

Ye Must Be Born Anew

by G. Campbell Morgan

The sermon emphasizes the essential need for spiritual rebirth through the Holy Spirit to truly become a child of God.

Scripture: John 1:12-13, John 3:3, John 14:6, Romans 8:5-6, Romans 10:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:17, Ephesians 2:1-5, Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 1:23

Topics: "Transformation in Christ", "New Birth"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the necessity of being born anew to become a child of God, as articulated by Jesus to Nicodemus. He explains that Christianity demands a transformation that cannot be achieved through human effort alone, but requires the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Morgan highlights that the new birth is essential for gaining a true vision of God, fostering love for Him, and escaping the enslavement of sin. He asserts that this transformation is a divine act, initiated by God, and is only possible through faith in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deep understanding of the new birth as a radical change that leads to a new creation in Christ.

Transcript

NO person can be a child of God but by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. The entrance to Christianity is perpetually and jealously guarded by the words of Jesus to Nicodemus: Ye must be born anew. The reason for this is to be found in the very nature of Christianity. It presents an ideal of life, and enunciates an ethical code, of such a nature as to demand something more than themselves. Its ideal is Jesus. Its code of ethics is His teaching. These are united in a sacred and wondrous union, for all He taught men to be, He was Himself. So wondrous was He in beauty of character, and so searching and severe in the requirements of His law, that man in his impotence is absolutely unable to copy the one, or to obey the other. If Christianity, therefore, has nothing more to offer men than these, it is an impossible and impracticable ideal, a mere mirage of the desert, suggesting growth and fertility, but ever eluding the grasp of those who, weary and desolate, stretch out longing hands after its fruits. The something more required is the essential gift and power of Christianity. It comes to men with life which is the very life of the Ideal, and is therefore the dynamic of obedience to the code. Nothing short of actual participation in that life constitutes any human being a Christian. Admiration of the Person and character of Christ, together with patronage of His teaching, are insufficient, and indeed do but insult the purpose of Christianity, whose mission it is, not so much to captivate the admiration, as to remake and beautify the character.

These words of Jesus to Nicodemus were the more remarkable because spoken to him. He was no profligate sunk in the mire and filth of bestiality. Nor was he a self-centred and self-satisfied Pharisee. He was a sincere seeker after truth, and the question he put to Jesus revealed the working of his mind. He came to a Teacher from God, and therefore he came with an open mind willing to receive truth. He was perhaps the most perfect example of the highest possibilities of the old covenant, which had instructed men in the things of God and had led them to the highest act possible in the energy of fallen nature--that, namely, of submission to a baptism which symbolized repentance. Christ's answer cast no aspersion upon the past. It revealed its limitations. It was as though He had declared that John, the last of the magnificent line of the Hebrew prophets, had done all that was possible in leading unregenerate men to the door of the kingdom. To enter, there was necessary the new and essential miracle of Christianity--that man should have a second birth, without which he could neither see nor enter in. Times have not altered human nature, nor have they changed the essential character of Christianity. To every seeker Jesus still says: Ye must be born anew. The first chapter of the practical section of this book is therefore devoted to a study of the New Birth, its necessity, nature, evidence, and method.

The teaching of Christ was unified. He said in a sentence, what other teachers under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would unfold in volumes. This conversation with Nicodemus deals fully and finally with this whole subject. The teaching of the Epistles is, however, valuable, in order that the sayings of the Master may be fully comprehended.

As to the necessity for the new birth, He declared: That which is born of the flesh is flesh. This statement must never be construed into a condemnation of the physical and material side of man's nature. That matter is inherently evil is a doctrine of devils, that finds no warrant in the teaching of Christ or His apostles. Every pulse and fibre of physical being owes its creation and preservation to the thought and power of God. That which He created in His own image, and which, when redeemed, He inhabits as a temple, is not in itself evil. The condition of human life apart from God is evil, because it has passed into limitation and prostitution. Those wondrous material bases of life upon which, for a time, essential being was to manifest itself, and be prepared for the final and perfected life, have become the prison-house of the spirit, and man is attempting to live by bread alone, to condition his being in the flesh. That is the condition of life which Jesus describes as flesh, and of that He says: That which is born of the flesh is flesh. The same guarding of terms is necessary in turning to the Epistles. The writers place the natural and spiritual in perpetual antithesis. This is not because the spiritual is unnatural, or the natural unspiritual. The deepest fact of human nature is that the natural is spiritual, and only when all the being is dominated by spirit is man natural. A concrete illustration may be found in the early chapters of Genesis. The man in the garden, himself a spirit tabernacling in physical dwelling, and yet holding unafraid communion with that God Who is a Spirit, is the natural man. He, who presently is seen bending back to earth, and entering upon the bread life which is ever through the sweat of the brow, is unnatural, because contrary to the Divine purpose and thought. When New Testament writers speak of the natural man, they are not condemning that which is natural in the sense now described. They are using the phrase in exactly the same way the Lord here used the word flesh, to describe the condition of being which is enslaved by the things temporal and material, as in opposition to those eternal and spiritual. This is the condition under which men are now born, and herein lies the necessity for the new birth.

What this condition really is may be gathered from a consideration of certain of the words of Paul. Take, first, his description of the Gentiles before they are brought into union with Christ: Darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God. That is the root-trouble. Man has lost his vision of God. He

has no true conception of God. Man has ever been attempting to construct a deity out of the imaginings of his own heart, and the result has been the idea of God as an enlarged man, and a consequent misconception of His true being. A flesh-conditioned life cannot discover God. Hence the necessity for the new birth, which is first of all new vision.

Then consider the apostle's description of the heart of the unregenerate: The mind of the flesh is enmity against God. How man fears God--nay, hates Him! To disturb the peace and mar the pleasure of the worldling, it is only necessary to introduce a conversation concerning Divine things. The one constant and successful endeavour of the flesh-homed life is to keep God out of conscious touch. There may be no open blasphemy, no avowed hatred, but the unvarying law of life, and the unchanging order of its activities, reveal that man has no desire for God, no joy in His company. A flesh-conditioned life cannot love God. Hence the necessity for the new birth is that of a new possibility of love.

Again, notice the description the apostle gives of the purpose, and set, and impulse, of the unregenerate: They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh. It would be a startling revelation to some persons if they would take the time to examine their own lives for any given week, registering the occupation of all the hours. One hundred and sixty-eight hours in all, -- so many given to the spiritual side of life, so many to the mental, so many to the purely physical; the vast majority devoted to What shall we eat? . . . What shall we drink? . . . Wherewithal shall we be clothed? This is so in many and varied ways, and must continue until man is born of the Spirit, and a higher view of life, and consequently other impulses, are produced.

Once again, notice his statement concerning the true government of such lives: Ye walked . . . according to the prince of the power of the air. They are the slaves of Satan, accomplishing his designs, yielding their allegiance to him. All unconsciously, man apart from God becomes the abject slave of the devil, and through the flesh hears the suggestions and proposals of hell, and yields to them, and becomes more and more fast bound.

This fourfold description explains the meaning of Jesus' words to Nicodemus, and gives the necessity for the new birth: That which is born of the flesh is flesh. The understanding is darkened; the heart is at enmity; the life is set on the things of the flesh; the being is enslaved by Satan. The hopelessness of man is still more clearly seen when it is observed that this fourfold description is a sequence. The understanding dark, and therefore a false conception of God. Then it is not to be wondered at that man hates. No man could hate the true and living God. The hatred of the human heart is for the monster of its own imagination. There can be no love for God until all the false views are swept away by the new vision that breaks with the new birth. If man turn away from God in hatred, it follows that, in order to satisfy the craving of his nature, he will turn to fleshly things and earthly things, because he has no vision of the higher. The man with the muck-rake is proving his capacity for the unseen crown by the very devotion with which he is searching amid the baubles at his feet. There will be no deliverance until a new life gives him the sense of those higher possibilities. The man thus enslaved is enslaved by Satan. God's perpetual work is to bring man near to Himself, that man may love. Satan ever enslaves through agencies and intermediaries, lest man, seeing the corruption, should be afraid and escape. This is no flattering tale of the need of human nature, yet it is the account which alone is true to the facts of history, and the present state of men. There is neither light, nor life, nor love, nor liberty save in the power of the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. Ye must be born anew, for that which is born of the flesh is flesh.

The nature of the change necessary is perhaps most sublimely described by the simplicity of the words of which Jesus made use: Except a man be born anew. A birth is a beginning. It is not the reconstruction or renovation of something already in existence, but the commencement of a new thing. That is what a man needs, if he would see or enter the kingdom. This statement of the case immediately lifts the possibility of being a Christian out of the realm of the human as to initiation. God only can begin a new thing. Men may manipulate the things that are, may replace in another order, may imagine they have started, begun something; but give a man nothing and tell him to begin a new thing, and the only new thing will be the old nothing. Born: that is the supreme fact; it is the commencement. As every living being is a work of God, so, if there is to be new birth, that also must be of God. If man must be born anew, then is he helpless until the Spirit of God work the creative miracle.

This view of the Christian life as a new thing was that which the apostles clearly enforced:

If any man is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new! A new creation, having a new vision of God, out of which springs a new love for God and a new devotion to Him--this is beyond the possibility of analysis. It is the mystery of life, and, like every other phase and form of life, is beyond the explanation of any teacher or scientist the world has produced.

The result of the new birth Christ declares as clearly and as simply in the second half of the verse first quoted: That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Again it must be restated that He is not undervaluing the physical side of man's being, and certainly He is not putting it out of count altogether. The vision presented by the statement is that of human life in which first, things are first, and second things are second, and last things are last--life in which spirit is dominant, the lord of being, and soul and body are subservient and sanctified. It is a perfect contrast to the old life; but it is a contrast which consists, not in the exaltation of one side of the being at the expense of the others, but in the restoration of the true balance of power and proportion. The change is summarized in the words of Christ, and light is thrown again upon this summary from the Epistles.

Following a law of nature, Christ placed the antidote in juxtaposition to the poison. Immediately after His summary of the facts of human life in the words which is born of the flesh, is flesh, He gave as brief and graphic a description of the changed life: That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. This method is followed through the New Testament, and a second reference to the statements of the apostle concerning the natural man will reveal a statement in each case side by side with them, giving the antitheses in the spiritual man. Those darkened in their understanding become taught in Him, even as truth is in Jesus. Those of whom it was declared that the mind of the flesh is enmity against God, being born again of the Spirit, and indwelt by the Spirit, look into the face of God and cry, Abba, Father. They that being after the flesh did mind the things of the flesh, now being after the Spirit do mind the things of the Spirit. Those who walked . . . according to the prince of the power of the air now sit with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.

The whole form and fashion of the life is changed, and the change is so radical and complete that the only way in which it is possible to account for it, is by the acceptation of the teaching of Christ, that it has been brought about by a new creation, a new beginning, a new birth.

As there was a sequence of thought in the description of man's condition in his sinful nature, so also is there in the antitheses just glanced at. The first effect of imparted life is to give man a true vision of God. That which could not be found by the flesh life is discovered directly the new life restores the lost sight.

Then the spirit of man, seeing God, cries, Father. Fear passes, and the life--tremblingly, it may be, at the beginning, but none the less surely--takes hold upon God with intense satisfaction and ever-deepening love. That is the cure for the minding of earthly things. To revert to a former illustration, let but the man with the muckrake see the higher things and know they are his own, he will forget all the empty trifles that have captivated him before. Again, the man satisfied with the things of God, becomes, by that very sense of satisfaction, master of Satan, and invulnerable against all his attacks.

The method of the new birth is most definitely stated in this same conversation. The miracle itself is a Divine work. The condition upon which it is wrought is the point of human responsibility. In the words born of the Spirit the Master claims the essential act as Divine, and most clearly does He show that work to be beyond our comprehension. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and than hcarcst the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Just as the power of the wind is beyond dispute by the evidences of its blowing that appeal to the senses, while the law of its coming and going abides a mystery, so the fact of the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit is proved by the phenomena of grace, while all the sacred mystery of its operation is beyond the discovery of any human mind. Men are called upon to accept the fact in each case, and to wait for the explanation of the mystery. Granted the possibility of the miracle, it is for man to seek to know the condition upon which it is wrought. This Nicodemus felt, and hence his question: Holv can these things be? The answer is perfectly clear: And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life" Man needs life. The Son of Man is to be lifted up that it may be provided. Pointing this seeker to the kingdom, the Master sets His Cross as the gate of life. On the place of awful uplifting, through the mystery of His Passion, He would liberate His life that this man might share it. The life-giving work of the Spirit is to be that of communicating to souls, dead in trespasses and sins, the very life of the Son of God. This can only be done as the corn of wheat dies to live, and there is no new birth for individuals or the race, but by the death of the Son of Man. That death has been accomplished, and now whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life. The one condition of life is that of belief. What this belief is has explanation in the opening part of this Gospel: But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name. Here two terms are used in explanation of each other. To believe on Him is to receive Him: to receive Him is to believe on His name. To believe is the condition upon which the Holy Spirit imparts the life by the coming of which old things pass away, all things are new. Thousands believe in the historic Christ, and are yet dead in trespasses and sins. No weak trembling soul in all the centuries has ever yet believed on Him in the sense of receiving Him as the Way, the Truth, the Life, with unquestioning surrender and abandonment, but immediately the new life has been imparted. In this, as in everything, God is a God of method, and this is His law of grace, by observance of which man appropriates the blessings of the Cross.

Ye must be born anew. Apart from this there is no escape from the corruption that is in the world by lust. Save through this, there is no becoming partakers of the Divine nature. While living in the full tide of spiritual possibilities, men shall yet pass through the years of probation barren and dead, unless they surrender to the Infinite Love; and receiving Him Whom they crucified in blindness, become heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.

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