

The Spirit's Work in the New Birth

by Dougan Clark

The new birth is the process by which the Holy Spirit regenerates a person, giving them spiritual life and making them a child of God.

Scripture: Mark 16:16, John 1:12, John 3:3, Romans 8:16, Romans 10:17, 2 Corinthians 7:10, Ephesians 2:8, James 5:16, 1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Regeneration"

Description

Dougan Clark preaches about the necessity of being born again through the work of the Holy Spirit. He emphasizes that conviction of sin, repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ are essential for spiritual regeneration. Clark highlights the importance of responding promptly to God's call for salvation, as delaying acceptance of Christ only leads to missed blessings. He also stresses the role of prayer in seeking forgiveness and the witness of the Holy Spirit in confirming one's adoption as a child of God.

Transcript

"Ye must be born again."

Every human being comes into the world with innate tendencies to sin: and every responsible human being has so far yielded to these tendencies, as to become an actual transgressor. Our first parents have sinned, and all their descendants have sinned, the man Christ Jesus--the second Adam, and the seed of the woman--being the only exception. We are born into this world possessed of physical life, and intellectual life, but destitute of spiritual life. In order to obtain that, we must by the Spirit Himself be quickened and born again. The Saviour in his memorable conversation with Nicodemus, insists upon the new birth as an indispensable thing. Whatever else may be done without, the new birth may not be done without. Whatever else may be desirable, the new birth is positively essential. Just as certainly as we get into this world by birth, we get into the kingdom of God by birth also. We do not get into that kingdom by growth, nor by culture, nor by money, nor by penances, nor by works of righteousness, nor by ritualistic ordinances, nor by anti-ritualistic observances, nor by improving our own virtues, nor by leaving off certain bad habits, nor by self-inflicted crosses or mortifications, nor by anything whatever which we of ourselves can be, or do, or suffer, or merit, but simply and only by the new birth.

And moreover, the spiritual birth, like the natural birth, is a definite process. There is a time when it takes place. The birth pangs may be slighter or more severe--shorter or more protracted--but as for every person upon earth there was a moment when the first breath was drawn and life began, so for every child

of God there was a time when in a spiritual sense he passed from death unto life. Every Christian has his spiritual as well as his natural birthday. In some instances but by no means in all, the conversion is manifest to the consciousness of the individual at the time when it occurs, and distinctly remembered ever afterwards. "Where were you born?" said a church prelate to Summerfield. "In Liverpool and Dublin," was the reply. "Why," said he, "were you born in two places?" And the answer again was, "Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things?"

But whether distinctly recognized and definitely remembered or not, regeneration is to every one who experiences it, a crisis--not less marked than that which happens to the child, when it passes from the darkness, and the confinement and the unconsciousness of its ante-natal existence, into the light, and the life, and the freedom, and the enjoyment of the wide, wide world. You see a living man--you know that he had a birthday, even if neither himself nor anyone else can tell when it was. So many a Christian may not be able accurately to define the time when he experienced the new birth, but both he and others know, or ought to know, that he has experienced it, because he feels in himself and exhibits to others that Christian love which is recognized in Scripture as an unmistakable sign of spiritual life. It is not so important to be aware of the time, as of the fact of one's conversion. It is of far less moment to inquire, When was I born again? or, When did I begin to live? than to inquire, Have I been born again? and Am I living?

And why should a sudden conversion be deemed strange or incredible? Are not analogous changes constantly occurring in human affairs? A man ceases to act with one political party, and begins to act with another; he is converted politically. A citizen removes from one country to another--becomes the subject of a different sovereign, and is converted as to his allegiance. A little time is sufficient for such a change. And may it not be possible for a subject of the prince of the power of the air to change his allegiance, and become a subject of the King of kings, without being months, or years, or a lifetime, in making up his mind and deciding for Christ? A drunkard in some moment of sober thought, resolves to abandon his cups, and if he keeps that resolution, he is converted from intemperance. Every day decisions are made in a moment which influence a lifetime.

Nor are families and communities exempt from these sudden changes. A rich man by a single, unsuccessful speculation loses his property--what a shadow falls upon his home! A poor man receives an unexpected legacy--what joy is brought into his household! You visit the residence of a friend today--it is gladdened by the prattle of children. You go again in a week--a epidemic fever has hushed those young voices for ever. The stricken parents no longer have the same interest, or the same objects in life as before. All is changed--it is a converted home.

And when we consider the transcendent importance of religious matters, as compared with secular, would it not be reasonable to expect that sudden changes should occur in the former as well as the latter? and so in point of fact we find it. A young Pharisee full of zeal for the extermination of heresy--breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the followers of the despised Nazarene--is smitten down at noonday--told whom he is persecuting--led into Damascus--visited by Ananias--directed what to do--receives the truth--immediately confers not with flesh and blood--and straightway preaches Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

And cases not wholly dissimilar occur in our own day. The following incident in point was related in my hearing. A series of meetings was held at a village in one of the Western States of America. When they began, a citizen of the place was heard openly and profanely abusing the men, the meetings, and the religion. Three days afterwards he was himself proclaiming at the corners of the streets that Christ hath

power on earth to forgive sins, and seeking to build up the faith which before he reviled.

Again, a hymn was given out in a public service with the request that none would sing it excepting those who were Christians. An unconverted man was indignantly saying within himself that he would sing it though he were not a Christian. But the dishonesty of such a proceeding struck him, and he sat down a convicted man. As the singing went on, he reflected, "Why may I not believe on Jesus now?" And with the thought came the resolve: "I will lay my sins on Jesus." In that thought was involved both repentance and faith; and he rose to sing the remaining verses, a converted man.

How Is Regeneration Effected?

I answer, By the direct energy of the Holy Ghost. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." This may mean born of the Spirit under the similitude of water--"the washing of regeneration," but more probably it refers to the water spoken of by the Saviour to the woman of Samaria--which should be in the receiver a well of water, springing up into everlasting life--or again, "the water of life," of whose fountain all are invited to come and drink freely--and which signifies, as I apprehend, gospel truth--salvation by faith in a crucified and risen Lord. To have this truth of the Gospel applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit, and received through faith, is what it means, to be born of water and of the Spirit.

Let us recur again to the fact that we belong to a fallen and sinful race; "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "Children of wrath," "children of disobedience," "dead in trespasses and sins," such are we when the Holy Spirit takes us in hand. And His first work in the heart of the sinner is that of conviction. He awakens him to a sense of his sinfulness, and of his danger, and of his need. He convinces him of his undone condition without a Saviour--He reminds him that all his lifetime he has been slighting the claims of God and living in rebellion against Him--He works within him not peace, but condemnation--not repose, but anxiety--not rest, but unrest. Truly and beautifully has Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our souls are restless till they rest in Thee."

But the sinner needs to be convinced not only of his own lost condition, but also of God's forgiving love. If he must learn the plague of his own heart, and his own deadly sickness, let him learn also of the healing balm and the great Physician. Everywhere in the Holy Scriptures are revealed two things. (1.) Man's utter ruin, and (2.) God's sufficient remedy. To bring these truths home to the apprehension of the unsaved--to produce in their minds a conviction of their reality, and of their infinite importance to themselves personally--that is the work of the Holy Spirit. But even in this work of conviction, the Holy Spirit employs a great variety of methods, means, and instrumentalities.

First among these and pre-eminently blessed by Him in convicting sinners is the Holy Bible. God will honor His own book, and that book is profitable for reproof. Many a man has seen his own portrait when he has read, "All the imaginations of the thoughts of his heart are only evil continually," or, "The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked," or, "The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt," or, "There is no peace saith my God to the wicked," or, "From the head to the foot there is no soundness," or, "The works of the flesh are these," (a long and dreadful list), or, "All we like sheep have gone astray," or, "Having no hope and without God in the world."

Another instrumentality largely employed by the Holy Spirit, in convincing lost men of their true condition, and their need of a Saviour, is the ministry of the Gospel. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." All true gospel ministry is under the power and the anointing of the Holy Ghost,

and it is He that makes it effectual for the awakening of sinners. Consisting principally of an exposition and application of truths, which are revealed in Scripture, the Holy Spirit imparts to it "that indescribable characteristic which we call unction," and gives it oftentimes wondrous power in convicting the unregenerate.

Thus it was on the day of Pentecost, when Peter's hearers were "pricked in their heart," thus it was when men and women shrieked with agony of soul, as they listened to John Knox uttering forth the threatenings of the law, thus it was when scores of persons fell from their seats, as though struck down by a sword, under the searching ministry of President Finney; and similar power attended the preaching of George Fox, of Edward Burroughs, of John Wesley, and others not a few, of the anointed ambassadors of Christ.

But other and simpler instrumentalities may also be employed by the Spirit to accomplish His blessed purposes. A text of Scripture printed on a card, or uttered by the humblest Christian, or even one who is not a Christian at all--a simple question, Are you converted? Are you saved? Are you a child of God?--the truths of the Gospel in a tract or periodical, religious instruction in a Scripture school or Bible class, the singing of a hymn, any means whatever by which God's truth is brought in contact with the sinner's heart may be used by Him with convicting and converting power.

Nor must I fail to mention that the Holy Spirit can work, and does work, effectually for the conviction of sinners, without any outward instrumentality whatever. He operates directly upon the hearts of the unsaved, showing them their wretchedness and their sin, and pointing them to the Saviour. Which of my readers has not experienced many and many a time the visitation of the Holy Spirit? He has come to you, it may be, in the stillness and the darkness of the night, or in some lonely hour and some retired spot by day, or even in the crowded street, or the gathered assembly. He has reproved you for sin. He has shown you the corruption of your heart. He has convinced you of your need. He has invited you to come to the Lamb of God and be saved. He has pleaded earnestly with you, "My son, my daughter, give me thine heart." Has He already been long knocking at the door of your heart? Has He waited till His head is wet with the dew, and His locks with the drops of the night? Oh! delay not to arise and let Him in. He will not force an entrance. The door of the heart opens inwards, and is subject to your own control. He may be very patient and long-suffering with you, He may tarry long, and go away and come again, but He will not save you without your own consent. He invites and entreats, but you must decide. He recognizes your moral agency and your power of choice. Your will must be put on His side. He will not take possession of your heart till you are willing to receive Him. Be willing now.

A young Frenchman, brought up a Roman Catholic, but at the time I speak of an infidel, while walking alone on the banks of the Hudson, not thinking at all of serious things, was suddenly arrested by the words, "Eternity, Eternity, Eternity"! sounding through the very recesses of his soul. Immediately he was convinced that whether there was a Heaven or not, there was certainly a Hell, for he seemed to feel it burning in his own bosom. He found rest by accepting in living faith the offers of salvation through a crucified and risen Saviour. Such was the conversion of Stephen Grellet.

"The wind bloweth where it listeth," and the Holy Spirit knows how to adapt His operations to the temperament, the dispositions, and the circumstances of every individual, and by what agencies each one may be successfully wrought upon and won to Christ. For the variety of character and condition among the unsaved is very great. There are some--alas! many, so deeply sunken in sin--so abandoned in their wickedness--so low in vice and poverty and degradation--that they do not need to be told of their wretchedness, but rather how to escape from it. They need to be convinced, not that they are miserable sinners--they know that all too well--but that there is hope for them, that the Gospel is really good

news--glad tidings of great joy to all who will hear and receive it, that there is indeed even for them "a Saviour which is Christ the Lord." The proper thing for them is not so much the message of their own ruin, as the message of God's love.

It is said, that at the time of the great fire in Chicago, many persons whose families had thus suddenly become homeless and destitute, walked about in a kind of sullen despair--almost stupefied by the calamity that had befallen them, not softened, but hardened and angered by the hopelessness of their circumstances; but when the news came flashing over the wires that the heart of the world was throbbing in sympathy with them, and that help was coming from every quarter; then the fountain of love and tenderness in their own souls was reached, and strong men wept like children. Despair hardens the heart; love melts it. It is, I believe, generally, if not universally true, that those who, in the Providence of God, are called and qualified to labor among the intemperate, the abandoned and the vicious, find it their proper place, under the leadings of the Holy Spirit, to go to them with glad tidings; to present before them the love of Christ; to convince them of His tender compassion towards our lost race, and to employ the language of invitation rather than of reproof.

The case is very different when we come to deal with respectable sinners--moral, upright, law-abiding in their outward conduct; some, Pharisaical professors, who are not like other men; some, traditional Christians, members of a worthy and influential religious organization; some, "measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves," and deciding that they are, at least, as good as their neighbors; some, whole and having no need of a physician; some, trusting, partially at least, in a rigid adherence to forms and observances. For such as these the important thing is, that they should be convinced of their own "exceeding need;" that whatever may be their outward conduct, and the advantages of their position, "there is no difference, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God;" that they are leaning upon a broken reed; that their self-righteousness is "filthy rags;" that they must be stripped of every false covering, and every refuge of lies; that they are hopeless, helpless, bankrupt sinners, wholly dependent upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus; and that they must cast themselves as humble, unworthy supplicants at His feet, pleading only His infinite merit for their pardon and acceptance.

Whether the work of conviction shall be short or long, gradual or sudden, depends largely upon the amount of resistance that is made to it. If the voice of the Spirit is unheeded; if His reproofs are slighted; if His visitations are repelled, or if He is told again and again to wait for "a convenient season;" then His convictions may be long-continued, and oft repeated, and may involve much suffering and sorrow. Hence, some persons tell us that their conversion was gradual, because they struggled weeks, or months, or weary years against the Holy Spirit, before the point was reached of submission to God, and trust in Jesus. When that point is reached, however, conversion follows at once. There may be a gradual work of development and preparation before birth; and a gradual process of growth after birth; but the birth itself, whether natural or spiritual, is a sudden change which brings the individual into a new world, and imparts to him a new life. Conviction may be gradual and protracted. Conversion is definite and immediate.

And let no one imagine that long, severe strugglings and conflicts are always essential to a sound conversion. It is not our remorse nor our suffering; not the length of time we are under conviction, nor the amount of agony we endure from the sense of our guilt; but it is the surrender of the will that brings about the blessed result. In the great plan of salvation, man receives by giving, and conquers by yielding; every victory is by surrender. It was not Jacob wrestling, but Jacob ceasing to wrestle--Jacob humbled, subdued, helpless, halting, trusting, asking--that obtained the blessing from God.

Conviction, if yielded to, produces "godly sorrow," sorrow for sin as such; not because it has injured us in health, reputation, or estate, but, primarily and chiefly, because it has offended our gracious Heavenly Father; "and godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation not to be repented of."

Repentance is not penance; not remorse, which, etymologically, is biting again, and belongs to despair, not agony of mind; not conviction; not "godly sorrow;" but that change of mind, and purpose, and will, which results from godly sorrow. It is not simply the forsaking of one's sins; because that may be done from various motives of self-interest; whereas, repentance is in the heart, and has respect to our obligations to God. Nevertheless, beginning in the heart, it works out also into the life, and produces "fruits meet for repentance." Following conviction, it is the after thought, the new resolve; the choosing to be the Lord's; the decision in favor of Christ; and true repentance does involve the abandoning of all known sin.

While it is the goodness of God, or, in other words, the influence of the Holy Spirit, that leads men to repentance, nevertheless, all men are commanded to repent. "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," was the primary message not only of John the Baptist, but of the Saviour Himself; and the same injunction is repeated, in one form or another, in many places, both in the Old and New Testaments. An express command of God implies the power to obey, and hence, repentance must be, in an important sense, an act of the will. God desires our co-partnership in the work of salvation, to the extent that we shall put our wills on His side, submit to Him, and consent to be saved. Without His grace, doubtless, we shall not be able to repent; but His grace will not be withheld if we are willing to repent. He commands us to repent, and requires us to repent; and He will not do our repenting for us. Let no one, therefore, who is convinced of his need of a Saviour, be waiting for deeper convictions, or more sensible manifestations of his undone condition, but let him at once, by a voluntary act, put himself into a state of submission to God; yielding his heart, including his will, into His hands. And whoever does this, repents.

But, in order that the sinner may be born again, he must experience not only repentance towards God, but also faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ; and every Gospel blessing which the Lord promises to give us, is to be received only with the hand of faith.

Faith signifies nothing more nor less than believing God's truth. It is the substance of things hoped for; because it makes them real. It is the evidence of things not seen; because it convinces the mind of their existence and importance. It is the confidence which the human soul reposes in its Creator. It is taking God at His word. It is the acceptance of the glad tidings. It is trust in the Lord. It is rest in Jesus.

All men believe something, and therefore, all men have faith. But it cannot be said, with truth, that all men believe God; nor, that all men have religious faith, or saving faith.

It is not sufficient to believe, historically, what is written about the Lord Jesus Christ; nor to believe, in a general way, that He was the Son of God and that He came into the world to save sinners. It is needful for each individual to believe in Him as a personal Saviour, and to grasp Him with that appropriating faith which uses the first person singular, and the possessive pronoun. This God is my God. This Saviour is my Saviour. "My beloved is mine, and I am His."

Faith is either the power of believing, or the act of believing. In the former sense it is given to all. In the latter it is exercised with the consent and choice of the human will. God presents us with this truth, and gives us the capacity to believe it; just as He gives us food, and the capacity to eat it. The act of believing, like the act of eating, is our own. Surrounded by plenty, men can starve their bodies by neglecting or refusing to eat. Surrounded by the saving truth of the Gospel, they can starve their souls by neglecting or

refusing to believe.

A ship, hoisting signals of distress, was spoken by another vessel and asked what was wanted. Feebly and beseechingly came the answer from famishing throats, "Water! water!" "Let down your buckets and dip it up," was the reply. "You are in the mouth of the Amazon." Fresh water all around them, and they perishing with thirst! And, with the water of life flowing freely for their refreshment, multitudes of souls are doing the same thing.

The proper business of a truly convicted soul while he is praying for repentance, is to repent; and, while he is praying for faith, is to believe.

"Faith," says Dr. Upham, "considered as an element of the Divine mind, is a nature and not an acquisition. In man, also, faith is a nature; but in God, it is nature eternal--in man, it is nature given. God, without faith in Himself, could not be God; and man, without faith in God as his Father, could not be the child of God. When man, therefore, was originally created, he was created with faith in God. If man was originally created in faith, he could not have fallen from his original state, except by ceasing to have faith; in other words, by unbelief. And he cannot be restored to the state from which he fell, except by the restoration of faith. Provision for this restoration is made in Jesus Christ; and this restoration is actually realized in the case of all those, who, in ceasing to have faith in themselves, have opened the door of their hearts for the faith which is in God."

Our Saviour has told us that all who would get into the Kingdom of Heaven, must enter it "as a little child." Now the child lives in the constant and easy exercise of faith. He readily believes what is told him about natural things, With the same readiness also, if rightly instructed, he believes what is told him about spiritual things. He is wholly dependent upon others for the supply of his daily needs; but he has faith in his parents and care-takers--he trusts them; he is not careful; he takes no anxious thought; he expects them to provide for his wants, and he is not disappointed. According to his faith it is unto him. If a certain good thing is promised him, he does not think of doubting that he shall receive it, but begins at once to enjoy it by faith. If certain things are required of him, or certain restraints imposed upon him, even though he may not be able to understand their reason, yet he quickly learns to obey; because he is certain that his father knows what is right and proper much better than himself.

And every one, man or child; old or young; male or female, is to receive the Kingdom of Heaven in a similar spirit of unquestioning faith, and implicit obedience. There must be faith in God's promises; obedience to His commands--which commands, at this stage are, repent and believe--and submission to Him, even in things we cannot understand; because our Father knows.

And, just because of this easy faith, it is especially incumbent on Christians to use all proper endeavors to secure the conversion of their own children, and of children generally. Still, as of old, the language of Christ is, "Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not." Of all the Christians in the world today, there can be little doubt that a large majority were converted in childhood and youth. The Holy Spirit begins His work of conviction upon the heart, at a very early period of life.

If a child, even when very young, comes to his parent grieved and distressed, because he has done wrong; the goodness of God is leading him to repentance. Embrace the opportunity thus presented by Providence for instructing him in the plan of salvation, and for bringing him to Christ. Do not give him any false comfort on the one hand, nor unduly discourage him on the other. Do not divert his attention from the subject too hastily, nor persuade him that he is not very bad after all. Tell him that he has indeed a

naughty heart, because Satan has had possession of it, and by means of it has led him into sin. But, tell him also that Jesus died, that he might be forgiven and become God's child. Instruct him how to pray in the name of that Saviour, for pardon and a new heart, and then, to believe he receives what he prays for. In this simple way, even a child, being justified by faith, will have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And not the child only, but everyone that is seeking salvation, should be instructed to ask, that he may receive. While naturally and properly desiring the prayers of others on his behalf, he is not to rely wholly upon them, but pray for himself. "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Do not be satisfied with exercising good desires in your hearts, but turn those good desires into words, and what you thus desire, pray for. The penitent sinner who humbles himself before God, assumes the attitude of prayer, and asks, vocally, for His mercy, seldom fails speedily to find pardon and acceptance at His hands.

It is quite true, indeed, that neither praying--whether silent or vocal--nor anything else that man can do, will be of any avail in the work of regeneration, without the aid of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, however, works by and with the concurrence of the intellectual and moral faculties of man. He does not supersede those faculties, nor act independently of them. The intellect, the sensibilities, the conscience, and the will, are all operated upon and influenced by Him. Man is not an automaton, nor a machine, manipulated in such a way by the Holy Spirit, that he must be saved or lost in spite of himself. He is, on the contrary, a moral agent, possessing and exercising the power of choice. The Holy Scriptures constantly persuade him to choose aright, but they clearly recognize his power of choosing wrong; and the Holy Spirit, who gave forth the Scriptures, does precisely the same thing.

It is He that causes the "godly sorrow" "that worketh repentance unto salvation not to be repented of." It is He that produces in the soul a hungering and thirsting after righteousness; and He does so in order that it may be filled. It is He that begets those longing desires after salvation, which can be satisfied only in Christ. It is He that inspires the prayer for mercy and acceptance; and a prayer thus inspired will most certainly be answered. It is He that enables the repenting, praying sinner to exercise saving faith in Christ; and "no man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost." Man's part in the work of regeneration is to repent, to ask, to believe. God does the rest.

But, "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Whenever the word of God, the gospel of life and salvation, is heard by the sinner--whether through the instrumentality of the Bible, a sermon, a hymn, a tract, or in any other way--that is a sufficient call to accept and obey it; and the Holy Spirit will not be wanting on His part, both to persuade and to enable him so to do. A sufficient reason to repent is, that God commands it. A sufficient reason to ask is, that you realize your need. A sufficient reason to believe is, that Christ is the Truth; and the repenting, asking, believing, should be done at once. If I may not invite a sinner to come to Christ now, it must be because Christ is not willing to receive him now; which is only saying that He wishes him to continue longer in his sins: a conclusion which the boldest advocate of delay and preparation would scarcely dare to adopt. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation."

If this book should be so fortunate as to be perused by any in the younger walks of life, I would here pause a moment to entreat all these to give heed to the admonition of the Preacher: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say I have no pleasure in them:" no pleasure in the follies, nor the gaieties, nor the sins of this world--where, perhaps, you have hitherto been seeking all your pleasure. Oh! if only you can be persuaded now to heed the loving

voice of your Saviour, who, through the Spirit within and the Gospel without, is inviting you to arise and come away--away from sin, and away to Him--how much bitter anguish and sorrow and remorse will be spared you in the future! While it is comparatively easy to believe, while it is comparatively easy to obey, before both heart and life have become thoroughly steeped in sin, before evil tendencies have become strengthened by constant indulgence, and evil habits fixed by constant repetition, before Satan has so completely enveloped you in his toils that you shall almost despair of escape, "While the evil days come not," oh, "Remember now thy Creator!"

God's purposes concerning you are purposes of love; His plans are plans of love; His means are means of love. He has His plan, also, for every man, yes, and for every child; a plan which, if carried out, will secure unmixed blessing to the recipient, and glory, as well as pleasure to Himself. What He wants to give you is infinitely better than anything you can seek for yourselves. If only the dear children, and young people, would let Him have His own way with them; if only they would not frustrate His grace, nor mar His work, nor thwart His plans, nor resist His will; what gloriously blessed results would He bring out in their experience. Into what delightfully green pastures would He guide them, beside what blessedly still waters would He lead them. Not but that His dealings would be very different in different cases. He would make some, it may be, like vessels of gold and of silver; and some like vessels of wood and of stone; but all should be vessels unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use.

Men seek for pleasure, or for wealth, or for fame, or for position in the world. For these things they strive, for these they struggle, for these they burn many a time the midnight oil; and how very few, after all their efforts, ever obtain that one of these supposed good things which they have desired so earnestly, and striven for so long. And, out of the comparatively small number who do attain what the world calls success in life, how much fewer still are those who are satisfied therewith. Do they not find, by experience which is often bitter and sad, that,

"Things of earth were never yet designed

To quench the vast and deathless thirst of an immortal mind!"

and that the very objects which they fondly imagined would make them happy, are only--like the apples of Sodom--fair and beautiful to the view, but crumbling to ashes within the grasp?

Multitudes of disappointed men are in the world today; some disappointed because they have not attained what they desired, and some because, after they have attained it, they are still unsatisfied.

"Bubbles we earn with our whole soul's tasking;

'Tis only God that is given away,

'Tis only Heaven may be had for the asking."

"One thing is needful."

"God seeth not as man seeth." Many a life which the world calls a success, will be found a stupendous failure when weighed in the balance of the sanctuary. Many a life which men count a failure, God will count a grand success.

A wealthy merchant was suddenly stricken with a fatal malady. Casting his dying eyes around the luxuriously furnished apartment in which he lay, and then fixing them upon his only daughter--for whose sake, it may be, he had been eager in his pursuit of gain--he simply asked, "Nelly, have not we made a mistake after all?" What a volume of instruction do these words convey; and how lamentable that in any case a mistake, whose disastrous effects may extend to eternity, should be discovered only when it is too late to rectify it!

Let us make a definite hypothesis. Suppose that God, by His Holy Spirit, calls you to surrender to Him and become a Christian at the age of fifteen years. You plead for delay. You wish a little more time for your own pleasures, and your own plans, you are young, you want to enjoy this world awhile, you must finish your education, you must settle in life, you must give yourself to business. A hundred excuses, your own ingenuity and Satan's can quickly invent, and you say to the Spirit, "Go thy way for this time." Suppose, however, that you stipulate that, at thirty years of age you will surrender your heart to the Lord. If such a thing were possible, suppose that He accepts your presumptuous proposition; leaves you to your own plannings, and willings, and pleasures, for fifteen years; returns to you, and you keep your vow, close in with His offers and become His child. Even then, what have you done? You have simply deprived yourself of fifteen years of unmixed blessing. The Lord in His infinite goodness may, and will, make of you the best thing that can be made now; but not the best thing that could have been made if you had surrendered then. There is a loss in every day's delay to accept the blessed Spirit's call; and not even by double diligence can we, in any just sense of the term, redeem lost time.

But, unhappily, in point of fact the majority of mankind, even in gospel lands, pass through their childhood and youth without ever definitely exercising faith in Christ, and without being converted. And we often meet with those, in middle or advanced life, who, although greatly concerned about their souls, yet tell us they cannot believe. And yet, from their childhood they have had faith in the sense of the power to believe; but they have never put that latent power into actual use by definitely believing God's truth for themselves. Their faith is weakened and paralyzed by long disuse; just as sight would be weakened and paralyzed if the eyes were bandaged from infancy to manhood, and never employed in seeing anything.

Under these circumstances, the will must be brought to bear in aid of the debilitated faith. The convicted and prayerful penitent, must will to believe," he must choose to believe," he must determine to believe. Do not let it be objected that belief is not a matter of volition, but a matter of evidence. It is not from any lack of evidence, that such an one as we have supposed does not believe that Christ is able and willing to save him now, and that He does save him now. It is because Satan has got hold of his believing power and rendered it partially inert.

And now, let the will be put on the believing side, and let the individual resolve to obey God's positive command--believe, as he would obey any other command. Let him grasp the promises of Christ and appropriate them to himself. "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out." That means me, now. "Be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee." That means me, now. "Be it unto thee even as thou wilt." That means me, now. "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely." That means me, now. With a fixed determination, let him regard unbelief as a grievous sin and an infinite dishonor to God, and, while he prays for help from above, let him also strive to believe. The Holy Spirit will be present to his necessity; and as he entreats, like one of old, "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief," he will receive the gracious response, "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace."

On one occasion Jesus found a man whose right hand was withered. He gave him a positive command: "Stretch forth thine hand." The poor man might have answered, "I cannot. It is the very thing I would gladly do, but this right hand has long ago forgotten its cunning. To tell me to stretch it forth is a mockery." Do we not see that if he had reasoned thus he might have carried his withered hand to the grave? But he did not thus reason. The command came: "Stretch forth thine hand." Immediately he made the effort, and with the effort came the power. The hand was stretched forth, and became whole as the other. Let the convicted and penitent sinner, whose faith has become feeble by want of exercise, do likewise. By a determined effort let him stretch forth the hand of faith, and he also shall be made whole.

And now the same blessed Spirit who has thus wrought the new birth in the soul of the sinner, becomes a witness to his adoption. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." And, because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying "Abba, Father." "He that believeth in the Son of God hath the witness in himself."

And the forgiven, accepted, regenerated believer, can but utter from his heart the language of adoring praise, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His Holy name."

Remarks

1. Conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit on the heart of the sinner, by which he is made to realize his undone condition and earnestly to desire reconciliation with God. In order to bring the impenitent to conviction, the Holy Spirit may either operate directly, or He may employ a great variety of instrumentalities.

2. Repentance is change of mind, the after-thought, a firm resolve to turn away from sin and come to Christ. "Godly sorrow worketh repentance," and "Godly sorrow" is itself the result of conviction, produced in the unforgiven soul by the Holy Ghost. The amount of mental agitation and suffering that may precede, or accompany, repentance is very different in different cases. One is pressed down as with the weight of a mountain, under the sense of his guilt. Another is melted at once into contrition, as he gets a glimpse of God's infinite love. One exclaims with Charles Marshall, "Oh, undeclarable fall! Oh, endless wall of partition and separation! Oh, gulf unutterable!" Another with the Psalmist cries, "Because Thy loving kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise Thee." One hears the threatenings of Sinai; another the invitations of Calvary. One is aroused by the terrors of impending judgment. Another responds to the voice of love, as an infant awakened from slumber by its mother's kiss. And let us not give heed to any heresy that would weaken a single motive, either of fear or of love, which may draw men to Christ.

3. Faith is the acceptance of God's mercy and grace in Christ Jesus. The grace of faith, or the power of believing, is the gift of God. The act of faith, or actual believing, is the exercise of that power. When God presents His truth to us it is not a matter of indifference whether we accept or reject it. He holds us accountable for the exercise of the faith which He has given us. "He that believeth not, is condemned already." And to every contrite, anxious soul that wills to believe, the power so to do will be given by the Holy Ghost.

4. Prayer is asking God to fulfill His own promises and to give us what we need. It is turning the good desires which the Holy Ghost has begotten in our hearts into words and addressing them to the throne of grace. This may be done either in vocal utterances, or by the whispered or silent aspirations of the soul. Whether prayer shall be silent or vocal in any given case may be left to the leadings of the Holy Spirit, but I believe the sinner who comes to Christ for pardon will often find it both necessary and effectual to call with

his voice upon the name of the Lord.

5. "Thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven thee." That state of heart which makes it proper and right for God to forgive one sin, makes it proper and right for Him to forgive all sins. The broken and the contrite heart He will not despise. Whoever comes to God in penitential prayer, believing in Jesus, receives justification. This is pardon, forgiveness, remission, absolution. All guilt, all condemnation, and all penalty on account of past transgressions are removed from him for ever. His indebtedness is canceled. "Jesus paid it all."

6. But in justifying a sinner, God has respect to his moral condition. He not only removes his guilt but He changes his nature as well. Conversion, or Regeneration, always accompanies Justification. These terms are used synonymously--the one indicating, in its etymology, a change of heart, the other a new birth. Spiritual life is imparted to the soul by the Holy Ghost; and this life, however feeble it may be in its incipiency, is a life in the, image of Christ, so that every justified soul, even if not wholly cleansed from the stains of its inward corruption, is yet partially sanctified; and whoever experiences "the washing of regeneration" begins to be made holy. The process is completed (in most cases at a later period) by the "renewing of the Holy Ghost."

7. The witness of the Spirit is explained by John Wesley as follows, viz.: "By the testimony of the Spirit I mean an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God, that Jesus Christ hath loved me and given Himself for me, that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God. I do not mean hereby that the Spirit of God testifies this by an outward voice. No, nor always by an inward voice, although He may do this sometimes. Neither do I suppose that He always applies to the heart (although He often may) one or more texts of Scripture. But He so works upon the soul by His immediate influence, and by a strong though inexplicable operation, that the stormy wind and the troubled waves subside and there is a sweet calm, the heart resting in Jesus, and the sinner being clearly satisfied that all his iniquities are forgiven and his sins covered."

8. I do not believe that either election, reprobation, or the perseverance of the saints is unconditional. If we take the whole tenor of Bible teaching instead of basing important doctrines on isolated texts, I think we shall find that the elect are those who hear the gospel and accept it; while the reprobate are they who hear and reject, or neglect, the great salvation. In point of fact, we may well suppose that very few who have really been born again have been finally lost. If they backslide, the Lord follows them with His tender invitations to return, Backsliding is soul-sickness, but not soul-death. But as among the millions of people who have inhabited the earth, a very few in the full possession of their faculties and exercising their own choosing power have committed suicide, so it is possible for the believer, in the exercise of his moral agency, suicidally to sunder himself from Christ. But who would wish or choose so to do?

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