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The New Birth

Christ began His public three-year ministry by cleansing the temple (cf. John 2:13-25).¹ Shortly after that we are told that Christ entered into a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus in which we read of Christ's first public exchange! And it was about the new birth.

John 3:1-4, 9-10, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of

the Jews; this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ [after a little more explanation, the text says...] Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?’”

From this exchange it should be obvious that an understanding of the new birth is of major importance. It constituted the first major address of Christ in His work as the Messiah! It was on account of an ignorance of this doctrine that Christ gave His first public rebuke to a Jewish teacher!

In this regard think of it: if a teacher of the law only familiar with the Old Testament was rebuked by Christ for not understanding the new birth, how much more ought we to understand this doctrine who have the entirety of the New Testament? And have studied the Bible now for years? Truly, it behooves us to have a good understanding of the glorious teaching and reality of the new birth — NOT simply so that we can say we understand it, BUT so that we might be equipped to live the Christian life in a hostile world!

That is why I am so thankful for Peter’s teaching in the text before us. After his initial introduction where he gave the essence of what we need to know if we are to prove faithful to the Lord in our time on the earth, Peter now turns to a fleshing out of his initial message. The first theme he addressed — much as our Lord when He began His public ministry — was the doctrine of The New Birth,

- What is it?
- Why is it so important for us as we live as pilgrims in this world?
- What difference ought it to make in our lives as we endeavor to serve the Lord in the Jerusalem in which we live?

We are going to address these questions beginning with a definition of the new birth.

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.”

The word here is ἀναγεννάω (*anagennaō*) which is a compound of two words: γεννάω (*gennaō*) which refers to the begetting of a child (with emphasis on the father’s work) and ἀνά (*ana*) which as a prefix means “up, again, or back.” Together the word refers to a literal re-conception, and so to a literal re-birthing (which is why, no doubt, Nicodemus got tripped up here).

Now with Nicodemus, we intuitively know that this can NOT refer to a literal rebirthing of an

individual. Just as Nicodemus said, a grown individual cannot enter their mother's womb a second time and be reborn. So therefore Peter/Christ must be using the expression in reference to a figurative rebirth. If that is your thinking, you would be wrong (in fact, this is how liberals take this word; they understand the rebirth as simply a new beginning, the turning of a corner!). Yet get this, the doctrine of the new birth in Scripture does NOT have reference to a figurative, metaphorical new beginning. RATHER (we are back to where we began), it references a literal re-birthing... a literal reconstituting of a dead person into life!

1 Corinthians 15:20, "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep."

This is referencing the New Birth... or what is known in Scripture as the *Doctrine of Regeneration*. When Christ rose from the dead, He did NOT *figuratively* rise; He REALLY rose! That which once was dead was brought back to life. The dead cells in His body were regenerated!

And as Christ's resurrection here is said to be the "first fruits," that is what happens to us upon salvation. That which was dead literally is regenerated!

Romans 8:11, "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you."- in theological studies we call this "the vivifying work of the Holy Spirit"

A work in which the Spirit of God gives life to that which is dead!

Colossians 2:13a, "And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him..."

Once again, the language here focusses on being made alive, just as was Christ when He rose from the dead. From these passages it should be obvious that the New Birth revolves around the reanimation and so the regeneration of that which was dead!

Now if this occurred in your life at a young age, you most likely won't remember it. But that doesn't matter. If you are saved, then there was a time in your life that you were reborn! In this regard, consider with me the following three elements to the new birth.

The Context of the New Birth, Genesis 2:15-17

After creation, God entered formally into a relationship with man. Here is how it happened:

Genesis 2:15-17, "Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.”

We know this as the Covenant of Works whereby God entered into a relationship with man, a relationship predicated/based upon our obedience. If Adam obeyed God perfectly, he would live. If he disobeyed, Adam and all of mankind would die. You know what happened. Adam rebelled against God. Yet upon first glance it doesn't seem as though he immediately died. In fact, after the fall, Adam lived another 900 plus years!² So what did God mean when He said that

Genesis 2:17, “...in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.”?

From the rest of Scripture we learn that on the day that Adam rebelled against God, death entered the world (Romans 5:12) manifesting itself four different ways. The first has been identified as

1. Spiritual Death — This references the death of the soul and its consequent enslavement to Satan. Paul describes the non-Christian as being:

Ephesians 4:18a, “...darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God.”

This passage speaks of the non-Christian as one who is dead to the life Adam enjoyed with God prior to the fall. In the garden Adam was NOT “darkened in his understanding, excluded from the life of God.” RATHER, Adam enjoyed an existence where he could have fellowship with God and so walk with Him in the cool of the day (cf. Genesis 3:8). Yet when he rebelled against God, all this ended. No longer was Adam free to relate with God as a living being. He now was dead! Speaking of the non-believer, Paul wrote this:

Ephesians 2:12, “*Remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

Why was that? Why was man without hope in the world? Because in Adam's death, mankind became enslaved to Satan and so a servant of death. Speaking of every individual prior to salvation Paul wrote this:

Ephesians 2:1-3, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.”

When Adam violated God's command in the Garden, Adam and so the human race died spiritually... they died to God! As a result, they became literal slaves of Satan.

2. There is a second aspect to the death Adam received as a result of his rebellion! It is known as Moral Death.

This has reference to the loss that Adam suffered when it came to the moral character of God which was formed in him when he was created in the image of God, specifically righteousness, holiness, and knowledge. In light of this, notice that which is restored when a person is born again. Paul exhorted the Ephesians this way:

Ephesians 4:24, “And put on the new self, which in *the likeness of* God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.”

When a person is reborn in Christ that which was lost at the fall — God’s moral image — is restored which here includes moral blamelessness and holiness. Yet there is more. In addition to “righteousness and holiness” there is the gift of spiritual understanding.

Colossians 3:9-10, “Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge [and once again] according to the image of the One who created him.”

From these passages it is clear that the death Adam suffered at the Fall included the loss of the moral Image of God. That means as fallen beings, no longer does the nonbeliever possess righteousness, holiness, or knowledge!

3. Thirdly, Adam’s death also included physical death, that is the degradation of his body in which every cell eventually falls apart.

Romans 8:20-21, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

From Adam onward, except in the case of Enoch and Elijah, every man who has ever lived on this earth has suffered physical death. Yet physical death doesn’t begin the moment a person physically dies. The process of degradation begins the moment we are born (which is why our bodies wear out). Physical death simply is the climax of this process!

In this regard, Adam most certainly suffered physical death the moment he sinned, it just took 900 plus years for the process of decay eventually to take his life!

4. Now lastly and the most serious of all the deaths a person can suffer is eternal death.

This is the “second death” which speaks of eternal separation from God in which the individual suffers under God’s wrath for eternity (we are talking here about hell and so the Lake of Fire)! In contrast to those who have been reborn in Christ, John declares plainly:

Revelation 21:8, "...the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Talk about bad news! Yet that is the context out of which a person is delivered through the work of Christ. Accordingly, when the Bible talks about regeneration or vivification, it is talking about this four-fold death!

From this you must see that the new birth does reference a literal regeneration! Accordingly, when a person is born again he does NOT simply receive a new status before God. RATHER, there is an implanting in him of life! He has become that which he was not before,

2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

Do you understand what this means? The text here is NOT talking in riddles. When God works salvation in the life of a sinner, the individual literally becomes that which he was NOT before: alive in Christ!

No doubt that is why Peter began this epistle telling the believers in Asia Minor that God had chosen them from the beginning to be aliens and strangers on this earth (vv. 1-2). The world suffers deadness to this hour. How can any alive in Christ find this world to be their home?

That's the context of the new birth. Notice the author of the new birth.

The Author of the New Birth, 1 Peter 1:3c; John 1;12-13; Titus 3:5; John 6:44a, 65

When a person goes from death to life it is NOT because the sinner chose God or asked God to save him. RATHER, the new birth is the exclusive choice and work of the Lord! Look at our text again...

1 Peter 1:3c, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again..."

There is no question that it is God the Father who is behind the New Birth in an individual's life! In fact, this truth is found throughout Scripture. Again, turning to the apostle of the new birth, we read this:

John 1:12-13, "But as many as received Him [this references a faith], to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name [this explains the language of 'receiving Him.' By this John is talking about saving faith. So where does it come from?], who were born [this references the New Birth. In this regard, notice where this New Birth comes from...] not of blood [through any racial or ethnic heritage], nor of the will of the flesh [through personal desire], nor of the will of

man [through any man-made system], BUT OF GOD.”

There is no question when it comes to the new birth. It rests with God alone! Prior to our exercise of faith, God must vivify the dead individual. This new birth then gives the newborn eyes to see, ears to hear, and grace to respond to the gospel!

This is so important because it completely removes from the hand of man any part or cooperation when it comes to his status as a son or daughter of God. From beginning to end, the new birth is the work of God alone! Accordingly, if God chose to resurrect you from your deadened state, there is nothing you can do, now that you are alive, that could forfeit the life you now enjoy! In light of the spiritual warfare that rages around us, we need to hear this!

=Titus 3:5: speaking of God, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”- once again the language here is the language of the New Birth. When a person transitions from death to life, it is NOT on account of anything they do (it is “not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness”). RATHER the new birth is the exclusive work of God (here effected by the regenerating work of the Spirit of God)! In the context of rejection where many chose NOT to follow Christ, Jesus was not alarmed. For when it comes to the new birth, the choice and impetus comes only from God.

John 6:65, “And He was saying, ‘For this reason [why He was not bothered by the many that left] I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father.’”

That is why Christ was NOT alarmed at the diminishing crowds. You may plant and another may water, but “it is God who causes the growth” (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6)!

From all of this we conclude that the Author when it comes to the new birth is NOT man, BUT God! In this regard J. I. Packer wrote:

Infants do not induce, or cooperate in, their own procreation and birth; no more can those who are ‘dead in trespasses and sins’ prompt the quickening operation of God’s Spirit within them (see Ephesians 2:1-10). Spiritual vivification is a free, and to man mysterious, exercise of divine power (John 3:8), not explicable in terms of the combination or cultivation of existing human resources (John 3:6), not caused or induced by any human efforts (John 1:12-13) or merits (Titus 3:3-7), and not, therefore, to be equated with, or attributed to, any of the experiences, decisions, and acts to which it gives rise and by which it may be known to have taken place. (Treier, 2017, p. 925)

As that is the case, when it comes to Christian ministry, what is our obligation? Simply to be faithful (cf. John 17:3)! We can’t talk a dead man unto life. There is nothing we can do to stop a hostile world from persecuting us. We are going to be hated. Yet none of this alarms us for

we know that the race and so victory belongs to God!

Finally, consider with me the effects of the new birth.

The Effects of the New Birth

On account of the implanting of the new life, the child of God enjoys multiple benefits! See, you may not remember when you were born again. Yet if you have been born again you have that which is much more important than a dramatic conversion story. On account of the new birth the defilement of his heart is cleansed or “washed” away. (Ezekiel 36:25-26; John 3:5; Titus 3:5). Speaking of the New Birth, God made this promise in Ezekiel’s day.

Ezekiel 36:25-28: “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 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. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. And you will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.”

This is why “obedience” (cf. 1 Peter 1:2) is part of God’s purpose for all in Christ. We have received a new heart such that now we NOT ONLY will, BUT are able to serve the Lord at His bidding, albeit not perfectly which is why the other grand theme of Redemption is the “sprinkling of blood,” 1 Peter 1:2. Such is the glorious fruit of the new birth!

The spiritual New Born is enabled to “see” and to “enter” the kingdom of God by faith (John 3:3, 5).

John 3:3, “Jesus answered and said to him [Nicodemus], ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

I remember as a young Christian marveling at the glimpse that God had given me of eternity. I honestly felt as if the Lord in Christ had lifted me up to gaze upon a glorious paradise on the other side of a massive mountain and then placed me back in the present. I was mindful that at every moment I could see that which the non-believer could not see on account of his sin! Oh Christian, there was no turning back! Life, for me, was forever changed!

He is also enabled to believe in Jesus (John 1:12-13) and to believe that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 5:1).

He is able to love others, particularly other Christians (1 John 4:7; 5:1)- which is why love is a mark of authentic Christian living (John 13:35)!

Finally, he is able to do righteousness and to shun the life of sin (1 John 3:9; 5:18).

1 John 5:18, “We know that no one who is born of God sins [the new life- our redeemed nature- cannot and does not sin; sin is rooted and grounded in our flesh]; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him.”

This doesn't mean that there won't be areas in our lives where sin is deeply rooted and therefore very slow in changing! Again, there remains in us our fallen humanness, our flesh!

Yet, and get this, even there at our worst, Satan cannot touch us! It is as if there is a force field surrounding us such that his accusations simply bounce off of us and stick on Christ! Such is a glorious effect of the new birth if we simply would discipline our minds NOT to dwell upon the negative criticisms that sometimes enter our minds concerning our unworthiness to be a child of God!

All of this brings us back to 1 Peter 1:3-5 and the statement made here by Peter, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again...” From this we conclude that — and here is the formal definition of the new birth — the new birth is not the replacing of the substance of fallen human nature with another substance, nor simply the change in one or more of the faculties of the fallen spiritual nature, nor the perfecting of the fallen spiritual nature.

Rather, by *new birth* Peter here is talking about the implanting of the principle of the new life in the soul, effecting an instantaneous change in the whole man (intellectually, emotionally, morally, and spiritually), and enabling the sinner to respond in repentance and faith to the gospel.

That is the new birth! And that is what we are going to be addressing in the coming weeks as we examine the incredible exhortation Peter gave to us in 1 Peter 1:3-5.

I want to close by delighting in the glorious reality of the new birth. And while I could endeavor to articulate what this ought to mean to us, a far more capable preacher than myself already has. Consider in closing, the wonderful comments Spurgeon made when he preached on this passage:

Who can estimate the privilege of receiving a heaven-born nature that, however weak and feeble it may be at first, is ever-living, and by the power of God will gain the ultimate victory? Let us then rejoice and be glad! We may be very poor today, but we are born from above. We may be much afflicted, but what of that if we are the twice-born sons of heaven! We may be despised and rejected, but the heavenly light has shone upon our eyes. We have been regenerated; we have ‘passed from death into life’ (John 5:24). Here is ceaseless cause for gratitude and joy, and if we rightly consider it we may forget our griefs. (Spurgeon, 2014, p. 1 Peter 1:3)

Truly, to have been born once is to die twice! But to have been born twice is to live with the prospect that the only death we now will ever suffer is physical death- which means death for

us is a portal into the presence of God where we will spend eternity fellowshiping with Him!

Works Cited

Spurgeon, C. (2014). *Commentary on 1 & 2 Peter and Jude (Spurgeon Commentary Series)*. Titus Books.

Treier, D. (2017). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic .

End Notes

¹ He also ended it that way too when He cleansed the temple (Matthew 21:12-13) just prior to His arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

² Cf. Genesis 5:5.