

Born of the Spirit

*“Verily, verily, I say
unto thee, Except a
man be born again,
he cannot see the
kingdom of God.”
—John 3:3*

OUR TITLE, “BORN OF THE Spirit,” and the phrase “born again,” which appears in our opening verse, have long been used by Christians to describe the present condi-

tion of those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Many also believe that those who outwardly make this claim are guaranteed a heavenly reward when they die, with little if any possibility of failure, regardless of their life’s conduct at the present time. As critically important as such claims should be, it is surprising that relatively few Christians seek to understand any other details concerning what is meant to be “born of the Spirit,” or “born again.”

The words of our text were addressed by Jesus to Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to the Master by night for the purpose of learning more about him and his teachings. (John 3:1,2) The words of Jesus in response to Nicodemus call attention to an important feature of God’s plan, which is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, or power, of God. This feature of the divine arrangement is that those who are to live and reign with Christ in his Father’s

kingdom, which is to bless all the families of the earth, must first be “born again” to a new life. Jesus used the invisible power of the wind as an illustration of one of the characteristics of that new life: “So is every one that is born of the Spirit.”—vs. 8

Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant by being born of the Spirit. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (vs. 4) Jesus explained, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (vs. 6) It is doubtful if Nicodemus understood this explanation. It conveys, however, the fact that the thought of birth in connection with the new life that Jesus is discussing is used only in a symbolic sense. It is not, as Nicodemus suggested, a case of entering again into a mother’s womb to be literally born a second time.

Here, as the case so frequently is in the Bible, a figure of speech is used to help us understand a great Truth. The word born, or birth, instantly conjures up in our minds the idea of a new life. Jesus is saying that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, some were to experience a new birth, meaning simply that they were to attain to a new life. This would be a life so unlike the one that is “born of the flesh” that those who are born into it will be both invisible and powerful. Since these are born by the Holy Spirit, or power of God, they become spiritual “sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, ... we shall be like him [Jesus]; for we shall see him as he is.”—I John 3:2

While the birth of the Spirit does not involve the necessity of entering literally into a mother’s womb

to be born again, the metaphor is carried out with considerable detail by the various writers of the New Testament, as they refer to this aspect of the Holy Spirit's work in the hearts and lives of the Lord's consecrated believers. Unfortunately, our English translations of the Bible, in most instances, fail to present clearly what the writers had in mind. This has led to the erroneous view that one can be born of the Spirit while still in the flesh. Out of this error has come the expression, "born-again Christians."

In the English language, we have two words that describe the coming into being of a new life—"begettal" or begotten, and "birth" or born. However, in the Greek language spoken in New Testament times, there is only one word to describe both the begettal and birth. That word is *gennao*. Therefore, when used by Jesus and the apostles, one has to determine by the context whether begettal or birth is referred to, or, in some cases, if the complete process of bringing into existence a new life is meant.

It is the Greek word *gennao* that is used in Matthew 1:1-16 where the genealogy of Jesus is given. "Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren," the record states. The word "begat" is used in this account thirty-nine times, and in every instance it is properly translated by our English word begat. Obviously in this instance begat is the correct translation. How odd it would sound, and how untrue, to say that "Abraham gave birth to Isaac"! This scriptural example points out the fact that in the natural human realm, the male provides the begettal, and the female gives birth. Both are necessary for a new life to begin.

In another example, the Greek word *gennao* is used twice, and is translated both “born” and “begotten” in the same verse. The text reads, “We know that whosoever is born of God [that is, by his Holy Spirit] sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.” (I John 5:18) To be consistent, the translators should have used the word “begotten” in both instances. The only apparent reason for not doing so seems to have been a desire to make the phraseology of the translation less repetitious. We note that the *American Standard Version*, *The Emphatic Diaglott*, *Revised Version*, and *Young’s Literal Translation*, have all translated *gennao* as “begotten,” both times in the foregoing verse.

BEGOTTEN NOW—BORN IN THE RESURRECTION

If we consider the full meaning of the birth metaphor we must conclude that in order to be born one must first be begotten. In other words, when a new life is to be brought into existence there must first be the begetting, then a period of gestation during which the embryo is nourished and developed, and thus prepared for birth at the proper time. Thus is the two-fold work of the Holy Spirit presented to us in the Scriptures. When Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again,” he was speaking of the completed work of the Holy Spirit in giving a new, and higher, life in the resurrection to those who would devote themselves wholly to the doing of God’s will. In the brief lesson to Nicodemus, Jesus did not go into detail to show that before any are born of the Spirit they must first be begotten of the Spirit. However, elsewhere

in the New Testament these details are clearly set forth.

We read, "Of his [the Heavenly Father's] own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." (James 1:18) This is an important text, for not only does it show that a begettal takes place—not bodily—but in the heart and mind of a Christian, but also that it is accomplished by God's will "with the word of truth." In I Peter 1:23, we are given this same information. Here we read, "Being born [*gennao*] again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." Here, *gennao* should more properly be translated "begotten."—See ASV, *Diaglott*, RV, and YLT

How clearly this sets forth the thought of begettal, for reference is made by Peter to the "seed." In the natural process of procreation, it is the begettal that is accomplished by the seed, not the birth. Thus the apostle here refers to the beginning, or begetting, of the new life, not to its completion in birth. The seed of begettal, he says, is "the word of God."

We have learned that every word of God in the Scriptures is Spirit-inspired. The Old Testament prophecies were written by holy men of old as they were "moved by the Holy Spirit." (II Pet. 1:21) All of Jesus' teachings are the direct result of the illumination of his mind and heart by the Holy Spirit. The same is true of the apostolic writings. When Jesus referred to the coming of the Holy Spirit he described it as "the Spirit of truth." (John 15:26; 16:13) It is clear, then, that to be begotten by the Word of Truth means that one is begotten by the Holy Spirit.

This is an important fact, and to grasp it clearly will help to guard us against the notion entertained by many Christians who believe the Holy Spirit enters directly into the life of believers, cleanses them from all sin, and makes it impossible that they should ever fall from grace. It is this erroneous view that leads to the mistaken suggestion, “Once in grace, always in grace.”

James and Peter give us the true thought. It is that through the Word of Truth the beginning of a new life takes place in the mind and heart of a believer. Would not this mean, then, that all who read the Word of God are begotten by the Holy Spirit? Not at all. Let us further consider the metaphor. All conditions must be right for the reception of the seed in order for begetting to take place. So it is in the case of Spirit begetting. Many read the Word of God whose minds and hearts are not receptive to its life-giving truths; and while they may receive some comfort from its pages, and some instruction to help guide them in their daily tasks, they are not begotten to a new life.

FULL SURRENDER

Full surrender to the divine will and to the holy impulses of God’s Word is the condition necessary in order to be truly prepared to receive the begetting power of the Holy Spirit through the Word of Truth. God’s part in this wonderful arrangement, whereby a few are to attain immortal life on the divine plane, was the supplying of his Spirit-inspired Word—the seed, as it were. This aspect of God’s plan is accomplished by the power of his thoughts over the thoughts of the believer. Even with unlimited

power at his command, the Creator will not invade the mind of another, and begin the development of a new mind, without the willing reception of the one involved.

Here is reflected one of the most wonderful characteristics of our Heavenly Father. When the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters in connection with the original creation and preparation of the earth for human habitation, it was an arbitrary exercise of his power, but not so in the begetting of those who are to live and reign with Christ. He exercised his power to fill his Word with his thoughts which express his will concerning these, and assures them that all needed guidance and help will be given them in order to know, and to do, his will. Then he has waited for the individual, whom his providence has brought into contact with his Word, to voluntarily decide whether or not they will yield wholly and completely to his will as the Holy Spirit has expressed it through his Word.

In his precious Word, God has caused to have recorded many wonderful promises of “glory and honour and immortality.” (Rom. 2:7) He has revealed that by these “exceeding great and precious promises,” we can be made “partakers of the divine nature.” (II Pet. 1:4) The Holy Spirit inspired Jesus to say, “I go to prepare a place for you. ... I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”—John 14:2,3

As we study God’s Word, these promises come to our attention, and we realize how wonderful they are. We also rejoice in the glorious provision God has made for the world of mankind, which Peter describes as “restitution,” or restoration to life on earth. We

are happy for the realization that all God's holy prophets since the world began foretold the "times of restitution of all things," and we look forward to the fulfillment of these earthly promises.—Acts 3:20,21

To attain, however, to the heavenly promises of the Bible, requires surrender and sacrifice. The way that leads to a heavenly spiritual birth is a "narrow," difficult one. (Matt. 7:14) Jesus said, "If any man will come after me [be my disciple], let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." (Matt. 16:24) We also remember Paul's exhortation to present our bodies a "living sacrifice." (Rom. 12:1) These conditions of the heavenly calling seem at first difficult, yet the promises attached to them, if we are faithful, are to live and reign with Christ and with him to bless all the families of the earth.—Rev. 20:4,6; Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Gal. 3:8

To those seeking to be part of God's divine family in heaven, and to bless the remainder of mankind in his coming kingdom, the great plan of God as revealed in his Word continues to increase their appreciation of its divine Architect. His love in giving his Son to be the Redeemer and Savior of the whole world calls forth from these an ever increasing love for him. (John 3:16,17) The love of Christ, in suffering and dying on mankind's behalf, reaches deeper and deeper into their hearts. If we find such noble thoughts in our hearts, and are exercised by them, we will conclude, as Paul did, that we "should not henceforth live unto [ourselves]" but unto Jesus, and unto the loving Heavenly Father who sent him to be the Savior of the world.—II Cor. 5:14,15

Having complied with God's invitation to surrender ourselves to him, to be directed by his Spirit-inspired Word, we know that the promises of the Scriptures to those who meet this condition apply to us. Those inspiring promises of a heavenly home and of the divine nature, instead of being as they were before, something apart from us, viewed merely as an interesting feature of God's plan, now become a life-giving influence in our lives. Through surrender to God, the seed begins at once to generate the hope of a new life. We are begotten of God by "the word of truth."—James 1:18

MIRACLE OF THE NEW LIFE

Just as only God can make a tree, so all life is a miracle in that our finite minds cannot comprehend it. We witness the miracle of a newborn infant and we instinctively realize that actually the parents did not give life to that child. They simply complied with the conditions that God designed thousands of years ago whereby the earth would eventually be filled with his human creatures. (Gen. 1:28) On a much higher level, this is true also with respect to those who are begotten of God by the word of Truth. It is among God's greatest miracles, in which it is our blessed privilege to cooperate.

Some miracles are accomplished almost instantaneously, others over a long period of time. When Jesus called to the dead brother of Martha and Mary, "Lazarus, come forth," and he who was dead "came forth," it was a miracle performed in a short time. (John 11:43,44) The miracle of the Creation as displayed throughout the universe, however, involved long epochs of time for accomplishment. The miracle

of Spirit-begetting and birth is also spread out over a long period of time.

Think of the time consumed in preparing the seed of begettal—that is, the Word of God. God’s Spirit miraculously guided the writing of the Bible. Thousands of years were involved in thus recording the thoughts of God in a manner in which they could enter the human mind and heart, be pondered over and accepted or rejected at the option of the reader. God could directly fill the mind of a person with his thoughts, but how would anyone know that they came from God? Besides, how disconcerting it would be for one to discover that his mind was being filled with forced ideas as a robot would be. How wise are God’s ways! The miracle-working power of God is operative in shaping the circumstances of one’s life in preparation for entrance into the mind of the seed of begettal, but each must accept and act upon these things voluntarily.

It is only when we realize the need of divine help that we are likely to give serious consideration to the Word of God. Our Heavenly Father, in his infinite wisdom and in the tenderness of his love, knows exactly the sort of experiences which will most effectively touch the heart of those whom he desires to call, that the called one might give heed to his Word. This work of preparing for Spirit begettal is miraculous, even as the preparation of the seed of begettal was by the Spirit of God. Every aspect of God’s part in this feature of his plan was, and is, miraculous, just as the birth of every newborn child constitutes a miracle.

In the case of those who have been made receptive by circumstances of life that have been overruled

by God for this purpose and, having studied his Word and voluntarily surrendered their lives fully to the divine will as expressed therein, Spirit begetting is a certainty. All who are thus dealt with by God may claim the promises of glory, honor, and immortality, in the certain knowledge that if they continue faithful to the Lord, they will receive the “crown of life.”—Rev. 2:10

In keeping with the figure of begetting and birth, the Scriptures reveal that as the embryo new life develops, this also is accomplished by the Spirit of God through his Word. Our new spiritual minds feed upon the promises of God. The spiritual growth, if pleasing to God, must be in conformity to the divine image. Thus the Spirit of God promotes growth of the Christian fruitage of peace, joy, long-suffering, and love. (Gal. 5:22,23; II Pet. 1:5-7) Paul gives us a beautiful description of this work of the Holy Spirit, saying, “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind; ... put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”—Eph. 4:23,24

When the new life is developed to the point where it is ready for birth, our corruptible bodies go into death, and the birth of the new life is accomplished by means of the resurrection. (I Cor. 15:53,54) Here the Spirit, or power, of God is further exercised. Paul speaks of this mighty power that was used to raise Jesus from the dead or, to use the symbol we are discussing, to bring about his birth of the Spirit. He speaks of “the exceeding greatness of his [God’s] power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at

his own right hand in the heavenly places.”—Eph. 1:19,20

In speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus used the wind to help illustrate some of the characteristics of those who are born of the Spirit in the resurrection. (John 3:8) The wind is both invisible and powerful. So will all those be who, having first of all been begotten by the Spirit through the Word of Truth, and who, by feeding upon the Word, continue to develop until they are made ready to be “partakers of the inheritance of the saints.” (Col. 1:12) Divine power will exalt these to heavenly life. They will be given celestial, or heavenly, bodies—incorruptible and immortal.—I Cor. 15:40-44,53-58

Not all of the Adamic race who will be redeemed through the blood of Christ will thus be born again as heavenly beings. Jesus did not say to Nicodemus that it is necessary to be born again in order to live again. What he said was that one had to be born again in order to see the kingdom of God, which is in heaven. (John 3:3; Matt. 4:17) The reference is, therefore, to those who will be associated with Jesus as heavenly rulers in his Father’s long-promised kingdom. In any kingdom, or government, there are the rulers and the subjects. Jesus and his true disciples of the present age will be the rulers in the kingdom of God. These will then be born again. Jesus was the first to experience this great change of life from human to spirit. His disciples—his true church—experience this new birth in the “first resurrection” at the end of the age. (Rev. 20:5,6) Then God’s promises of restitution life, which is restored human life, will flow out from heaven to all the families of the earth.—John 3:14-17; Rev. 21:2-5 ■