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5

NUMBER

**Faith  
Justification  
Conversion  
and the  
New Birth**

BY GEOFFREY BINGHAM

# FAITH JUSTIFICATION CONVERSION AND THE NEW BIRTH

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## 1. FAITH

“ Your faith has saved you; go in peace. “ These words Christ addressed to a woman who had been immoral. Jesus saw her evident love and explained it as springing from forgiveness. He said, in effect, “She has loved much, because she has been forgiven much.” On another occasion Jesus was contrasting the faith in God of a self righteous Pharisee who rather congratulated himself before God that he was not as others, whom in fact he despised. One of the those he despised was a social outcast, a tax-gatherer and a hated man. The taxgatherer had cast himself upon God. “ God be merciful to me, a sinner!” he had implored. Just that. Jesus said this man went down to his house justified, rather than the Pharisee who evidently was not.

All of this is quite puzzling. Why should outrageous sinners exercise some kind of faith, and be right with God, and good-living people be more or less condemned by God, as though they had missed out? “Missed the bus,” we say.

Surely we should investigate this kind of talk. It could be that our actions of goodness are also misplaced. If so we must know the reason. The best place to begin at is the word “faith,” that is to say we should find its real meaning, particularly in the Scriptures. One of the verses the New Testament writers often refer to is Habakkuk 2 :4. It says, “ Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous man shall live by his faith.” It is translated in Romans 1:17 (as also in Galatians 3:11) as “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” In Hebrews 10:38 it is written, “My righteous one shall live by faith.” Of course we are not going into a complicated word study, but the essence of the Habakkuk verse is that one man is proud in his heart, and self-sufficient; the other man is dependent upon God. That is true faith.

Faith, in the ultimate is total dependency upon God, a state of being man had in the very beginning until he rebelled against God. To describe the stages of faith we say (i) Faith is coming to believe God for what He really is. (ii) Faith is coming to trust God as He is.

(iii) Faith is obeying God as He commands from what He is and does. Let us repeat those three things so that we can examine them.

The question now is, “Do you believe God for what He really is? Do you trust Him as He is? Do you obey what he commands, and accede to what He demands?” Or, to put it bluntly, “Do you go along in your own way, and leave it at that?” If you do, then no matter whether it is agnosticism or religion you will still function on your own.

### **Inability to Know God.**

A reader may well say, “I don’t know God. I don’t understand Him. How can I have faith in Him?” That is a fair question. The Scriptures agree with you. They say that Satan has blinded men’s eyes so that they do not see and know God (II Corinthians 4:4). They say that no one seeks after God or knows Him. (Romans 3:11, Psalm 14:1–2). They also say that the natural man cannot understand the things of God, nor can he receive them. (I Corinthians 2:14). Jesus made it very plain that deeply religious men did not know God. He said to one of the religious leaders of the day, “Except a man be begotten from above he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” He added, “Except a man be born of water (baptism of repentance) and of the Spirit (baptism of the Spirit) he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. (John 3:3–6). On another occasion he put it even more simply. He said, “Except you be converted and become as little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3).

All these passages add up to one thing. Man cannot see or know God truly because, in fact, everything is against him knowing God. Because he is guilty he has no desire to go near God. Isaiah 59:2 says, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you so that He does not hear.” This simply means that a guilty man does not want to go near God. We are told that when Adam sinned he went and hid himself. He said, “I was afraid, because I was naked, and I went and hid myself.” Cain was very angry when God did

not accept his sacrifice, because it seemed God did not accept him. Well, he was right; God did not accept him, because he was a guilty man. What was hidden in his heart came out when he murdered his brother.

If a man could be free of his guilt, and stand clear of it before God his whole attitude to God would be different. The religious Pharisee was assuring himself that he was right. The wretched taxgatherer admitted he wasn’t. Because of this he was a step ahead of the self-righteous Pharisee.

### **How Does a Man Come to Have Faith in God?**

Some reader may already be saying, “What has been written so far does not convince me. Whilst I wouldn’t claim to know God well, I don’t see myself as evil. I can’t really believe my sins are so terrible that I can’t hear God coming through, if He is speaking, or even if He exists.”

Jesus had exactly this trouble with religious people. John’s Gospel describes the constant war that went on between Him and the religious leaders. He insisted that if they had known God — His Father — then they would quickly have recognised the Son. That was a fair statement. The point we want to bring out is that until a man can stand without guilt before God he cannot really know Him. Something of this happens in human affairs. The person against whom we sin, is the one we feel reluctant to meet. We can even come to hate him although he has done nothing against us. A number of times in the Bible it is said that man hates God. (Romans 5:10, Colossians 1:21, Romans 1:30). How then will he know Him?

Whilst the Scriptures tell us God is love, and God is good, and God is light, these are mere ideas in our mind until we come into a powerful experience of any one of them. If suddenly we experienced God’s love then we would really know Him. John’s Gospel says very clearly that no man has seen God at any time, and the Son who lives close to the Father came to reveal Him. That is, God does not leave us to find Him — or we wouldn’t even try! — but He sends His Son. On one occasion Jesus said God was seeking His children. The

same John's Gospel keeps on telling us that whoever believes on the Son will pass from death to life, and that the life into which he comes will be eternal. Listen to a few such verses:

John 3:16. "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes on him should not perish but have eternal life."

John 3:17. "God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved."

John 5:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life; he does not come into judgement, but has passed from death unto life."

Now we hear a few more severe statements of Jesus:

John 3:18. "He who believes in him is not condemned: he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

John 3:36. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life: he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him."

If we look at these verses we conclude their message is (a) God has given clear evidence of Himself by sending His Son who reveals Him. (b) He has not sent His Son to condemn but to save. (c) If men reject the Son, they also reject the Father, and they reject the offer of eternal life. To put it in terms of faith—they do not believe God for what He really is; they do not trust God for what He really is. They do not obey God in what He demands. To be plain about the matter; they distrust, ignore, and reject God.

Now let us look at the positive side. Believe God, trust Him, and a miracle has happened. You have passed from death to life. The weight of judgement has lifted off you. You will never see death! Think of that!

### **Coming to Have Real Faith.**

Someone once said, "Faith is acting on the facts." That is we believe God for what He is because we see Him in action. If all we have to believe is difficult

theology, then who will see God? Now this is what happened. We are told in John 2:23 "Now when he (Jesus) was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; but Jesus himself did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man."

We have to be honest; all through John's Gospel people believe. So many are baptised that John the Baptist's disciples are disturbed. Yet these very people who believe and are baptised later melt away. They leave Jesus. (See John 4:1f, 6:60–66, 8:30ff.). We draw this conclusion:— Only he who really sees Jesus, and really believes— shall we say totally believes — comes to know the full experience of faith. John, when he summed up the reason for writing his Gospel put it this way, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." (John 20:30–31).

One conclusion we can come to at this point is, "When we see God through His Son and His acts, then we can see what kind of God (and Father) He is, and trust Him, and submit to Him."

Your question may be, "What has He done that gives me ground to believe Him, to trust Him, and to obey Him?" We hope the answer which lies in what we are about to say, will really be clear to you. Whilst some describe faith as a "leap into the dark," or "believing what one cannot see," we prefer to say it is a step into the light, and believing because you can see. You can never believe what you cannot see; you can never trust what is not trustworthy. You can never submit to what lacks true authority. Well, the secret we must see is that faith is a gift!

### **Faith is a Gift**

In Ephesians 2:8–9 we read, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any man should boast. " In Philippians 1:29 we read " It

has not only been given to you to believe, but also to suffer for His sake.” Notice, it has been given to believe. Faith then is a gift.

The Scriptures tell us this gift comes into operation in the following ways. Romans 10:17 “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.” That is one believes when one hears the truth. The telling of the truth comes through the Spirit of truth. Jesus said time and again that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. Let the truth come through and it will have “the ring of truth.” A person may reject it, but he knows it is the truth. John said, “You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you know everything.” (I John 2:20). Jesus also said the Spirit of truth would convince the world of sin, and righteousness and judgement. Jesus often said, “He who has an ear to hear, let him hear.”

Paul once said to some of his converts, “God chose you from the beginning to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you by our Gospel . . . “ He meant, “When the Word and the Spirit worked on you—you believed.” This is precisely the way the gift of faith comes, and becomes operative.

### **Faith is Relevant.**

They say, “ Scratch where it itches. “ It means, “What is relevant will make sense.” Sometimes, even for years, people do not see the Gospel as relevant. For example death suddenly seems to make a lot of things relevant. “Where am I going? What will I be? How am I prepared? What ‘life’ will I live—if any?” If I have guilt then I ask many questions. “How can I be free? How can I be sure God will not judge, and if He does where will I stand?” The Gospel gives answers to these questions. Jesus came to deal with the deepest problem — guilt. Ultimately our faith is in God who deals with these things, practically, and sets us free. When we itch along this line nothing else can scratch us. Nothing can most our need. hut what God does.

What we are saying simply is this, “No man can really live without the Gospel. No man dare die apart from it.”

### **Faith and Justification.**

When Jesus asked men to believe in Him — or perish, He was not speaking mildly. He was both insistent and urgent. He saw through man’s outward attempts to deal with the problems of life and death, and let them know they couldn’t—apart from Him. He said clearly, “ I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. “ “ I am the living bread sent down from heaven. If a man eat of me he shall live forever.”

The apostles went about calling for belief. One man asked Paul, “What shall I do to be saved?” and he said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” Peter said to the Gentiles, “To Him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.” The Gospel is also a command. To believe is to obey. That comes through time and again. We are told that a great company of the priests was obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7). Paul cries (Romans 10:16), “But they have not all obeyed the Gospel, for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’“ In II Thessalonians 1:8 Paul speaks of God “inflicting vengeance upon those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.” By contrast when Christ comes he will be “marvelled at in all who have believed.” (1:10).

The point we want to stress, however, is that to believe is to be justified. That comes through clearly in many places. One of them — Romans 5:1 — says, “Wherefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Almost the same meaning is in Romans 8:1, “There is therefore, now, no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” These passages say clearly, “A man who has faith, is now no longer under judgement. He is acquitted from it. He lives, before God, without guilt for his past sins.”

## II. JUSTIFICATION

### What is Justification?

We said before that faith is coming to see God as He is and to trust Him, and so, as He demands, to obey, since we are in a sort of faith union with Him. We also said that we will not have that belief and trust until we see who He is by what He has done, and see what He has done as relevant to our needs. Well, justification is simply acquittal from the accusation and condemnation of sin. “Justified,” we tell the children, “is being just—as-if I’d never sinned.” That is what it means. It does not mean I have never sinned—for I have. But before God as the Judge of all men I stand as though I had never sinned.

At first sight this seems to be a mere sort of legal trick, a kind of idea curious religious people get. Is it, however? The Pharisee, underneath, had worked hard to be able to stand before God as though he were a guiltless person. The tax-gatherer knew he couldn’t. He knew he had sinned dreadfully. So did the thief on the cross, eventually. He said, “We suffer justly for our own sins.” The scornful non-religionist is sickened by all this “guilt talk.” Sin to him seems only a little thing. He is far from understanding the nature of God. God is holy. God is personally angry when it comes to sin. God in fact pours out His wrath upon sin.

Once a speaker or writer comes to this point men very quickly shut off. Perhaps you are now tempted to do so. Resist the feeling and keep reading. You may be at the crisis point of your life, if you can get past this point of stumbling or being offended. In Romans 1:18 it is written, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in acts of unrighteousness.” Without saying too much about this read on in the chapter and you will see how God pours out His wrath. It is this :He gives men up to their sin and sins. In verses 24, 26, and 28, it is written “God gave them up to their sins; their lusts; to a reprobate mind. “

It means this: that whereas God’s wrath is not sin, yet sin is God’s wrath, in the sense that God lets the sin of a man affect him, and does not withhold those effects of sin which destroy a man. Sin is not merely something which has been done in the past, and recorded against a man. It is a constant powerful thing, working in a man’s conscience. It operates ceaselessly, more often in the unconscious areas of being than the conscious, but its effects are in conscious life in the form of tensions, fears, a sense of failure, of inferiority, of deep nameless fear. It causes irrational anger, suspicion, the sense of carrying a burden. Sin gives a sense of defilement, of loss of meaning to life, of fear of God, of fate, and terror of the future. “Men and women,” says the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, “are all their lifetime, through fear of death, subject to bondage.” John says, “Perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not made perfect in love.

Psalm 7:11 says, “ God is angry with the sinner every day. “ That is why St. Augustine once said, “ Man carries about in his conscience every day a testimony to the wrath of God.” Nevertheless we must not think of God as having the same kind of impatient and irrational anger which many human beings evidence. His anger arises out of His holiness. As the prophet said “You are of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, and you cannot look upon evil.” He means, “You must and you will judge it.”

Our conclusion then is that wrath is felt in the conscience and is the working effects of our sins, as God is personally angry against us, because He did not create us for evil but for good, not for defilement, but for holiness.

Now we come to the crux of our study. God has acted in history to show His love by sending His Son to take our sins, and so to bear the wrath of God upon all sin. Let us read again that statement, John puts it this way, “Herein is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Propitiation means “to avert the wrath of,” and in this case the wrath of God. In fact, what the

taxgatherer cried was “God, be propitious to me a sinner.” What he meant was “Oh God. I cannot make propitiation. You make it for me.” That was faith; that was the faith which saved him, and unless a man has this faith, he will stay forever in his guilt, and never see the love of God.

### **The Climax of the Cross.**

We now come to see what God did in and through His Son, and how, in fact He did it. On the night of His betrayal Jesus took the cup of wine and said, “This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins.” That was clear enough. He was saying, “My death will take away and destroy your sins—for ever. You will be free of them.” Then He said, “You will all be scandalised because of me this night, for it is written, ‘I will smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered.’” He was quoting a centuries’ old prophecy from Zechariah 13:7 “Awake oh sword against my fellow. Smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered.” “Awake” means “Draw from the scabbard.” “Make ready.” “Smite” means “Cut in judgement.” “My fellow” means “My equal.” “The Shepherd” means, “the Good Shepherd, the only Shepherd, Jesus!”

That the Cross is a scandal is in no doubt. Paul later said “The preaching of the Cross is to the Jew a scandal. To the Greek it is (intellectual) foolishness.” And no wonder. Listen to what New Testament writers say about Him on the Cross. Peter says “He bore our sins in His body on the tree.” He means that Christ did not just bear the punishment of sins upon that Cross, but He bore the sins themselves! Of course the punishment was inherent in the sins, but it must be said again, He bore the sins! Paul, in like vein says, “God made Him (He who knew no sin) to be sin for us.” That is Christ became the actual sin. What does that mean, but that He bore its components, its shame, its pain, its fear, its defilement, its anguish, its burden, its impurity, its suffering its deep sorrows—all the things which we said constitute the personal wrath of God upon man?

“Yes,” cries Isaiah, We did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted.” He was right; so He was. He continues, “But He was wounded for our transgression. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed.” What suffering! As Jeremiah voiced it, “Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by, Look and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, wherewith God has visited me in the day of His wrath. “

See, the deep sorrow that a man knows all his life of sin is now borne by this beloved Son. He bares Himself for the sword, the cut of judgement and then cries in intolerable anguish. “My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?” Only there do we understand both the wrath and the love. Isaiah says, “Surely He has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.” Yes, that is it; there is nothing which needed to be borne, which He has not borne.

Then He cried, “It is finished.” Ah, yes, the total work is finished. The wrath is borne; sin is destroyed. Man is freed. Man does not now have to receive the judgement.

Do you believe this? Do you believe God has revealed Himself in the anguish and love of that Cross? Do you believe every pain and impurity of your sin has been borne to extinction by this beloved Son, sent by the loving Father? Do you trust God? Do you submit to Him. Do you now understand true repentance and forgiveness? Do you really know now what it means “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus,” and “Wherefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?”

Friend, let faith—God’s great gift to you—have its way, right now. Submit in repentance and faith. Take the gift of forgiveness, and your clearance from guilt. Look, clear-eyed, into the eye of the God who loves. Believe, trust and submit. Your faith hath saved you, go in peace!

### III. CONVERSION

A dramatic moment in the life of Israel was when Peter cried, “Repent, therefore, and turn again (convert), that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord . . . .”

Peter was in fact saying that Israel had strayed from God, had broken the covenant God had made with them through Moses, and needed to be renewed in its covenant vows. However he introduced a new element, which the prophets had not used. He spoke about conversion bringing (a) Forgiveness of sins and (b) Times of refreshing from the Lord. In fact he was telling Israel that if she converted at this time she would come into the benefits of the New Covenant — the covenant of forgiveness, and also the covenant of the giving of the Holy Spirit.

#### Conversion in the Old Testament

The term “conversion” in the Old Testament was a familiar one. Those of Israel were not “converted to God.” They already belonged to God by the fact of the Covenant. They were a covenant people, bound to Him by the agreement they had made mutually when in the desert of Sinai. They had agreed to keep His law (See Exodus 24:1–8) and so whenever they departed from it, it did not mean God rejected them, but that He chastised or disciplined them. He still regarded them as His people, but they had to return to Him, that is they had to “turn again” which is what the term conversion means in the Old Testament. Conversion then is always turning from evil done, and turning to the Lord. The whole principle is stated in Malachi 3:7 “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.” When they ask “How shall we return” God points them to a resumption of their covenant vows. In this case it is to give their tithes and offerings. In other cases it is to cease from idolatry, a fascinating occupation which never ceased to attract Israel.

Whether they wished to “convert” or turn to God is a matter for consideration. Hosea, speaking for God (5:4 ) says of the two kingdoms of Israel, “Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God, for the spirit of harlotry is within them, and they know not the Lord.” It is as though they have become ‘not God’s people’ ( 1 :10). In other words, God may call for conversion, but if a man is fascinated by sin he will not hear that word. The interesting thing is that God does not leave them to go their own way. He sends His prophets to warn them, and call them to return as in Zechariah 1 :1–6 and Nehemiah 9:26 and other references. If they do not return God punishes them with severe actions of death, destruction, and being taken into captivity (See Ezekiel 33:9, I Kings 9:6–9, Hosea 11:5, Amos 4:6–12). Their greatest punishment is that their idolatries destroy them, and God’s anger deprives them of what all Israel needs, the love and mercy of their covenant God.

The positive side of conversion is that when they turn to God, that is return to God, then He blesses them richly and deeply. They are now in covenant union with Him, and all the blessings of that covenant—for it was a blessing—covenant, are theirs again. Whilst their sacrifices give them forgiveness, yet God’s grace and kindness are lavished upon them anyway.

When Peter cried to Israel to be converted, he was in line with some strong prophecies that in the last days Israel would return. For example in Hosea 3:5 we read, “Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to His goodness in the latter days.” Similar prophecies are given in Malachi 4:5 (See Luke 1:16–17), (Micah 3:5 and Deuteronomy 4:30). It should be seen that Malachi 4:5 relates to John the Baptist’s ministry and that the prophecy of Hosea 3:5 relates to the days of Pentecost and following, for it is according to Joel 2:28 that God will pour out His Spirit in the last days.

### Conversion in the New Testament

When we come to the New Testament we see on its opening pages to call to repentance and baptism for entrance into the Kingdom of God. This is strange, seeing that Israel already constitutes the Kingdom of God. The explanation is along the lines of what we have already said. Israel is God's covenant people, but in these days they still need to turn to God. Jesus makes this plain, time and again, especially when He says, "Except ye be converted and become as little children you shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3). John the Baptist's call is answered. Men turn to God in repentance, and as Jesus said, some press violently into it.

It is natural, then, that once the events of the cross and the resurrection are completed, and Christ commences His reign in heaven, that Israel should turn to God. Hence Peter's call, which we have read from Acts 3:19 Also note the order, "Repent, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

We must not think that Jesus felt that Israelites were not doomed eternally because they belonged to the covenant. He has two things to make clear:— (i) The Old Covenant was virtually at its end. It had run its course. (ii) The time of the Kingdom and the New Covenant was at hand. Indeed all Israel had to repent, and turn to Him as Messiah. To believe meant life; not to believe and submit meant death and judgement.

The beautiful thing of course is that Israel has the chance to repent. Yet, this opportunity given, nevertheless, for the most part they refuse. Stephen puts it boldly, and so calls down death upon himself. He says, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, when you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

However conversion is not limited to Israel. The Gentiles are now included, but in a sense their conversion is not a turning again to God, but an initial turning. In terms of being created in the image of

God and of having fallen away from their Father—Creator, it is a turning again. In terms of coming to God after centuries of idolatry, it is turning to God. When Christ commissions the apostle to the Gentiles — Paul, He does it in these words, "Rise and stand upon your feet: for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles—to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among them that are sanctified by faith in me." (Acts 26:16–18).

Paul's report is, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus, then at Jerusalem and throughout all the country of Judea, and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance." We conclude then that for both Jew and Gentile conversion is an indispensable element in the matter of a person receiving salvation and eternal life.

### The Nature of Conversion.

Of course it is a simple matter: turning from sin and turning to God. A person has to decide to do this, and then do it. Yet what appears so simple is in fact difficult. We saw that when Israel was caught in the fascination of idolatry, that they could not turn to God. Sin has its own inbuilt deception, and guilt its self-concealing power. Men do not see that they need God. We have seen that guilt breeds repugnance towards God. The things of God seem dull and uninteresting. God, moreover is looked upon as grim, gloomy and vengeful. The dreadfully destructive nature of sin is not seen, and the awfulness of an eternity without God is not realised.

That is, sometimes. In the Old Testament God never ceases to speak to His people. His Word is powerful, and goes out through the prophets. The suffering that

comes from sin, such as punishment, destruction, death and exile finally brings people to their knees, and to God. Also the warmth of His love, grace and tenderness reduces them to repentance\* and faith. So they turn again.

Likewise in the New Testament we find some in Israel longing for the day of Messiah. Gladly they obey John and are baptised. Gladly they follow Christ. On the Day of Pentecost thousands turn, and shortly afterwards even more. The Gentiles turn in large numbers. Paul says to the Gentiles at Thessalonica, “You turned to God from idols, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers from the wrath to come.”

In the New Testament it is the Word of God which arrests men and turns them to the Father. The Word is spoken by apostles, evangelists and prophets. It is made powerful and clear by the Holy Spirit. What we are really saying is that no man will turn to God unless a powerful influence is brought to bear upon him. The word “influence” in fact is too weak to describe what happens. Paul, on the road to Damascus is literally arrested by Christ. In our next study on the New Birth we will see some of the elements that are brought to bear upon persons to turn them. However we must see, at this point that unless God turns a man he will not turn. Time and again, in the Old Testament this principle is uttered. Jeremiah’s last words in his ‘–Lamentations’ are, “Turn us O Lord, and we shall be turned!” The same principle may be seen in Jeremiah 31:18, Psalm 60:1 and Isaiah 64:9.

One of the interesting things in the New Testament is that the verb “to convert” is not in the passive, but the active voice. That is one is not converted, but one converts. The action, or the responsibility to do it lies with the person confronted by the Gospel. Whilst it is true that we lack personal power to turn to God, we are

yet expected, in practice, to respond when the dynamic word is preached, and the command to obey, to turn, repent and believe is issued. This is reasonable enough seeing the Spirit is present in the Word, and the Word itself is alive and active. Not to repent, is as Stephen said, to resist the Holy Spirit. On the positive side a man who turns has his head turned, so to speak, by the wonder of God’s love, the glory of His grace, the astonishing suffering of Christ, and the rich promises of new life, and deliverance from powers of darkness and the bondage of sin and guilt.

We ask, “Who would not turn?” Who, indeed. The direct question is “Have you turned? And if you have, are you turning others?”

#### IV. THE NEW BIRTH

In speaking of conversion we lay the foundation for understanding New Birth. This too, is an Old Testament teaching. Nicodemus, the Jewish scholar and leader who visited Jesus by night, was told that he must be born again, or begotten from above. As Jesus told him about the New Birth he asked, wonderingly, “How can these things be?” Jesus reminded him that he was a teacher in Israel, he did not know the basic teaching of his own faith. Jesus meant that the teaching of the New Birth is in the Old Testament.

#### The New Birth in the Old Testament.

In Deuteronomy 30:6 we read Moses’ prophecy, “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” It is very much like Jeremiah 32:39, “And I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for their own good, and for the good of their children after them.” Or again as in Jeremiah 31:33, “. . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people” and yet again in Ezekiel 36:26, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you: and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh.” These statements tell us that God will renew a man.

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\* See Teaching Series Book No. 4, "Commanded Repentance and Full Forgiveness."

A yet more dramatic picture of New Birth is to be found in Ezekiel 37 where the prophet is taken to view a wild and desolate valley which encloses a dreary desert. Here the scattered bones of dead men shine white in the desert sun. They are dry, sere, and worn. Yet from these bones God restores the original skeletal forms, and even causes flesh to come upon them again. Even so they are not alive. They are dead. He tells the prophet to “Prophesy to the Breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the Breath, Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.” He then describes the wonderful thing that happened. The divine Wind came across that valley, and Breath came into the bodies, and they lived. Not only did they live, but they stood up, “an exceeding great host.”

This remarkable story Nicodemus knew, and he should have understood when Jesus said “Except a man be born. . . of the Spirit, He shall not enter the Kingdom of God.” When he did not understand Jesus gave him further information. He said, “The Wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you cannot know whence it comes, or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The picture of bones depicted Israel, desolate and destroyed. Israel’s regeneration was the miracle of the Spirit. Of course we would not fully understand unless we knew the word in the Old Testament and the New Testament for “spirit” is also the same word for “breath” or “wind”.

### **The New Birth in the New Testament.**

Israel was only going to be renewed, or regenerated, when the Spirit came. This He did, at Pentecost, and interestingly and significantly enough He came “as of the sound of a mighty rushing wind,” the same Spirit who had “moved across the face of the waters” at creation. Israel, or all who would respond, was regenerated on the day of Pentecost, and the following days of that ministry of the Spirit. They came into New Birth.

The Gentiles, likewise, in the event of Peter’s preaching to them at Caesarea experienced the

“Breath” or the “Spirit.” Whilst they listened to the Gospel, we are told “the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the Word.” Later the Jews describe this as God granting to the Gentiles, “the gift of repentance unto life.”

Far and wide the early apostles and believers travelled preaching the Gospel. Men were dramatically changed. So much so that Paul can wave aside the old teachings and patterns and say, “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, or uncircumcision, but a new creation.” (Galatians 6:15). He can say, “If any man be in Christ he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, behold they have become new.” (II Corinthians 5:17). Also he can say, “You have put off the old humanity, and you have put on the new.” (Colossians 3:9–10).

### **The Nature of the New Birth.**

We have an obsession today to psychologise every experience a man has. Should we do this with the New Birth, we still will not really understand it. It is a mystery, as Jesus said, in John 3:8. We should therefore approach it with reverence. At the same time we can discover many facts concerning it. Let us, nevertheless look at the “new” aspect of it.

We have the “new” covenant. We have new wine, new cloth, new bottles, new man, new creature, new song, new heavens, new earth, and finally we have Christ saying, “Behold, I make all things new!” These new things are really the original creational things as God made them, but now renewed.

So this takes us directly to the meaning of the term “regeneration.” Whilst this word is only used technically twice in the Bible, it has been taken to cover the whole event of the renewal of man, and of the universe. It is used for the renewal of man in Titus 3:5 where the term “the renewal of the Holy Spirit,” and in Matthew 19:28 where it means the regeneration of the universe. A similar thoughts is an Acts 3:21 where Peter speaks of “the restitution of all things.”

What we gather, then, is this. What God originally created He will ultimately renew. In Genesis 1:26 and following verses we read that God created man in His own image. Sin did something to this image, whatever we may say. Some say it was defaced. Others see the image as relating to the whole person of man, and say that its operation has been reversed. The image is there, but is operating wrongly, even evilly. We need not enter into this debate, except to say that the Bible speaks of man as dead. Jesus says He comes to give life, obviously because man is dead and needs life. The Scriptures make it clear that when a man experiences regeneration or new birth, he is a restored person. He has a new heart, new life, and a new direction. He also has a new destiny.

### **How is a Man Born Again.**

We must be practical, in the ultimate. How does a man come to New Birth? Jesus says it is a being “born again,” or “begotten from above.” In other words it is an act of God in man whereby, just as in physical birth he could not initiate his own conception but was dependent upon others, so in this “new birth,” God must move. The life he receives and will live must come “from above.” That is it is not mere human life. John makes this clear when he says in the 1st Chapter of his Gospel, verses 12–13. “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God: who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

He is very plain; not human conception, nor human will, nor human effort can make one a child of God. The creation is from God. Hence the need of the Spirit to effect this spiritual birth. “Except a man be born. . . of the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” Yet some human action is indicated. If one believes, one receives Christ, then the miracle takes place. Jesus also mentions being “born of water.” This has been strongly debated as to its meaning. Some see it as seminal fluid, some as the water which appears at natural birth, others as the seminal Word of God. The most natural explanation is reference to the baptism of

John or Jesus which was then taking place. This baptism signified repentance, with a view to the remission of sins. We can say, then that when a man repents he comes into the birth of the Spirit.

This is reasonable, for when the Spirit came upon the Gentiles at Caesarea He obviously regenerated them. Also the Jews commented, “Then God hath granted also to the Gentiles the gift of repentance unto life.” The coming of the Spirit related to their repentance and repentance is always “unto life,” that is the new life, eternal life.

If then you wish to be practical you should believe on Christ, receive Him, and you will be born of the Spirit. As we said, you do not have to seek some felt experience as such, for the Spirit will effect that in any case. If you have not believed and received, you should do so now and trust God that He has wrought the New Birth in you.

### **The New Birth and the Cross.**

Wherever in the New Testament you have the promise or mention of the New Birth it is always in the background of the Cross. Readers should look up the context of these Scriptures:– John 3:3–6, II Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15, Titus 3:5, and I Peter 1:23. For our purposes we will look at the John Chapter three Scripture. Here Nicodemus is still puzzled even after Jesus has pointed him back to the Old Testament. So Jesus says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up that whoever believes on him should not perish but have eternal life.” (V. 14).

Jesus is referring this scholar back to Numbers 21:4–9. The incident concerns Israel as it rebelled in the wilderness and was visited with poisonous vipers. Most of the people had been bitten and were doomed. Moses prayed for the people, not wishing them to be destroyed, and God told him to make a brass reproduction of a viper, and set it on a pole. The people if they looked would live. Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, in effect. “ I will be as a serpent set upon a pole. He who looks at me will live.”

We need not seek to apply the incidents in every detail. The essence of it is this, as Jesus applied it:— “All were doomed to death. They needed new life. Out of that which looked like the cause of their death, the viper, came life if their faith and obedience caused them to look hopefully at the snake and pole. Similarly, I will be made to look like that which caused death to man— the serpent. Men, dying in their sins are perishing. If they look at me on that pole, that Cross, they will live. Not only will they not die, but they will then receive what they did not have before—eternal life.”

Was He like a serpent on that Cross? The answer is, “Yes.” He bore our sins in His own body on the Tree. The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Our old humanity—rebellious, evil, and deathly as it was— was crucified with Him. Every form of evil was taken up into that Cross for we read in Romans 8:3 that God condemned sin in His flesh. Yes, He was made to be sin for us. How vile and loathesome He must have appeared. Little wonder that God turned from Him. Yet no evil ever was which He did not take up into that Cross and defeat and destroy. And over it all, as the battle finished He cried triumphantly, **“It is finished!”**

### **Conclusion .**

The New Birth is a beginning. It is the beginning. It is the beginning of a new life, which constantly knows the stream of renewing power working through it. One day the new creations, called God’s men, will live in the new creation of God’s eternal universe. The question is, however, “Have you been born again; made anew?” Jesus said, “Except a man be born anew, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”

How be born? Peter says “of the living Word of God.” That is by hearing, and obeying; by receiving Christ as you believe; by coming into repentance and faith.

Do it now. It is a matter of life and death. When you are made anew it will be only a matter of life. But do it now.

“If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away. Behold! They have become new!”

“And He that sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold! I make all things new!’”