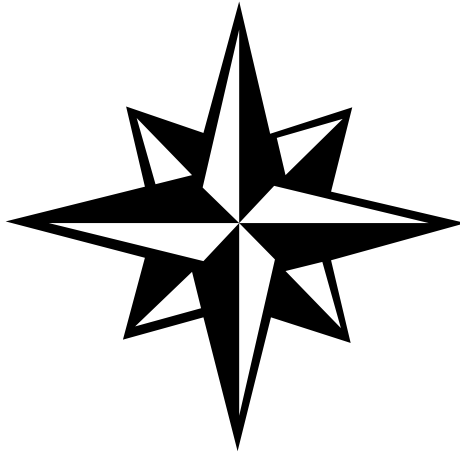


BORN FROM ABOVE

*God's Wondrous Work Of
Creating Believers*



Barry McGee

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Published by
Redding Community Bible Church
rcbchurch.org

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INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of “the new birth” is one of the most glorious truths in all of Scripture. This doctrine magnifies the grace of God. It reveals God as the one who transforms human souls, giving them new spiritual affections and abilities that they did not previously possess. The Apostle Peter was big on magnifying the grace of God as seen in “the new birth.” It astounded Peter that God would so bring sinners out of spiritual death and give them an eternal inheritance in His Son Jesus Christ. In his first epistle, Peter busts out with this exclamation of praise:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance, which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you (1:3-4).

Do you see it? Peter is worshipping God here. That’s what it is to “bless” God. And, the item upon which Peter’s attention is particularly focused is that, in His great mercy, God “*has caused us to be born again to a living hope!*” In other words, Peter blesses God for this fact—he thanks Him for it—he *worships* God because of it! That God would so mercifully cause sinners to be “born again” to a living hope filled Peter’s heart with gratitude and adoration. He couldn’t help but bust out in praise! So it should be for any believer in Christ when they realize just what it is that God has done within them and for them. Do you, my dear reader, worship Him for this fact?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE MEAN BY “BORN AGAIN”?

Part of our problem in understanding and appreciating this truth may be due in part to how our culture has popularized the phrase, “born again.” In 1976, Time magazine proclaimed the “70s as the ‘Born Again’ decade.” Jimmy Carter was the first self-proclaimed “born again” President of the United States. Subsequently, many other celebrities picked up the phrase to identify themselves. Perhaps due to overuse, the phrase became a religious buzz-word and its true meaning became fuzzy.

Biblically speaking, though, to be “born again” is a profound and rich reality! Simply put, to be “born again” is to receive inner spiritual life by the sovereign gracious work of God. It is a complete inner “spiritual overhaul,” so to speak. In his book, *Essential Truths Of The Christian Faith*, R.C. Sproul makes the following helpful remarks,

Regeneration is the theological term used to describe rebirth (or, to be ‘born again’). It refers to a new generating, a new genesis, a new beginning. It is more than ‘turning over a new leaf’; it marks the beginning of a new life in a radically renewed person. . . . Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit upon those who are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-10). The Spirit recreates the human heart, quickening it from spiritual death to spiritual life. Regenerate people are new creations. Where formerly they had no disposition, inclination, or desire for the things of God, now they are disposed and inclined toward God. In regeneration, God plants a

desire for Himself in the human heart that otherwise would not be there.¹

Sounds remarkable, doesn't it? Clear back in the Old Testament, this "spiritual overhaul" was something God predicted He would be doing. Through Ezekiel the prophet, God said,

Moreover, I will give you a *new* heart and put a *new* spirit within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances (36:27-27, italics mine).

Now, "heart," here, does not refer to that "coronary pump" in our chests we typically associate with a heart. But, as used in the Bible, it means the innermost identity of a person—the "real you"—the person behind the skin and other externals. As you can see from what God says through Ezekiel, the new birth (being "born again") is nothing less than the radical transformation of a person's inner being. A person who is "born again" is not the same person they were before! They have an entirely new *Godward* disposition (a new heart), whereby they love God and desire to fulfill His will. As Louis Berhof described,

Regeneration consists in the implanting of the principle of the new spiritual life in man, in a radical change of the governing disposition of the soul, which, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, gives birth to a life that moves in a Godward direction. In principle this change affects the whole man: the intellect, . . . and the feelings or emotions.²

This change is so radical that the Apostle Paul wrote,

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This is what it means to be “born again.” It is to become “a new creature!” But there is more to this verse than what might appear on the surface. John MacArthur comments,

The transformation wrought by the new birth is not only an instantaneous miracle but also a lifelong process of sanctification (I.e., complete life change). For those so transformed, everything changes; the old things have passed away. Old values, ideas, plans, loves, desires, and beliefs vanish, replaced by the new things that accompany salvation. The perfect tense of the verb “have come” indicates a past act with continuing results in the present. God plants new desires, loves, inclinations, and truths in the redeemed, so that they live in the midst of the old creation with a new creation perspective. That perspective, as it is nourished and developed, helps believers gain victory in the battle against sin and conforms them to the image of Jesus Christ.³

Are you beginning to see more and more why the Apostle Peter praised God for this truth? Again, the doctrine of “the new birth” is one of the most glorious truths in Scripture, magnifying God’s grace!

THE ABSOLUTE NECESSITY OF BEING “BORN AGAIN”

However, a person might ask, “But why? Why must a person be ‘born again?’” Well, we must realize the description the Bible gives us of people in their na-

tural “spiritual” condition (that is, the spiritual condition they possess upon entry into this world), or we will never understand the biblical answer to this question. Far from being neutral or slightly wounded, in need of a little divine help, ours is the most dire “spiritual” condition imaginable! At least 3 facts stand out from Scripture.

First, a person in their natural spiritual condition is enslaved to sin. That is, they are incapable of living life in a way that pleases and honors God, but instead habitually live life apart from giving God His rightful place. In Ephesians 2:1, Paul gives us this simple pointed description of our natural condition,

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins (also see Romans 6:15-22).

Get that. Before being made alive in Christ, a person is dead in sins. Sin is all they know, all they can do. They are slaves to it. From God’s perspective, they are dead in it. If we are not “born-again” spiritually, that is our present condition—*dead in sins!* We are living life on our own terms apart from God’s will. Apart from being made alive in Christ, a person might try to clean themselves up. They might try and get religious for awhile—maybe even for a long while, but sooner or later they will return to what they really love and want (2 Peter 2:20-22).

Second, a person in his/her natural condition is blind to spiritual truth and incapable of truly responding to that truth. They really don’t get it! Now, please be sure you understand that this is not something I’ve made up. God’s word says it is so.

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he *cannot* understand them, because they are spiritually appraised (1 Corinthians 2:14, italics mine).

In other words, dear person, unless God first makes a person spiritually alive and opens their eyes to the preciousness of His Son, they cannot possibly comprehend His truth in a saving way. That's what Jesus was getting at when He said, "No one *can* come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44, italics mine).

And third, even worse, a person in their natural spiritual condition is not only incapable of responding to the truth in a saving way, they are antagonistic toward it, having no desire at all for the person of God. In Romans 8, Paul gives us this description of the natural person:

For those who are according to the flesh (i.e., people in their natural condition) set their minds on the things of the flesh, . . . For the mind set on the flesh is death . . . , because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, *for it is not even able to do so* (verses 5-7, italics mine).

Also, back in Romans 3:11-12, Paul said of people in their natural condition,

There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one.

WOW! *Not even one!!* As you can see, people in their natural spiritual state are in a totally lost condition. While every unregenerate person (I.e., not "born-

again”) is not as bad as they possibly can be (there is always room for “*deprovement*” as John Gerstner used to say), they are, apart from God’s grace, utterly incapable of living the spiritual life that pleases God. Unless God changes their dispositions, inclinations, capabilities, and desires, they will most certainly remain in their lost condition and reject Him as the Lord of their lives. This is why the “new birth” is an absolute necessity!

Some might ask, though, “Surely, aren’t there *some* people who will get to go to heaven without being ‘born again?’” However, in the third chapter of John’s gospel we are told of an *ultra* religious guy named Nicodemus who came to Jesus for a “nighttime” interview. Now, according to many religious standards, if there was anyone who should have been able to gain entrance into heaven by his righteous life, it was Nicodemus!! He was the pre-eminent teacher of God’s Law at that time. But what did Jesus tell him? Jesus said,

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he *cannot* see the kingdom of God (v. 3, italics mine).

As you can see, Jesus clearly denies the possibility of any unregenerate person of being able to see God’s kingdom (I.e., participation in God’s saving rule). Jesus took this truth so seriously that He preceded it with the oath, “Truly, truly.” In other words, this is an inviolable principle. No one . . . absolutely no one is able to see (or, enter, v. 5) God’s kingdom unless they are “born again” (the better translation here being, “born *from above*”).

There are not two classes of people who go to heaven—those “born again” and those not. Only those who are “born again” receive eternal life and go to heaven! Regarding Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus, George Whitefield, the great evangelist of the 18th century, made the following profound remarks,

It is very observable, that our divine Master, in the famous passage before (us), concerning the absolute necessity of regeneration, does not say, ‘unless a man be born again, he SHALL NOT,’ but ‘unless a man be born again, he CANNOT enter into the kingdom of God.’ It is founded in the very nature of things, that unless we have dispositions wrought in us suitable to the objects that are to entertain us, we can take no manner of complacency (i.e., comfort) or satisfaction in them. For instance: what delight can the most harmonious music afford to a deaf, or what pleasure can the most excellent picture give to a blind man? Can a tasteless palate relish the richest dainties, or a filthy swine be pleased with the finest garden of flowers? NO! And what reason can be assigned for it? An answer is ready; because they have neither of them any tempers of mind correspondent or agreeable to what they are to be diverted with. And thus it is with the soul hereafter; for death makes no more alteration in the soul, than as it enlarges its faculties, and makes it capable of receiving deeper impressions either of pleasure or pain. If it delighted to converse with God here, it will be transported with the sight of His glorious majesty hereafter. If it was pleased with the communion of saints on earth, it will be infinitely more so with the communion and society of holy angels, and the spirits of just men made perfect in heaven. But, if the opposite of all this be true, we may assure ourselves the soul could not be happy, was God Himself to admit it (which He never will do) into the regions of the blessed.⁴

In other words, there absolutely must be a radical transformation of spiritual disposition and desires if a person is to see and delight in the things of God. Without a new heart, their disposition and desires remain the same. Whitefield was so burdened about the necessity of “the new birth” that he regularly emphasized its truth within his sermons. On one occasion a person asked, “Why, Mr. Whitefield, why do you so often preach on ‘Ye must be born again?’” “Because,” replied Mr. Whitefield, looking solemnly into the face of his questioner, “Ye must be born again!”

*WONDROUS TRUTHS REGARDING
BEING “BORN AGAIN”*

From Jesus’ remarks to Nicodemus and other portions of Scripture, several other things stand out for comment on the doctrine of “the new birth.” First, from the grammar used in John 3:3 (which is not apparent in our English language), it is clear that being “born again” (“born from above”) is not a process, but instantaneous. In other words, one isn’t *being* “born again” or in the process of being “born anew.” Either they are “born again” or they aren’t. Either they are dead in trespasses and sins, or they are alive to God in righteousness. There is no middle ground. The new birth is the *decisive* instantaneous work of God! Yes, the experience of a person’s conversion to Christ may seem to them, and others, very much a process as they exercise faith and repent of sin. However, behind and beneath the scenes, either they

are spiritually alive or they are spiritually dead.

Another thing we notice in the grammar of John 3:3 is that “born again/from above” is stated in the “passive voice,” not the “active voice.” This is important! When a verb is passive, it means that the subject is being acted upon rather than performing the action. Therefore, when Jesus says, “unless one is born again/from above,” He is not telling Nicodemus that he (Nicodemus) must do something. Rather, He is telling him that he (Nicodemus) needs God to do something to or for him! What we see here is that, rather than ourselves, God is the initiator and agent in the work of regeneration (causing people to be “born again”)! While there is certainly a role we subsequently play in our conversion and growth (believing on Christ; repenting of sin; pursuing daily obedience; etc.), the work of regeneration is totally one-sided. God and God alone must do it! It isn’t *synergistic* (us and God), but *monergistic* (God alone). This is clearly seen elsewhere in Scripture:

- John 1:12-13, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*” (emphases mine).
- Romans 9:16, “So then, it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs *but on God Who has mercy*” (Italics mine).
- Ephesians 2:4-5, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, *even*

when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ” (Italics mine. Notice the timing Paul emphasizes here — “*even when we were dead*”).

- 1 Peter 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy *has caused us to be born again . . .*” (Italics mine; also see Titus 3:5).

Now, what we might not realize is that this view of God “one-sidedly” initiating and accomplishing our rebirth is very contrary to the common view. Many believe and have been taught, not that God did the decisive work here, but that we did!! “I believed and was ‘born again.’” “I initiated my rebirth!” However, such thinking is contradicted by the witness of Scripture.

Stop and think about it. From what Scripture says of a person in their natural spiritual condition, how many, apart from God transforming their hearts, would actually yearn for the Person of God and exercise saving faith in Christ? How many? That’s right. Zero. Man, in his natural condition, is incapable of doing anything spiritually pleasing toward God. And, faith is certainly pleasing to God (see Hebrews 11:6). Thus, as none of us had anything to do with initiating our first natural birth, so no one has any part in initiating their spiritual rebirth. The work of a person’s “rebirth” is wholly one-sided. God must do it!!

But let’s not be confused! Yes, a person must believe upon Christ in order to be saved (Romans 10:9). That is the command, to believe in/upon Christ.

And, we must certainly do that in order to be saved (John 3:18). However, the command is not to be “born again!” That is something we cannot fulfill. That is the mysterious sovereign work of God’s Spirit. As Jesus told Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

It is evident, then, from Scripture, that being “born again” *precedes* our demonstration of saving faith. Indeed, in the new birth God gives a person the very ability to believe on Christ!! Faith itself is the gift of God (see Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29; and, 2 Peter 1:1). As John Piper states, “I believed. It was my choice to believe. But my choice was the gift of God; the effect and not the cause of new birth.”⁵

The reason why (people) often think that regeneration comes after saving faith is that they *see the results* (such as a love for God and His Word, and turning from sin) *after* people come to faith, and they think that regeneration must therefore have come after saving faith. . . In fact, we can never know that we have been regenerated until we come to faith in Christ, for that is the outward evidence of this hidden, inward work of God. Once we do come to saving faith in Christ, we know that we have been born again.⁶

This, then, is what we believe is the emphasis of Scripture — that God’s work of regeneration must, of necessity, precede our active expression of faith. However, at this point, someone might object, saying, “But that’s contradictory!! On the one hand, you say a person must repent and believe, and, if they

don't, they will perish. But on the other hand, you say they can't repent and believe unless God first makes it possible through the new birth. This can't be true!" That, though, is exactly the case. It is what John Duncan described as "the Gospel Vice,"

As long as I am told that I must come to God, and that I can come, I am left to suppose that some good thing, or some power of good remains in me, and I arrogate to myself what belongs to Jehovah. The creature is exalted and God is robbed of His glory. If, on the other hand, I am told that I cannot come to God, but not also that I must come, I am left to rest contented at a distance from God, I am not responsible for my rebellion. But if we preach that sinners can't come, and yet must come, then is the honor of God vindicated and the sinner is shut up. Man must be so shut up that he must come to Christ, and yet know that he cannot. He must come to Christ, or he will look to another, when there is no other to whom he may come; he cannot come, or he will look to himself. *This is the gospel vice, to shut up men to faith* (Italics mine).⁷

Why does God "shut up men to faith" (or the need for faith)? Well, our natural human pride may not like the answer to this, but it is so that man is humbled and God, rather than ourselves, gets all the credit for salvation. This priceless salvation belongs to Him. It is His to grant to whom He will. He will get all the glory for any who go to heaven. This is the consistent witness of Scripture:

- 1 Corinthians 1:30-31, "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, Who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

- Ephesians 1:11-12, “(In Him) we also have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose Who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.”

At the same time, let us be very clear that, according to the Scriptures, when God causes a person to be “born again,” such spiritual transformation does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in conjunction with the Word of God (whether proclaimed or written) and a person’s exposure to that Word. This is part of the reason why it is so vitally important that believers share the good news of Jesus Christ! Apart from the truth of God’s Word, no one is “born-again” (Romans 10:14-17). At least a couple of verses make clear the role of God’s Word in this matter:

- 1 Peter 1:23, “For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, *through the living and enduring Word of God*” (Italics mine).
- James 1:18, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth *by the Word of Truth . . .*” (Italics mine).

Do you see it? As a person is exposed to the truth, God (the Holy Spirit) takes up that word and, by it, performs an internal hidden (mysterious) transformation whereby a person is enabled to say, “Yes, that is what I believe!” A beautiful picture of this is seen in Acts 16:14 where we are told that the Lord opened the heart of a woman named Lydia “to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” Thus, as Lydia was there listening Paul preach, God reached right into the very core of her being, transformed (opened) her heart,

and gave her the very ability to respond to the things Paul said. And, what happened in Lydia's case is no different from what happens within the heart of any person who responds in true faith toward Christ!

Finally, we must emphasize that "the new birth" is not the end, but the beginning of a whole new life in relationship with God. Theologian, Millard Erickson, helpfully states,

Although regeneration is instantaneously complete, it is not an end in itself. As a change of spiritual impulses, regeneration is the beginning of a process of growth which continues throughout one's lifetime. This process of spiritual maturation is sanctification. Having noted that his readers were formerly dead but are now alive, Paul adds, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). He speaks in Philippians 1:6 of (God) continuing and completing what has been begun: "And I am sure that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Regeneration is a beginning, but there is much more yet to come. The manifestations of this spiritual ripening are called "fruit of the Spirit." They are the direct opposite of the fruit of the old nature, the flesh (Galatians 5:19-23).⁸

CONCLUSION

When we consider what Scripture teaches regarding "the new birth," it's no wonder Peter broke forth in praise to God for it! So will we if our hearts have been changed by God's grace. I ask you, dear reader, is such grace present in you? Have you been "born again?" Do you see the proofs of "the new birth" present in your life? What are those "proofs?" What are the validating marks of having received spiritual life

from God? First, there is a recognition of your sinfulness and need for God's forgiving grace, and a break from your prior life of sin (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Second, a "born-again" person is a person who loves Jesus Christ and trusts Him (believes on Him) for what He accomplished for sinners in His death, burial, and resurrection. Specifically, a "born again" believer trusts that Jesus took their penalty for sin upon Himself and that the perfect life He lived is credited to them (2 Corinthians 5:21). And third, while a person "born from above" is by no means perfect, they will yearn to grow closer to Christ, and will, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, make progress in sanctification (I.e., holiness, 1 John 2:4-6). Such are the proofs of being "born-again." So I ask you again, "Are you born-again?" If you are, praise and thank God!! It is by His *sheer* grace that these things are true of you.

However, if you recognize that these things are not true of your life, *Oh dear sinner*, look to Christ and cry out to Him from your pitiable helpless condition!! While you may not truly comprehend the Bible (God's Word), expose yourself to it's truth repeatedly. In particular, read the gospels in the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). They will tell you about Jesus. Also, listen to biblical preaching. Confer with believers who can help guide you in how the Bible answers the questions you may have. Remember, it is through the truth of the Bible that God causes new life to be brought to a person's soul! Respond to the light (truth) that you have and you will receive more light (see Proverbs

2:3-5). If you are not “born-again,” do not merrily go about your life as though everything was just “peachy!” That is the worst thing you can do! You must certainly repent of your sin and believe in Jesus or else you will perish!!

To bring this booklet to a close, may we take to heart some things C.H. Spurgeon preached more than 100 years ago,

Do not think Christians are made by education; they are made by creation. You may wash a corpse as long as you please, and that corpse could be clean, but you cannot wash life into it! You may deck it in flowers, and robe it in scarlet and fine linen, but you cannot make it live! **The vital spark must come from above!**

Regeneration is not of the will of man, nor of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but by the power and energy of the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of God alone!

See then, the ruin of nature and the freeness of grace! Void and dark, a chaos given up to be covered with blackness and darkness forever, and, while as yet it is unseeking God, the light arises, and the promise is fulfilled, “I am found of them that sought Me not; I said, behold Me! behold Me! to a people that were not a people.”

While we were lying in our blood, filthily polluted, defiled, He passed by, and He said in the sovereignty of his love, “Live!” and we do live. The whole must be traced to sovereign grace!

From this sacred well of discriminating distinguishing grace we must draw water this morning, and we must pour it out, saying, “Oh Lord, I will praise your name, for the first origin of my light was your sovereign purpose, and nothing in me.”⁹

Notes

1. R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths Of The Christian Faith*, Tyndale Pub., p. 171
2. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans Pub., p. 468
3. John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, Moody Pub., p. 196
4. George Whitefield, quoted from his sermon “*On Regeneration*”
5. John Piper, quoted from his sermon “*God’s Great Mercy and Our New Birth*”
6. Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, Zondervan Pub., p. 303
7. John Duncan’s quote found in Iain H. Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism: Old Truths for a New Awakening*, Banner of Truth Pub., p. 18
8. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker Pub., Vol. 3, p. 945
9. C.H. Spurgeon, quote from his sermon “*Light, Natural and Spiritual*” (No. 660)