

I

THE SUPERNATURAL CREATION OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” He was speaking to all of us when he said that. Nicodemus was not a special case. You and I must be born again, or we will not see the kingdom of God. That means we will not be saved; we will not be part of God’s family, and we will not go to heaven. Instead, we will go to hell if we are not born again. That’s what Jesus says later in this chapter about the person who does not believe on Christ: “The wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). This is no joking matter. Jesus uses hard words for hard realities. That is what love does. The opposite is called pandering.

Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees, the most religious Jewish leaders. Jesus said to them in Matthew 23:15 and 33, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as

yourselves....You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” So the topic of the new birth is not marginal. It is central. Eternity hangs in the balance when we are talking about the new birth. Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

THE NEW BIRTH IS UNSETTLING

The question we are asking in this chapter is: *What happens in the new birth?* Before I try to answer that question, let me mention a very earnest concern that I have about the way these chapters will be read. I am aware that these chapters will be unsettling to many—just as the words of Jesus are unsettling to us again and again, if we take them seriously. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, Jesus’ teaching about the new birth confronts us with our hopeless spiritual and moral and legal condition apart from God’s regenerating grace. Before the new birth happens to us, we are *spiritually* dead; we are *morally* selfish and rebellious; and we are *legally* guilty before God’s law and under his wrath. When Jesus tells us that we must be born again, he is telling us that our present condition is hopelessly unresponsive, corrupt, and guilty. Apart from amazing grace in our lives, we don’t like to hear this assessment of ourselves, so it is unsettling when Jesus tells us that we must be born again.

Second, teaching about the new birth is unsettling because it refers to something that is done to us, not something we do. John 1:13 emphasizes this. It refers to the children of God as those “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” God causes the new birth; we don’t. Peter stresses the same thing: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again” (1 Pet. 1:3).

We do not cause the new birth. God causes the new birth. Any spiritually good thing that we do is a result of the new birth, not a cause of the new birth. This means that the new birth is taken out of our hands. It is not in our control. And so it confronts us with our helplessness and our absolute dependence on Someone outside ourselves. This is unsettling. We are told that we won't see the kingdom of God if we're not born again. And we're told that we can't make ourselves to be born again.

The third reason Jesus' teaching about the new birth is unsettling, therefore, is that it confronts us with the absolute freedom of God. Apart from God, we are spiritually dead in our selfishness and rebellion. We are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). Our rebellion is so deep that we cannot detect or desire the glory of Christ in the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). Therefore, if we are going to be born again, it will rely decisively and ultimately on God. His decision to make us alive will not be a response to what we as spiritual corpses do, but what we do will be a response to his making us alive. For most people, at least at first, this is unsettling.

MY HOPE: STABILIZE AND SAVE, NOT JUST UNSETTLE

In view of how disturbing this can be to the tender conscience as well as the hard heart, I want to be very careful. I do not want to cause tender souls any unnecessary distress. And I do not want to give false hope to those who have confused morality or religion for spiritual life. Pray as you read this book that it will not have either of these destructive effects.

I feel like I am taking eternal souls in my hands. And yet I know that I have no power in myself to give them life. But God does. And I am very hopeful that he will do what he says in Ephesians 2:4-5: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in

our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” God loves to magnify the riches of his life-giving grace where Christ is lifted up in truth. That is my hope: that these chapters will not just unsettle but stabilize and save.

THE PLAN

So let’s turn now to the question: *What happens in the new birth?* I will try to put the answer in three statements. The first two we will deal with in this chapter, and the third we deal with in the next: 1) What happens in the new birth is not getting new religion but getting new life. 2) What happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. 3) What happens in the new birth is not the improvement of your old human nature but the creation of a new human nature—a nature that is really *you*, and is forgiven and cleansed; and a nature that is really *new*, and is being formed by the indwelling Spirit of God. Let’s take those one at a time.

NEW LIFE, NOT NEW RELIGION

What happens in the new birth is not getting new religion but getting new life. The first three verses of John 3 go like this:

Now 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.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

John makes sure that we know that Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. The Pharisees were the most rigorously

religious of all the Jewish groups. To this one, Jesus says (in v. 3), “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Even more personally, he says in verse 7, “You must be born again.” So one of John’s points is: All of Nicodemus’ religion, all of his amazing Pharisaic study and discipline and law-keeping, cannot replace the need for the new birth.

What Nicodemus needs, and what you and I need, is not religion but life. The point of referring to new birth is that birth brings a new life into the world.⁸ In one sense, of course, Nicodemus is alive. He is breathing, thinking, feeling, acting. He is a human created in God’s image. But evidently, Jesus thinks he’s dead. There is no spiritual life in Nicodemus. Spiritually, he is unborn. He needs life, not more religious activities or more religious zeal. He has plenty of that.

Recall what Jesus said in Luke 9:60 to the man who wanted to put off following Jesus so he could bury his father. Jesus said, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead.” That means there are physically dead people who need burying. And there are spiritually dead people who can bury them. In other words, Jesus thought in terms of people who walk around with much apparent life, but who are dead. In his parable about the prodigal son, the father says, “This my son was dead, and is alive again” (Luke 15:24).

Nicodemus did not need religion; he needed life—spiritual life. What happens in the new birth is that life comes into being

8 Throughout this book, we will not make any significant distinction between the imagery of conception and the imagery of birth. Even pre-scientific, first-century people knew that children were alive and kicking before birth. But the biblical writers did not press the details of gestation in discussing the new birth. In general, when they (and we) speak of the new birth, we are speaking more broadly of new life coming into being whether one thinks of the point of conception or the point of birth.

that was not there before. New life happens at new birth. This is not religious activity or discipline or decision. This is the coming into being of life. That's the first way of describing what happens in the new birth.

EXPERIENCING THE SUPERNATURAL,
NOT JUST AFFIRMING IT

Second, what happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. Nicodemus says in verse 2, "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." In other words, Nicodemus sees in Jesus' ministry a genuine divine activity. He admits that Jesus is from God. Jesus does the works of God. To this, Jesus does not respond by saying, "I wish everyone in Palestine could see the truth that you see about me." Instead, he says, "You must be born again, or you will never see the kingdom of God."

Seeing signs and wonders, and being amazed at them, and giving the miracle-worker credit for them that he is from God, saves nobody. This is one of the great dangers of signs and wonders: You don't need a new heart to be amazed at them. The old, fallen human nature is all that's needed to be amazed at signs and wonders. And the old, fallen human nature is willing to say that the miracle-worker is from God. The devil himself knows that Jesus is the Son of God and works miracles (Mark 1:24). No, Nicodemus, seeing Jesus as a miracle-worker sent from God is not the key to the kingdom of God. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

In other words, what matters is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. The new birth is supernatural, not natural. It cannot be accounted for by things that are already found in this world.

Verse 6 emphasizes the supernatural nature of the new birth: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The flesh is what we are naturally. The Spirit of God is the supernatural Person who brings about the new birth.

Jesus says this again in verse 8: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The Spirit is not a part of this natural world. He is above nature. He is supernatural. Indeed, he is God. He blows where he wills. We don’t control him. He is free and sovereign. He is the immediate cause of the new birth.

So, Nicodemus, Jesus says, what happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in me, but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. You must be born again. And not in a natural way (metaphorically speaking), but in a supernatural way. God the Holy Spirit must come into you and bring new life into existence.

In the next chapter, we will look at the words in verse 5: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” What do water and Spirit refer to here? And how does that help us understand what is happening in the new birth?

JESUS IS THE LIFE WE RECEIVE AT NEW BIRTH

But in the space that remains in this chapter, I want to make a crucial connection between being born again by the Spirit and having eternal life through faith in Jesus. What we have seen so far is that what happens in the new birth is a supernatural work by the Holy Spirit to bring spiritual life into being where it did not exist. Jesus says it again in John 6:63: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.”

But the Gospel of John makes something else clear as well: Jesus himself is the life that the Holy Spirit gives. Or we could say: The spiritual life that he gives, he only gives in connection with Jesus. Union with Jesus is where we experience supernatural, spiritual life. Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In John 6:35, he said, “I am the bread of life.” And in John 20:31, the apostle says, “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

So there is no spiritual life—no eternal life—apart from connection with Jesus and belief in Jesus. We will have lots more to say about the relationship between the new birth and faith in Jesus. But we can put it this way for now: In the new birth, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ in a living union. Christ is life. Christ is the vine where life flows. We are the branches (John 15:1–17). What happens in the new birth is the supernatural creation of new spiritual life, and it is created through union with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit brings us into vital connection with Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life. That is the objective reality of what happens in the new birth.

And from our side, the way we experience this is that faith in Jesus is awakened in our hearts. Spiritual life and faith in Jesus come into being together. The new life makes the faith possible, and since spiritual life always awakens faith and expresses itself in faith, there is no life without faith in Jesus. Therefore, we should never separate the new birth from faith in Jesus. From God’s side, we are united to Christ in the new birth. That’s what the Holy Spirit does. From our side, we experience this union by faith in Jesus.

NEVER SEPARATE THE NEW BIRTH AND FAITH IN JESUS

Here is how John puts them together in his First Epistle: “Everyone who has been *born of God* overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our *faith*” (1 John 5:4). “Born of God” is the key to victory. “Faith” is the key to victory. Both are true because faith is the way we experience being born of God. Being born of God always brings faith with it. The life given in the new birth is the life of faith. The two are never separate.

Or consider how John says it in 1 John 5:11–12: “This is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” Therefore, when Jesus says, “It is the Spirit who gives life” (John 6:63), and, “You must be born of the Spirit” (John 3:5, 8), and, “Believing you may have life” (John 20:31), he means: In the new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith. For Jesus is life.

Therefore, when answering the question *What happens in the new birth?* never separate these two sayings of Jesus in John 3: “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3), and, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (v. 36). What happens in the new birth is the creation of life in union with Christ. And part of how God does that is by the creation of faith, which is how we experience our union with Christ.

Now 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." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 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.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

John 3:1-10