

YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

An explanation of what it means to be "Born Again".

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to Jesus in the night to talk with him. The story is told in John chapter three. Nicodemus began by saying that his fellow Pharisees knew Jesus was from God, for no man could do what he did apart from God. Why, then, did Nicodemus come at night, seeking to avoid notice? Perhaps he was afraid of losing face among his peers, who were critical of Jesus. Jesus saw the emptiness in Nicodemus' heart and said to him, "Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God" (verse 3). Nicodemus' responded by asking, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Jesus answered and elaborated on what he had just said, adding an element of mystery, saying that we must be born of water and the Spirit, and that the operation of the Spirit is incomprehensible to the natural man.

What affect might this have had on Nicodemus? The Scriptures do not say, but it is not hard to imagine. Expecting to receive some profound truth, he instead received reproof for his lack of spiritual insight.

We can see this same kind of problem in the lives of Jesus' disciples, before the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. They were actually incapable of understanding the deeper sayings of Jesus, unless the Spirit revealed the meaning to them (Luke 24:25; Matt. 16:17). The problem was not a lack of knowledge, even of what the Bible said; the problem was that they were naturally incapable of knowing the mind of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:11). They continually misconstrued or balked at what Jesus said (Matt. 16:6, 11, 23; John 6:60-65). Only after Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit did the words and prophecies of Jesus become clear to them (Acts 2:14-36).

It would be easy to counsel a person on how to be born again if it was simply a matter of following outlined steps to take in order to receive this new birth. Man, however, is not capable of initiating this process - it must be of God. All man can do is to pray and ask God

for forgiveness and regeneration. God responds out of mercy, not from obligation. Recognizing our total helplessness and need for this life of Christ is therefore a preliminary to God's act of regeneration on us.

We plead to God for help, and God responds by giving us an acute awareness of our personal sins against him. It is absolutely necessary that we understand the gravity of our personal sins, and only the Spirit can reveal this; for the natural man has a warped view of sin. The Spirit reveals this to us, we ask forgiveness, and he releases this burden from us and replaces the emptiness of our souls with his presence.

J.I. Packer, in his essay on "Regeneration" in The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology comments on this work of God: 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 Eph. 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 3:37), 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.

While some would argue the role of one's free will and how it fits into regeneration, at least we can say it is not a result of any of our works or efforts.

However, that free will must be activated by the human being; the one seeking salvation. We can choose or refuse God's efforts to convict and convince us of our need for repentance. Once a choice is made, the Spirit does not give up on us. He continues to work with the soul needing Jesus. He continues to provide facts in lieu of assumptions. **To convince one to repent of his sin, one must yield and humble himself.** This is why so many people fail to accept the free-gift of salvation. They simply do not understand why it does not require money

or work. Everything else in life has stipulations and hard requirements for such a gift. Salvation is a free gift...no obligations.

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:"(John 1:12).

"The wages of sin is death...The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

The gift is offered...and we must accept (receive) it to inherit eternal life.