not yet at an end. And if any hear His Word, and believe on God who sent Him, then have they everlasting life; they shall not come into judgment, but have passed out of death into life (John 5. 24).

III

In John 3. it is the power of the Holy Spirit that is seen in sovereign exercise in effecting the New Birth. In John 5. it is the Son who quickens, and in Ephesians 2., which I would now briefly consider, it is God the Father—speaking as we speak when distinguishing the Persons of the Godhead—who acts. At the close of Ephesians 1. Christ is seen in death, and the mighty power of God is displayed in raising

At the close of Ephesians 1. Christ is seen in death, and the mighty power of God is displayed in raising Him from the dead, and setting Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places. That same power has been put forth in connection with the objects of divine mercy who were dead in trespasses and sins. "God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ (by grace ye are saved), and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Such are the words chosen for the setting forth of the great truth of our not only being quickened, but quickened together with Christ. Now, it will be evident to every reader that here we are on a larger platform in relation to quickening than either in John 3. or John 5. In the former the individual is simply born of the Spirit; in the latter he is quickened by the Son, and is passed out of death into life; but in Ephesians 2. it is life in association with Christ

risen and glorified. Quickened, raised up, and made to sit together in the heavenlies in Him. This sets the believer on heavenly ground, and in heavenly associations. "If anyone be in Christ, there is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." Neither New Birth nor the Son's quickening—if John 5. be viewed alone, and apart from the Scriptures in which the great doctrine of Christian life is further developed—places us there. Life, in present association with Christ in resurrection and ascension glory, could only be declared after Christ was glorified and the Holy Spirit given. Nor, in the very nature of things, could it be before.

IV

Connected with this subject, and essential to the understanding of the believer's present position in life before God, is the immense truth that we have died with Christ, though this is the teaching of Romans, not Ephesians. Here faith must do its work, faith that receives without debate that which God has been pleased to say on such a subject. In the death of Christ our links with the first Adam have been dissolved. We have died with Christ. It is ourselves, not our sins, that we speak of now. And if we have sin still in us, as is assuredly the case, yet we are entitled to speak of it as "No more I" (Rom. 7. 20). The "I" to whom sin attached has died with Christ. "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2. 20).

V

But though we have sought to distinguish between New Birth, quickening, and quickening together with Christ, yet we by no means wish to separate them, as if a man might be born again to-day, quickened to-morrow, and quickened together with Christ the day after. We speak subject to correction when we say that they are to be regarded rather as different parts of the same mighty work of grace, different sides of the same great truth, though the sides be not equal, and indeed are not, as we have endeavoured to show.

When we speak, however, of the apprehension of these things, the soul's really getting hold of them, as deep and precious realities, by the teaching and effectual working of the Holy Ghost through the Word, then we treat of quite another matter, and one that does mark undoubtedly distinct stages of spiritual growth. And the importance of this cannot be overstated, inasmuch as the Christian's character is formed, and his whole life moulded, by the objects before him, and by his present living associations. If we narrow down the doctrine of Christian life to life communicated to the soul, if we sever life from the knowledge of the heavenly position and relationships in which the believer is set, we do ourselves a grave wrong, and deprive life of much that makes it to be life indeed. Hold fast by all possible means to life on the side of possession, for that is fundamental truth, and anything that weakens it should be resolutely resisted. But the Saviour came not only that we might have life, but that we should have it more abundantly (John 10. 10). There are the known blessings of redemption, and the heavenly position and relationships into which Christianity introduces and relationships into which Christianity introduces the believer, as marked off from all that was known in preceding ages. It is the knowledge and enjoyment of these things that constitutes Christian life in the sense in which we are now speaking of it, and that makes it easily distinguishable from anything that went before, either under law or in patriarchal days. If what has been advanced is lacking in simplicity,

If what has been advanced is lacking in simplicity, an illustration at this juncture might serve to make our meaning plain. A child is born heir to vast estates and a ducal coronet. It happens that in his earliest years, and in an untimely hour, the child is stolen from his parents, and becomes the inmate of a gipsy's tent, and the sharer of the wandering life a gipsy leads. The child grows up in ignorance of his parent-

age, and never dreams that other surroundings than his present ones belong by right to him. By the hand of a gracious Providence the youth is eventually discovered by his sorrowing parents, and restored to the position suited to his rank. What a contrast between a gipsy's tent or caravan and a ducal mansion! between the selling of brushes, brooms, and baskets, and the higher occupations that engage him now! And yet, when under the canvas of a gipsy's tent, he was as truly a duke's son, and heir to a princely inheritance, as when recalled to his rightful home and place. But surely any one can see that the knowledge of his noble birth, and his restoration to his father's house, made life another thing to him. Life, as that which constituted him a living being upon earth, was truly his when as a gipsy boy he ran with bare feet across the village sward; but when seated as a son at his father's table, life on the side of knowledge and enjoyment was altogether another thing.

There is nothing on God's side that is true of the one who has been longest "in Christ," that is not true of the one whom God has just set there. "All things are yours," can be said of all who are in Christ, quite irrespective of what they understand and enjoy. Yet the latter is of infinite moment; for, as we have already said, the Christian's character is formed and moulded by it, and by these things he

lives.

In conclusion, we have only to add that the Cross is the basis of all that into which we are brought through grace. Indeed, it cannot be too clearly seen, that every exercise of divine power in blessing to man, from the clothing of our first parents in "coats of skin" down to the ingathering of the last that shall be blessed, has its foundation in the cross of Christ. In whatever way it may please God to bless the objects of His grace according to varying ages or dispensations, it is all founded on the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.