

Born Again John 3

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon emphasizes the necessity of being born again through the Holy Spirit to truly understand and enter the kingdom of God.

Scripture: Ezekiel 36:26-27, John 1:12-13, John 3:3, John 3:5, John 14:6, Romans 8:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 4:24, 1 Peter 1:23

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

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the necessity of being born again through the Holy Spirit, contrasting it with the limitations of human nature and the inadequacy of mere profession of faith. He explains that true transformation comes from a divine nature imparted by God, which enables believers to see and delight in the righteousness of God. Darby warns against the dangers of relying on outward evidence and human understanding, stressing that only through the new birth can one truly enter the kingdom of God. He highlights the importance of recognizing the cross's role in this transformation, as it signifies both death to the old self and the birth of a new spiritual identity in Christ. Ultimately, he reassures that through Christ's work, believers are made partakers of divine nature and are called to live in accordance with it.

Transcript

The truth connected with the Holy Ghost, together with Christ and His work, is the great safeguard against the error by which Satan is working in the present day. The enemy's craft must be met by the truth of God. In this chapter we have the work of the Spirit in quickening souls, and this is brought out, in contrast both with God's previous trial of Israel, and with man's natural power in the reception of outward evidence. From chapter 2:24, etc., we see the need of getting hold of God's truth for our own souls. The profession of Christ may be ever so sincere, but apart from life and fruit it is worth and is nothing. The people saw He was the One who should come, the Person sent from God, and they had right thoughts about His works, and yet all that went for nothing and was worthless in the sight of God. The solemn question was, What was in man? The conviction spread amongst them that He was the Messiah, because of the miracles He did, and they were ready to have Him in their own way. Nicodemus said, "We [not I] know that thou art a teacher sent from God," etc.; but the wickedness of man's heart was not all come out. Man proved what he was in the treatment he gave the Lord Jesus, notwithstanding the undeniable evidence vouchsafed in His works that He was come from God.

There are none so hostile to truth as those who know, but will not have it. The spies who had been up and seen the land were those active in speaking against it. You cannot go the way of the cross without having its trial and difficulty, as well as its infinite gain. The cross is not pleasant, of course, and it never was intended to be pleasant. Directly I see that Christ has a right and claim on my conscience, my nature rises to resist His power; I see He ought to have the first place, and that other things should give way. This I do not like. The cross must be contrary to our nature.

The Lord now meets Nicodemus with the declaration that he must be born again, or rather anew (which is a stronger word than "again," or "from above"). It is the same expression in the original as "from the very first," in Luke 1:3. You may find lovely qualities in human nature; but nature never loves Christ, where the cross and the glory come together. The new birth is a thing totally new. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Christianity does not alter it at all. Man is in love with creation, and neither loves God nor believes His love. The creation is ruined, spoiled - not willingly, as man is, but still it is fallen. Man's will is gone away from God. His intellect may be all very well in its way; his disposition may be amiable, but you never find one who naturally seeks after God. Nay, you generally find the most amiable person the last to turn to God. Man must be born entirely anew; he must come into heaven with a nature altogether distinct from that which he has got. Man will use his good qualities as well as his bad, just as an animal but with more intelligence. The eye must be opened. It is a new ground and way of perception, by which we can even see the kingdom of God.

122 There was neither holiness nor righteousness before the fall. The original state was something distinct from both. Adam was innocent, but not properly righteous or holy. To apply innocence to God, or to the Lord Jesus, would be absurd. God is holy; seeing what is bad, and abhorring it, which holiness, negatively at least, consists in. A righteous man judges what is contrary to justice, and hates it. An innocent man did not know things in themselves good and evil, though, of course, he knew that it was his duty to obey God. Adam's sin was in trying to be like God; our goodness is in desiring to be like Him. Ought we not to seek to be like God - to imitate Him, as Paul exhorts? We are called by glory and virtue, and are seeking to remind our souls that God's counsel is that we shall be conformed to the image of God's Son. This one thing we should do, "forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before." Adam knew nothing of this; his whole moral nature was entirely different. In sinning man got his conscience, and was ruined in getting it, because it was a bad one. Consequently he was afraid of the God he wished to be like. He lost innocence, and we never regain it, but we are renewed after the second Adam. We are, after the image of God, created in righteousness and true holiness, made partakers of the divine nature, and brought to judge of sin as God judges it, and to love holiness as He loves it.

It is after God we are created again; Eph. 4:24. Not only have we, as men, the knowledge of good and evil, which made the man afraid of God, and hide himself, but now in being born again it is another thing. We have life in our souls in a divine way.

123 We have the holy moral nature that God has, and in this nature there is a positive delight in the righteousness of God, which does not condemn it, because it is the same. This new nature feeds upon, and delights in, what is of God, and is satisfied with the object before us, even Christ Himself. God has chosen us in Him that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love - He has us before Him in this the image of His own nature. In Christ we have all that God delights in brought out and displayed in the man. He is the perfect and blessed display of all God is, and He is the expression before God of what He has made us to God. We have the image of God in the man, and, more than this, we have what man is for God.

This quickening of the Spirit has a double character; it is death in both. We are dead, and are to reckon ourselves "dead indeed unto sin," etc. This is liberty. But there is death practically, or putting to death, and that is what we do not like, for this is the cross. We like the liberty, but not the mortifying, or putting to death, our members on earth.

The sentence of death that God has passed on flesh and sin is an unchangeable sentence, and it is a positive blessing to have done with the flesh, for it is a condemned thing. The sentence was executed upon Christ, the new man, that we might live after the power of that new Man - Christ. There is an important point as to this, which is often confounded and mistaken. We must live that we may die - not die that we may live, as is often represented. Men talk of death before they have life, but they are wrong. Death, morally, is the consequence of having life. And this is just the difference between a monk - not using the word offensively - and a Christian. As a monk I mortify myself in order that I may live, instead of first having life, as a Christian, from God, that I may die. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter," etc. (v. 5). "Of his own will begat he us by the word of truth." God has begotten us by the word. "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." "He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true." "The word giveth light and understanding to the simple," and the effect of the light's coming in by the word is to bring the judgment of everything in man, as it brings delight in that which is of God.

124 "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." There is the communication of a new nature in believing; and, when born of God, the truth sanctifies and cleanses. There is "the washing of water by the word"; but this cannot be till after we are born of the Spirit by the word. There would be no sense in saying, that which is born of water is water; but that which is born of the Spirit is of the spiritual nature of God, not of man's nature.

"The living water" made the woman at the well, to whom Jesus spake, hate herself. It detects what is in man. Hence Christ could say to His disciples, "Ye are clean through the word which I have spoken to you." In the new and holy nature, in which I am created of God in Christ, I can now take up everything that I delight in, and I can judge everything contrary to it. Thus the word has a cleansing power. Baptism may be the expression and figure of it here, as the Lord's supper embodies the truth of John 6 ("whoso eateth my flesh," etc.) - though I do not say that the Lord referred to either institution, but to the reality of which each is the sign. The substance of the thing is not the putting away the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who came by water - not by water only, but by water and blood. It will not do to look at ourselves with approbation. See what is said of the king of Tyre. (Ezek. 28). We must not look at self, nor take pleasure in it. We want an object outside ourselves - even the renewed man does. The moment there is the communication of the divine nature, there must be delight in Christ Himself.

This is brought out in this double way in John 5 and 6. In chapter 5 there are dead sinners quickened, or raised. This speaks of God communicating the divine nature. I do not speak of faith now, but it is God's own power that is spoken of - God quickening. In chapter 6 we get faith still more fully insisted on: and here is the object of my faith presented. This is perfection - to be so occupied with Christ, as to be forgetful of self. While told to reckon ourselves dead, we are looked on as dead already in Christ. How is this? Christ is looked on as coming down into the place of death, that there, where I was without stirring, Christ might be and rise up out of it for my deliverance. Because of what He suffered on the cross, as manifested in the power of His resurrection, "old things have passed away, and all things have become new." God will have none of the old thing now. It is defiled and corrupted and good for nothing.

125 "All things have become new," not renewed. "In him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." He is the eternal life that was with the Father and is manifested unto us. This is not the man that fell out of paradise! How then can God and man be connected? "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone." There was the inseparable barrier of man's will on one side, and the power of death on the other. Therefore he says, "I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" But "if it die (the corn of wheat), it bringeth forth much fruit." "The exceeding greatness of his power," etc. (Eph. 1:19), is in resurrection. Then, passing over the allusion to the church, in the next chapter we read, "You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins," etc. In connection with, and the basis of, it all is Christ, who is dead and risen, with whom we are quickened together. The second Adam has not His place as Head of the family, except by death first. Why? Because redemption could not have been wrought. Nor would it have been, as now, a question of God's righteousness. These being accomplished, He is entirely and in everything fitted to be the head of the new creation. This new link is wrought by the word. The living word, by the Spirit, is the power, and resurrection-life with Christ is the standing into which we are brought.

Christ, we may observe, speaks to Nicodemus about the things that he, as a Jew, ought to have understood. (Compare Ezekiel 36.) He says, "If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" God's earthly things were not evil or fleshly things, but the promised earthly portion which the Jews were to look for. In the latter day they must be sprinkled with water, and have a new heart from the Spirit, before they can inherit. This Nicodemus should have known. Then there are the heavenly things, which are better. "The wind bloweth where it listeth," etc. There is the sovereign acting of His grace. He will take any poor sinners of the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, and bring them into the blessing He has to give. "God so loved the world." This goes beyond the Jews. It is not here that God so loved Israel.

126 For all alike, Christ was needed. For the best, the Son of man must be lifted up, and for the worst God would give His only-begotten Son. Under promises, law, or nature, death must come in, if man is to be saved. In nothing can they be taken up in their own title.

What are we brought into by that which Christ has done? He says, "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen." Here was the double revelation of God. Christ is speaking as a divine Person, and as one who has seen divine glory. "No man hath seen God at any time: the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." He knew, and saw, as One familiar and at ease with the Father and the Holy Ghost, with the glory of the Godhead. He was Himself in the unity of the divine essence. And though we were not only men outside it all but fallen men, yet now, as born of God, what are we not brought into! We have resurrection-life in Him; we are one spirit with the Lord. It is not the poor thing of the mere renewal of good qualities; but it is Christ, the Son, Himself making us partakers of His own things.

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