

# THE NEW BIRTH AND ETERNAL LIFE.

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JOHN iii.

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**M**ANY operations of the Holy Spirit, only experienced under Christianity, were unknown in the times preceding the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. But the new birth is nothing special, as belonging to peculiar circumstances or at a particular period; it was found in the earliest days since sin entered into the world, and can never be superseded till the last trace of sin is gone for ever. It is the one fundamental want of every soul of man, to whom God would make Himself known in any measure or manner. For He gives, by the Holy Spirit, those who believe to partake of His own nature. And this is what is meant by the new birth.

If this blessing was enjoyed through every dispensation, it was needed also; for, though conscience might give its intimation of a God and His judgment, the mind of man never can rise above the inference that there must be a God. Man, as he is, cannot go beyond this. God Himself is never thus known. The human mind, as such, is incapable of finding out God; and, in

point of fact, that which gave scope to the mind of man was his ruin. He reasons about God, because he has lost God; and all that reasoning can discover in any of its processes is, not what is, but simply, granting this or that, what *must* be. But a God, that simply must be, is awful to a conscience burdened with its guilt. The God that must be, for a sinner, is necessarily a *judge*; and if God be a judge of sin, what must be the sinner's lot?

Now, in the face of all this, God has not merely given a revelation, and made promises whereby to direct the soul through faith to God: there was always faith, but there was also more than this. There is, and always has been, such a thing as spiritual life: it is the necessary condition of being able to enjoy God. A new nature is given to the believer; so that it is not merely a question of faith, but of a *new life* imparted through faith, whereby also the soul assures itself that it is thus born of God. There may be other evidences to other eyes and hearts; but faith is that which is intended of God to give its possessor the assurance that he is born of Him.

This truth and indispensable necessity, though always made good in souls, was, before Christ, but feebly understood, being in Old Testament times rather implied than explicitly taught. This accounts for the way in which Nicodemus was taken aback by the Lord's declaration to him, of a necessity he had never before apprehended; and this put in so broad a manner as to make it as absolute for a Jew as for a Gentile. "Except a man be born again," &c. No exceptions were entertained: it was a divine requirement for those near, as well as for those more remote. "Except a man be born *afresh*, he cannot see the kingdom of God," for that is the

meaning of the word. Neither "born again," nor "born from above," expresses it. No, he must be born afresh—born from the very outset (another); as Christ further says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

This our Lord explains after a figurative sort, compressing into one word (as it were, an image-word), the truth which otherwise would need to be expanded into many words. This same figure is used in the Old Testament (*e.g.*, Isaiah xlv.), where God promised to pour water on him that was thirsty, and His Spirit on the seed of Jacob. Still more plainly it was declared in Ezekiel xxxvi., that when He gathered Israel into the land, He would there take away their stony hearts, and put into them a heart of flesh, sprinkle clean water upon them, and put His Spirit within them—the two elements of our Lord's statement: though, as was proper when the Son of God took the place of a teacher on earth, He clothes the expression with a force peculiar to Himself, and gives it a characteristic depth in the form in which He presents it to Nicodemus. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit." It is, in truth, a new nature—a divine nature—having no foundation in man, no source, save in God, who, Himself the centre, fills it in the person of Christ His Son. Such is the force of being "born again."

This birth is characterised as of water, which, in Scripture, is habitually employed as a figure of the word of God applied by the Spirit, or of the Spirit Himself in His own power. As, here the Spirit is distinguished from it, water is the expression of the word dealing morally with the soul, convicting the man

of being unclean, and not merely cleansing—judging him, and bringing him in guilty, and unfit for the presence of God. A new nature that the man had not before, is thus imparted. But there is also the inner character of this divine action : “ Except a man be born of water *and of the Spirit.*” Compare Titus iii. 5, James i. 18, and 1 Peter i. 23 ; from which passages we find it is not merely enlightenment, thoughts, views, truth, &c., communicated to the mind, but the impartation of a new kind of life or nature the soul never had before. Hence we have the further truth added, “ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” And this is most important. Had the water merely been presented, it would have left the door open to the *mind* of man, which is really included in “ the flesh,” and a subtle kind of rationalism would have been the result. But it is not so. “ That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The word of God unquestionably is what He uses : but still man is not born of the word alone—it is of the Spirit, if you look to the real active personal source.

But while a soul that receives the gospel now is born of God, it is very far short of the full truth merely to speak of it as new birth. It was God’s purpose, not only to manifest Himself *to* man, but also *in* man ; and so He says, “ If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things ?” Connected with these last, He says, “ No man hath ascended up to heaven, but He which came down from heaven, ~~even~~ the Son of man which is in heaven.” Heaven was that to which He belonged, or rather it to Him. Heaven was an entirely new realm, and the surroundings are as new. Here is the full

manifestation of the truth in one who is divine, but none the less human: divine, that God might be known; human, that we might know Him.

But, for this, a work must be done, in order to give God a righteous title to bestow on us the blessing of His own nature; therefore He adds, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but"—what? "Be born again?" No—"have eternal life." Not that those born of God in Old Testament times had not divine nature, or that this nature was not eternal: all saints, from beginning to end, have life in the Son. But now, for the first time, He speaks of it as given by and in Himself, and describes the application of this truth to the believer, founded on the redemption to be accomplished by His death, as the Son of man lifted up on the cross; not simply as the new birth, but, as "having eternal life." Thus does the Spirit of God put honour on Christ and on His finished work on the cross.

We read of "eternal life" in Daniel xii., and in Psalm cxxxiii. of "life for evermore;" but they are both bound up with the hope of Messiah's presence and reign, when He brings in the kingdom of God as a matter of visible display. But here, the glory of the person of the Son being now manifested, we are brought into the blessing at once. We wait for nothing else prior to the enjoyment of it. The reason is—we have Him. Consequently, although public blessing be not yet established, we are now ushered into an unbounded scene of rich and divine blessing; and for this reason, that we have God's Son, and that we have Him thus and now. Hence, not merely am I "born again," but,

that eternal life that was with the Father is mine ; and this blessedness is now presented after a sort that is true of Christ Himself—in the community of the same life and nature.

If the cross be viewed merely as the necessary basis of divine righteousness, whilst it was also the fullest display of pity for me, a guilty and a needy sinner, this of itself would never settle my soul in perfect peace with God, still less would it give me an adequate knowledge of Him. Therefore He says, "God so loved the world," &c. There had not been a word before about God's "love," or about "the world," in this discourse. But now we see what He is ; we know what He feels ; we have the witness of His own grace in Christ. He, who knew Him perfectly, would have Him known as He is, and His feelings about this poor world ; and so He adds this crowning blessed truth, "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." How blessed thus to have eternal life, and to know that we have it as the free spontaneous gift of His love, given to us in His beloved Son ! thus displaying what He is in the best gift even He could give—eternal life in the Son—fitting us for fellowship with Himself, even while here below.

Surely, however blessed it is to have our sins and misery met, it is incomparably more to have that life which was manifested in Jesus while here below, in all dependence and obedience ; that life which reciprocates His mind and feelings, enters into His joys, and takes part in all the griefs with which He looks upon rebellious man and a ruined world. In Him was life ; and, as a Christian, it is no longer the old "I," but Christ

that lives in me. Christ, too, is my object; but with the object there is life; and this life is in Himself—in the Son of God, even eternal life.

May we be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith, being rooted and grounded in love, that we may be able to apprehend the glory before us, and know His love that passeth knowledge, and so be filled unto all the fulness of God!—(*Abridged, with permission of the author, from “Kelly’s Lectures on the Holy Spirit.”*)

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### IN CHRIST IN HEAVEN.

And art Thou gone where all is light,  
 Blest Saviour!—passed from mortal sight  
 To Thine own native air!  
 Where no defiling thing can come,  
 Where *nature* cannot find a home,  
 Nor *flesh* an entrance dare?

Amen! our hearts respond, and raise  
 Their hallelujah notes of praise,  
 Though still on earth *we* roam!  
 To *Thee* 'tis joy!—to *us* not grief:  
 Not sev'rance from *Thee*, but relief,  
 That glory is *Thy* home!

We love *Thy* footprints here to trace,  
 The moral beauty and the grace  
 Of all *Thy* walk of love:  
 Dear memories!—but would we detain  
*Thee* here below, for any gain  
*Thy* company would prove?

Nay! for the life which *Thou* hast given  
 Finds its *own level* but in heaven,  
 And *there* its source must be:  
*Thy* life in us, for range, repose,  
 Craves its own region, where it knows  
 Its fountain, Lord! in *Thee*.

And though we tread the desert here,  
 Our interests and our joys are *there*,  
     Guarded—maintained by Thee ;  
 Nor could we *spare* Thee from that home,  
 Till the blest hour when 'Thou shalt come,  
     To take us there to be !

'Tis there, Lord Jesus, where alone  
 Our spirits find it all *their own*,  
     Where flesh can ne'er intrude :  
 The presence-chamber of our God,  
 Where witnesseth the sprinkled blood,  
     All power by Thee subdued.

Thy rest, Lord Jesus ! pass'd Thy woe !  
 The " Man of sorrows," as below,  
     Thou never more canst be !  
*Thine* was our grief, *ours* is Thy joy ;  
 And now we drink without alloy,  
     The cup of joy with Thee !

'Tis *as we drink it* that we turn  
*With Thee* to view, *from Thee* to learn,  
     Thy path of earthly woe !  
 For only on that sacred height—  
 Yea ! only in Thy glory's light,  
     Such wonders can we know.

'Tis *there* we see Thee (past all fears),  
 Reaping in joy, who sowed in tears,  
     There reap we too with Thee ;  
 And soon " rejoicing " Thou shalt come,  
 Bearing Thy sheaves ! while Thy blest home  
     *Ours* shall for ever be !



Price, for gratuitous distribution, direct from Manchester, 1s. 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> per  
 100; or per post, or through any Bookseller, 1s. 10d.

Published at 93, Bloomsbury, Oxford Road, Manchester.  
 R. L. ALLAN, 15, Paternoster Row, London.

POST-OFFICE ORDERS PAYABLE TO W. B. HORNER, OXFORD ROAD  
 POST-OFFICE.