



## THE NEW BIRTH

### Course 4, *The Promised One*, Lesson 7

The Problem: A young lady was asked by a friend, "What happened to your life when you became a Christian?" She answered, "I was saved from sin." He was curious and interested. He questioned, "What do you mean, you were saved?" She explained, "Before I found Christ I used drugs, lived an immoral life, and almost destroyed my health forever. Christ gave me new hope for the future, new peace of mind, and the power to live a better life." The friend asked, "You mean that for you, salvation was something that changed your habits of thinking and even affected your health?" She exclaimed, "Very definitely. Being a Christian is a practical matter. It changed the way I think, feel, and act. And now I have much more capacity to study and work. My health and happiness are vastly improved." The friend was impressed. "I can't argue with that kind of faith. If it works like that, it must be good!"

How does Christ save us? That is a question that has exercised the mind of man for centuries. Some Christian thinkers have argued that in heaven Christ simply credits His righteousness to us, even though on this earth we remain unrighteous. They do not think that righteousness is possible to fallen humanity, or that any change of our lives could possibly qualify us for heaven. Only Christ's righteousness, they say, is sufficient to recommend us to God; hence what happens in our hearts is substantially irrelevant to His work of saving us.

This idea expresses a part of the truth. The Bible does, indeed, teach that our righteousness is inadequate for salvation. In fact, our righteousness in God's sight is counted as unrighteousness (Isaiah 64:6). Only the righteousness of Jesus can ever save us (1 Corinthians 1:30). The question is whether Christ's righteousness is solely credited to us in heaven, or if we also experience its transformative power within our hearts—making us righteous in both life and character through Him. Does God save us while we remain in sin, or is our salvation the result of Christ living within us, shaping us into His likeness?

If the Father recognizes the presence of His Son living within us by the Holy Spirit and saves us for that reason, he certainly is not saving us because of our works or goodness. The goodness belongs to Christ, not to us, but He chooses to share it with us. The inner spiritual life and power that a Christian believer enjoys is not his achievement; it is Christ's gift. Thus, salvation is wholly by faith in Christ. His righteousness qualifies us for heaven because we have received Him into our lives. He does good works through us (Galatians 2:20) that we could never have done without His presence and power. So, we can never claim that our works have saved or recommended us to God. All of the credit belongs to Christ.

This is the message of salvation by faith in Christ: if His righteousness were only His and never imparted to us, we would remain trapped in our sins. God saves us by sharing His righteousness with us through Christ. Those who are taken to heaven are those who, in this life, have been transformed by the indwelling power of Christ. God does not permit us to continue in our sins with the false hope that He will miraculously save us in the end despite our impurity. Only those who are pure will enter the heavenly kingdom (Revelation 21:27). These are the ones who, through Christ, have allowed their sins to be taken away and have received His purity and holiness within.

This was Jesus' message to Nicodemus. The Pharisees thought their good works qualified them for salvation. They imagined themselves better than other people because their personal righteousness was of a superior variety. Jesus swept away that illusion and confronted the Pharisee, Nicodemus, with the most important issue of life. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus powerfully illustrates that salvation is fundamentally about the transformation of the heart above all else.

Objectives:

- I. Jesus taught that salvation is a new birth experience.
- II. The new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit.
- III. The new birth is possible because of Calvary.
- IV. The new birth is justification.
- V. The new birth is the power for good works.

## I. SALVATION IS A NEW BIRTH EXPERIENCE

Nicodemus belonged to the sect of the Pharisees, a highly respected Jewish religious party who were very legalistic in their religious observances. Jesus condemned their self-righteous and hypocritical piety (Matthew 23). Nicodemus was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme religious council of the Jews (John 7:50). As an important ruler in Israel, he was afraid to approach Jesus openly (John 3:1-2). Later he threw off his disguise and became a Christian (John 19:39-40). Jesus' message to Nicodemus is perhaps the most beautiful discussion in the Bible of how sinners can be saved.

The Word:

- 1. What approach did Nicodemus make to Jesus? John 3:1-2
- 2. What did Jesus present as essential to salvation? John 3:3
- 3. How did Jesus answer Nicodemus' objection? John 3:4-6

Explanation: Nicodemus first praised Jesus as a heaven-sent teacher and miracle worker, but his statement revealed that he did not believe in Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus ignored Nicodemus' opening compliments and focused on his basic problem. *"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* John 3:3. The Greek may be translated: *"Except a person has been born from above..."* Being familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, Nicodemus should not have been shocked at Jesus' statement. Ezekiel had written: *"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh"* Ezekiel 36:26.

Nicodemus tried to avoid conviction by raising an objection. He chose to interpret Christ's words literally: *"How can a man be born when he is old?"* (John 3:4). A similar question could have been asked of Ezekiel's teaching. How could God take out our hearts and spirits and give us new ones? Biologically, it seemed impossible. In fact, an attempt to explain spiritual things in a naturalistic, rationalistic way will always reduce them to absurdity. *"The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned"* 1 Corinthians 2:14. Jesus had confronted Nicodemus with his real problem; he needed a new birth experience, a new heart, a changed life if he were to be qualified for the kingdom of God. To Nicodemus, rich, benevolent, and influential as he was, it was something of an insult to suggest that, in his present state, he was not acceptable to God. But Jesus made that very clear.

Jesus gently and patiently explained that water baptism is necessary, but the new birth through the Holy Spirit is indispensable. While physical birth is a natural beginning, spiritual rebirth is a wholly different and transformative experience. Jesus emphasized that it is the renewal of the mind, brought about by the Holy Spirit, that truly matters. This, He revealed, was the ultimate solution to Nicodemus' spiritual dilemma.

Relevance: The sole qualification for salvation is the experience of the new birth. While education, wealth, and professional status may have their merits, they hold no weight in recommending us to God. In matters of salvation, the only thing that truly matters in the eyes of heaven is a heart surrendered to the reign of the Holy Spirit. Are you enjoying the new birth experience?

## II. THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

There may be a point in the past that we can identify as our initial new birth experience, or we may have come gradually to the point of total surrender. However we come to Christ, it is vital to understand that the new birth experience must

be renewed every day as we come to Christ for healing and cleansing. Paul wrote that "the inward man is renewed day by day" 2 Corinthians 4:16. We cannot expect the spiritual experience of yesterday, or ten years ago, to be sufficient for today. We certainly would not argue that yesterday's meals will do us for the next few days, even though we sometimes feel that way. Just as we need regular nourishment through food and drink to sustain our physical health and strength, our spiritual well-being also requires daily renewal. Through a fresh and vibrant communion with Jesus each day, our spiritual resources are replenished, allowing the Holy Spirit to continually transform and strengthen our hearts.

The Word:

4. How did Jesus explain the imperceptible but effective work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds? John 3:7-8
5. Who dwells in our hearts when we receive the Holy Spirit? Ephesians 3:16-17; compare John 14:16-18, 23.
6. Into whose likeness are we converted by the Holy Spirit? 2 Corinthians 3:18; 5:21.
7. What kind of power is brought to us by the Holy Spirit? Acts 1:8

Explanation: The work of the Holy Spirit cannot be seen any more than the wind can be seen. But the effect of His moving in a human heart becomes very apparent. Jesus' metaphor was most appropriate. The Greek and Hebrew words for "spirit" (pneuma and ruah) mean wind, breath. The Holy Spirit is a real Person. Even though He does not have a bodily form like ours, He possesses the three marks of personality: intellect (John 16:13; 14:26), will (1 Corinthians 12:11; Acts 16:6-7), and emotion (Acts 15:28; Ephesians 4:30; Isaiah 63:10). Moreover, the Holy Spirit is supreme Deity, mysteriously one with and equal to the Father and the Son. When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he lied to God (Acts 5:3-4). Paul taught that we are transformed by "*the Lord, the Spirit*" (2 Corinthians 3:18). There is only one God (Malachi 2:10), who consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (See Matthew 28:19). This is the mystery of the Trinity.

Jesus' message to Nicodemus emphasized that receiving the Holy Spirit is receiving the presence of God Himself. The Spirit brings the presence of Christ into your life, transforming you with His likeness and empowering you with His strength. Through the Spirit's work, you are given both the ability to overcome sin and the boldness to bear witness, as the holiness and passion of Christ become evident in your life. See 1 John 2:29; 3:7; Revelation 22:17.

Relevance: Without the gift of the Holy Spirit, received through the new birth experience, we cannot truly belong to Christ (Romans 8:9). However, when Christ lives in our hearts through the Spirit, we are granted the gift of His righteousness. Although we remain fallen human beings (1 Corinthians 9:27; Galatians 5:17-18), with inclinations toward sin, we are also empowered to overcome those tendencies (Jude 24). The indwelling presence of the righteous Christ transforms us, driving sin out and enabling us to live victorious lives.

Are you enjoying the presence and power of Christ in your life?

### III. THE NEW BIRTH IS POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF CALVARY

Nicodemus marveled at the profound beauty, simplicity, and relevance of Jesus' teaching (John 3:9-12). Yet, Jesus did not end the conversation there. He went on to reveal that the new birth experience is made possible through His own sacrificial death. Those who lived before the cross were born again through faith in the coming Savior who would die for them. Since the cross, believers are transformed through faith in the risen Savior who has conquered death and offers new life.

The Word:

8. To what Old Testament experience did Jesus refer in explaining to Nicodemus the significance of His death? John 3:14-15; Numbers 21:5-9
9. Of what is the serpent a symbol? Genesis 3:1; Revelation 12:9; 20:2 (compare Isaiah 27:1)

10. What did Jesus bear for us on the cross? Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 2:24.

11. What does looking to the cross and belief in Christ do for us? John 3:16

Explanation: When Jesus explained His death using the example of the serpent that God commanded Moses to make in the wilderness, Nicodemus must have gained a clearer understanding of His mission. Nicodemus recognized the serpent as a symbol of sin and knew that Moses' bronze serpent represented the Messiah. But why would a symbol of sin be used to foreshadow Christ's sacrifice on the cross? It was because Christ took our sin upon Himself, becoming "*sin for us*" 2 Corinthians 5:21. The bronze serpent, crafted from metal, was not meant to be an idol, though Israel mistakenly worshiped it later in their history (2 Kings 18:4). Instead, those who looked upon the bronze serpent understood that their healing from snake bites came through divine power. In that moment, they glimpsed a profound image of the sacrificial work of the coming Messiah.

Relevance: We have all been bitten by the serpent, the devil, Satan. "*For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God*" Romans 3:23. But Jesus has already died for our sins. By looking and believing, we can be healed. God so loved us that He gave His Son so that we might have eternal life. This life begins at the moment you enjoy the new birth experience. See John 3:36; 1 John 5:11-13. You are no longer condemned for your past sin (John 3:18; Romans 8:1) because your guilt has been taken away. See 1 John 2:2; 4:10. Calvary made this experience possible, and the new birth by the Holy Spirit makes it a reality in your life.

#### IV. THE NEW BIRTH IS JUSTIFICATION

The new birth is a metaphor that Jesus used to illustrate the experience of being reconciled to God. Paul used a different metaphor to illustrate the same point. What Jesus called the new birth, Paul called justification.

The Word:

12. In what words did Paul identify the new birth with justification? Titus 3:5-7.

13. What kind of person is the justified person? Romans 10:6-10; 6:18.

14. Can we do anything to justify ourselves before God? How are we justified? Romans 3:20-22; Galatians 2:16.

Explanation: Jesus' message to Nicodemus made it quite clear that man cannot save himself. Only as he is born of the Spirit can a person be right with God and fit to enter the kingdom of heaven. Writing to Titus, Paul identified Jesus' metaphor with the one he had been using. See Titus 3:5-7. He emphasized, as Jesus had, that salvation results from the "*renewing of the Holy Ghost*." That is a clear reference to the new birth experience. Then Paul adds: "*that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*" Jesus' words in John 3 established that eternal life begins for the one who is born again. In the same vein, Paul teaches that eternal life begins with the renewal brought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the justified believer. He emphasizes that salvation (Titus 3:5) and justification (v. 7) are inseparable, both being integral aspects of the believer's transformation. This experience—the renewing work of the Holy Spirit—is the cornerstone of faith for those who place their trust in Christ.

Relevance: When you are born again, or justified, by faith, you are spiritually cleansed and qualified for heaven. This was the experience of the thief on the cross. He was transformed from sin to holiness by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus assured him of a place in heaven. This can be your experience also. Believe and accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and you will be born of the Spirit.

#### V. THE NEW BIRTH IS THE POWER FOR GOOD WORKS

Evil deeds arise from an evil heart, just as good deeds spring from a heart that is aligned with goodness. True goodness, however, is impossible apart from Christ. Only when He reigns in our lives do our actions become pleasing in God's sight.

Through the new birth experience, Jesus is established as the ruler of our hearts, making it possible for us to produce works that reflect His righteousness.

The Word:

15. Why did Jesus say men's deeds were evil? John 3:19-20.
16. What makes possible works that are good in God's sight? John 3:21.
17. Who works through the believer so that what he does is acceptable to God? Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 4:11; 1 John 3:24

Explanation: Jesus' profound understanding of our human struggle is truly remarkable. He recognized that many turn away from Him out of fear that their sinful deeds will be exposed and that they will be called to give them up (John 3:20). Yet, for those who come to Jesus, the Light of the World, their deeds are 'wrought in God' (John 3:21), meaning that it is God Himself working through them. Both Paul and John affirmed this truth: good works are not achieved by human effort alone but are the result of Christ living His life through the believer.

This is why God evaluates us by our works (Revelation 22:12)—not because these works save us, but because the good works that God accepts are always the evidence of Christ's presence in the heart through the Holy Spirit. If the works are evil, it reveals Jesus' absence. If the works are pleasing to God, it is a clear sign that the individual is experiencing the born-again life and that Christ is actively working through them. God's primary concern is our relationship with Christ, for it is this relationship that transforms us into holy individuals who produce good works. The new birth experience is the foundation of this saving relationship with Jesus.

Relevance: Have you allowed Jesus to transform your heart by the Holy Spirit?

Are you allowing Him to live out His life through you every day?

#### *Review Questions*

1. True or False
  - a. Nicodemus was saved because he was a loyal Pharisee.
  - b. God is not interested in our hearts being righteous.
  - c. When you experience the new birth, you have the gift of Jesus' righteousness.
  - d. Good works are the result of the new birth experience, not the means of salvation.
2. If the new birth experience qualifies a person for heaven, what is the purpose of continuing to grow in holiness afterward? How does this ongoing transformation align with God's plan for believers?"

Further study: Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* pp. 167-177.