

The Christian Race and Other Sermons (1900)

by
J. C. Ryle

Sermon 3

"REGENERATION" (Part 2)

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

About this new birth--without which no man or woman can be saved! You may remember I began to speak of it last Sunday morning, and I endeavored to establish in your minds two main points, which it may be well to recall to your recollection now. First, then, I showed you the reason why this new birth is so absolutely necessary to salvation. It is because of our sinful hearts, our inbred corruption. We are born from the very first with a disposition towards that which is bad. We have no natural readiness to serve God,--it is all against the grain. We have no natural insight into the excellence of Christ's spiritual kingdom, no natural love towards His holy laws or desire to obey them, no natural fitness for heaven. An unrenewed man would be miserable in the company of Jesus and the saints. In short, I said, it is not enough that we are born of the flesh once, natural men. We must needs be born the second time of God and become spiritual men, or else we shall never taste eternal life. I then reminded you of the awful carelessness and indifference and deadness and lukewarmness and coldness and slothfulness about religion which does so widely prevail. And I observed that people were always ingenious in framing reasons and making excuses for their own particular neglect of God, always supposing they had some special difficulty to contend with, which none else had--business, or poverty, trouble, or family, or want of time, or want of learning, and the like--always fancying if these difficulties were taken out of the way they should be such good Christians. And I then told you to mark that the root of all these difficulties is the natural old heart, and the thing wanted is not leisure and ease and money and learning, but a new heart and a new principle within.

Secondly, I went on to set before you the nature and character of this new birth. I showed that it was a change not outward only, but inward,--not in name only, but in spirit and in truth,--a change so thorough, so searching, so radical, so complete, that he who has gone through it may be called born again, for he is to all intents and purposes a new man. He was darkness, but he is now light. He was blind, but he can now see. He was sleeping, but he is now awake. He was dead, but he now lives. He was earthly-minded, but he is now heavenly-minded. He was carnal, but he is now spiritual. He was worldly, but he is now godly. He once loved most the things corruptible; he now loves the things incorruptible. He did set his chief affections on that which is mortal; he now sets them on immortality.

Lastly, I pressed upon you all the immense, the surpassing importance of this doctrine, and I do so now again. I urged you, every one, to remember,--and I repeat it now,--it shall avail us nothing that Christ Jesus has brought in righteousness for us if there be not also the work of the Holy Ghost

within us; that it shall profit us nothing to say we are redeemed if there is not also good evidence that we have been indeed renewed.

I shall now go on, according to my promise, to set before you the first great cause of this new birth, and the means and the manner in which it comes. And I once more pray God that the subject may not be carelessly put aside, but thought over and made useful to all your souls.

I. This new birth, then, this great spiritual change, whence comes it, and how does it begin? Can any man give it to himself when he pleases? Can any change his own heart? No! The thing is impossible. We can no more quicken and impart life to our souls than we can to our bodies. We can no more rise and become new men in our own strength than wash away sins by our own performances. It is impossible! The natural man is as helpless as Lazarus was when he lay still and cold and motionless in the tomb. We may remove the stone, as it were, and expose the sad work of death, but we can do no more. There must be a power far mightier than any power of earth in exercise before the natural man can awake and arise and come forth as a new creature. And to do all this is the special office of the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Ghost, whom Jesus promised to send. It is He that quickens; it is He that gives life. The Spirit alone can make the seed we scatter bear fruit; the Spirit alone can lay the first foundation of that holy kingdom we want to see established in your hearts. It is the Spirit [who] must move over these waste and barren souls before they can become the garden of the Lord. It is the Spirit [who] must open the darkened windows of our conscience before the true light can shine in upon those chambers within us. And so, he that is born again is born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God; for the Spirit is very God.

Beloved, this is a very humbling and awful truth. The conversion of a sinner can never be that light, off-hand affair that some do seem to think it. This great change which must come over us can never be a thing so entirely within our reach and grasp that we may put off the old Adam like a cloak and put on the new man just when and where we please. Oh, but it is a work that cannot possibly be done without the hand of God! The same Power which first created heaven and earth, and called the fair world around us into being,--the same Power alone can create in us new hearts, and renew in us right minds--the same Power alone can convert the natural man into the spiritual.

Yes! you may dream of death-bed repentance and say, By-and-by we will turn and become Christians; but you know not what you are saying. The softening of the hard heart, and the entrance upon new ways, and the taking up of new principles is no such easy matter as you seem to fancy. It is work that can only be begun by power divine, and who shall say you may not put it off too long?

It is not the plainest and clearest preaching, however lovely it may sound, which can cause men to be born again, without the Spirit. You may set Paul to plant and Apollos to water, but the Spirit alone can give the increase. We may raise up congregations fair and formal, and sinews and flesh and skin may cover the dry bones; but until the Spirit breathes upon them they are no better than dead. Not all the wisdom of Solomon, not all the faith of Abraham, not all the prophecies of Isaiah, not all the eloquence of Apostles, could avail to convert one single soul without the operation of the Holy Ghost. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts." And therefore I call this an awful truth. I know the Spirit is promised to all who ask it; but I tremble lest men should loiter and put off their souls' concerns so long that the Spirit may be grieved and leave them in their sins.

And still, beloved, awful as this truth may be to sinners, it is full of consolation to believers. It is full of sweet and unspeakable comfort to all who feel in themselves the holy workings of a new and spiritual nature. These can say with rejoicing, "It is not our right hand nor our arm which has brought us on the way towards Zion. The Lord Himself was on our side. It was He who raised us from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, and surely He will never let us go. Once we were sleeping and dead in trespasses, but the Spirit awakened us and opened our eyes. We caught a sight of the punishment prepared for the ungodly. We heard a voice saying, 'Come unto Me, and I will give you rest,' and we could sleep no longer. And surely we may hope that He, who graciously began the work of grace will also carry it forward. He laid the foundation, and He will not let it decay. He began, and He will bring His handiwork to perfection."

So much for the great Cause and Giver of the New Birth--the Holy Spirit. It only remains for us to consider the means through which it is ordinarily conveyed, and comes, and the different ways and manners in which it generally shows itself and produces its wonderful effects.

Now, with respect to the means which the Holy Spirit does ordinarily use, I would not have you for one minute suppose that I wish to limit or set bounds to the Holy One of Israel. I do not for an instant deny that some have been born again without any outward visible machinery having been used--by a sort of secret impulse which cannot be well explained. But I do say that, generally speaking, the Holy Ghost, in giving to a man that blessed thing the new birth, is pleased to work upon his heart more or less by means which our eyes can see and which our minds can understand. I would not, then, have you ignorant that a man is seldom born again of the Spirit without the *preaching of the Gospel* having something to do in the change. This is a special instrument for turning men from darkness to light, and many a one can testify that it was through sermons he was first touched, and brought to the knowledge of the truth. It was Peter's preaching which first touched the men of Jerusalem after our Lord's death, insomuch that they were pricked to the heart and said, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" It was the command which Jesus gave to the apostles before his ascension, they were "to preach unto the people and to testify." It was a cause of joy to Paul that Christ was preached at Rome: "I therein rejoice," he says, "and will rejoice." It was his own declaration about himself, "Christ Jesus sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel." No means is so blessed in all the experience of Christ's Church as the plain preaching of the Gospel; no sign so sure of decay and rottenness in a Church as the neglect of preaching, for there is no ordinance in which the Holy Spirit is so particularly present, none by which sinners are so often converted and brought back to God. Faith comes by hearing; and how shall men believe except they hear? Therefore it is that we press upon you so continually to be diligent in hearing Christ preached; for none are so unlikely to be born again as those who will not listen to the truth.

And seldom too is a man born of the Spirit without the *Bible* having something to do in the work. The Bible was written by men who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, and he who reads it seriously and attentively, or hears it read, is seeking acquaintance with God in God's own way. You would find few indeed among the Lord's true people who would not tell you that the starting-point in their spiritual life was some saying or doctrine in Scripture; [that] some part or portion, pressed home upon their consciences by an unseen, secret power, was among the first things which stirred them up to think and examine their ways; [or that] some plain declaration flashed across their minds and made them say, "If this be true I shall certainly be lost." Therefore it is we tell you over and over again, Search the Scripture, search the Scriptures; they are the sword of the

Spirit, they are the weapon by which the devil is often driven out; and he who leaves his Bible unread does plainly not wish to be born again.

Once more. Never are men born of the Spirit without *Prayer*. I believe there would not be found a single case of a person who had been quickened and made a new creature without God having been entreated of an inquired of before. Either he has prayed for himself, or someone has prayed for him. So Stephen died praying for his murderers, and by-and-by Saul was converted. The Lord loves to be sought after by His guilty creatures; and they who will not ask for the Holy Spirit to come down upon them have no right to expect in themselves any real change.

Such then, beloved, are the means through which this new birth is generally given. I say generally, because it is not for me to set bounds to the operations of God. I know men may be startled by sicknesses and accidents and the like, but still I repeat that preaching, the Bible, and prayer are the channels through which the Spirit ordinarily works. And I say further that in all my life and reading I never heard of a man who diligently, humbly, heartily and earnestly made use of these means who did not sooner or later find within himself new habits and principles. I never heard of a man steadily persevering in their use who did not sooner or later feel that sin and he must part company--who did not, in short, become a real child of God, a new creature.

III. So much for the means through which the Spirit generally conveys this new birth. There is yet one point to be considered this morning, and that is the *particular manner* in which this mighty spiritual change does first touch a person and begin.

Now, on this point I remark, there are great diversities of operations. There is a vast variety in the methods by which the Spirit works, and hence it is that we can never say He is tied down to show himself in one particular way. We must never condemn a person and tell him he is a graceless unconverted sinner because his experience may happen to differ widely from our own.

I would have you note, then, there is great diversity in the time and age at which this change beings. Some few have the grace of God in them from their very infancy. They are, as it were, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost from their mother's womb. They cannot so much as remember the time when they were without a deep sense of their natural corruption and a lively faith in Christ, and an earnest desire and endeavor to live close to God. Such were Isaac and Samuel and Josiah and Jeremiah, and John the Baptist and Timothy. Blessed and happy are these souls. Their memories are not saddened by the recollection of years wasted in carelessness and sin. Their imaginations are not defiled and stained with the remembrance of youthful wickedness. But few indeed are to be found of this sort. There would be far more, I am persuaded, if infant baptism were not so inconsiderately and lightly regarded (as it too often is)--so scrambled over; but we have no reason to expect the children of unbelieving parents can turn out anything else but unclean and unholy; and when children are brought to the font without real faith and real prayer, we have no warrant for supposing the baptism of water is accompanied by the baptism of the Holy Ghost.¹ And let me also add that much depends on the education which parents give; and many a one could tell you he got his first impressions of religion from the teaching and example of a

¹ *KM note:* We need not necessarily accept Ryle's view of infant baptism to agree that his point is well-taken. Water baptism, of any kind at any age, in and of itself does not produce regeneration. In the Baptist view, believer's baptism is not performed unless there already is a profession of faith and evidence of a regenerated life. In the case of infant baptism, when the baby is "brought to the font" by believing parents with "real faith" and "real prayer," then there is a basis for hope that this child will fall into the same category as "Isaac and Samuel and Josiah and Jeremiah, and John the Baptist and Timothy" as defined in this paragraph; otherwise the baptism is of no value whatsoever.

father and mother who really feared God.

But again. Many, perhaps the greater part of true Christians in our day, are never born of the Spirit till they come to age and have reached years of maturity. These were once walking after the course of this world, perhaps serving divers [various] lusts and pleasures, perhaps decent outwardly and yet only regarding religion as a thing for Sundays, not as a concern of the hearts. But by some means or other God stops them in their career and turns their hearts back again, and they take up the cross. And bitter indeed is their repentance, and great is their wonder that they could have lived so long in such a fashion, and warm is the love they feel towards Him who has so graciously forgiven them all iniquity.

Once more. Some few, some very few, are first brought unto God and born again in the advance and in the decline of life. Oh! but it is fearful to see how few. There are not many who ever arrive at what is called old age; and of these I believe a very insignificant part indeed are ever brought to a saving change, if they have not been changed. And little wonder if we consider how deeply rooted a thing is habit, how hard it is for those who are accustomed to do evil to learn to do good. O brethren beloved, youth is the time to seek the Lord! I know that with God nothing is impossible. I know that He can touch the rock that has long been unmoved, if He pleases, and make the water flow. But still we very seldom hear of old men or women being converted. Grey hairs are the time for burning the oil of grace and not for buying it, and therefore I say, pray that your flight be not in the winter of life.

IV. The next thing I would have you note is the *great diversity in the ways* by which the Spirit, so to speak, does strike the first blow in producing this new birth.

Some are awakened suddenly, by mighty providences and interpositions of God. They despise other warnings, and then the Lord comes in and violently shakes them out of sleep and plucks them like brands from the burning. And this is often done by unexpected mercies,—by extraordinary afflictions and troubles, by sicknesses, by accidents, by placing a man in some great danger and peril. And thousands, I am certain, will tell us in heaven, "It is good for us that we were tried and distressed. *'Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept Thy word.'*" This was the case with Paul. He was struck to the earth blinded while going to Damascus to persecute, and he rose up a humbled and a wiser man. This was the case with Jonah. When he fled from the Lord's command, he was awakened by a storm while sleeping on board the ship. This was the case with Manasseh, king of Judah. He was taken prisoner and laid in chains at Babylon, and in his affliction he sought the Lord. This was the case with the jailer at Philippi. He was roused by the earthquake and came and fell down saying, "What shall I do to be saved?" This is the case spoken of by Elihu in the thirty-third of Job. And here is the reason why we ought to feel so anxious about a man when God has laid His hand upon him and afflicted him. I always feel about such a person, "There is one whom the Lord is trying to convert. Will it or will it not be all in vain?"

Again. Some are awakened suddenly by very little and trifling things. God often raises up Christ's kingdom in a man's heart by a seed so small and insignificant, that all who see it are obliged to confess, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes." A single text of Scripture sometimes, a few lines in a book taken up by accident, a chance expression or word dropped in conversation and never perhaps meant by him who spoke it to do so much. Each of these seeming trifles has been known to pierce men's hearts like an arrow, after sermons and ordinances have

been used without appearing to avail. I have heard of one who could trace up the beginning of his conversion to the saying of a perfect stranger. He was profanely asking God to damn his soul when the stranger stopped him and said, it were better to pray that it might be blessed than damned. And that little word found its way to his heart. Oh, how careful should we be over our lips! Who knows what good might be done if we only strove more to speak a word in season?

Once more. Some are born of the Spirit gradually and insensibly. They hardly know at the period what is going on within them. They can hardly recollect any particular circumstances attending their conversion, or fix any particular time. But they do know this--that somehow or other they have gone through a great change; they do know that once they were careless about religion and now they hold it chiefest in their affections; once they were blind and now they see. This seems to have been the case with Lydia at Philippi. The Lord gently opened her heart so that she attended to the things spoken by Paul. This is what Elijah saw in the wilderness. There was the whirlwind and the earthquake and the fire, and after all [these] there was something else--a still small voice. And here is one reason why we sometimes hope and trust that many amongst the hearers in our congregations may still prove children of God. We try to think that some of you feel more than you seem to do, and that the time is near when you will indeed come out and be separate, and not be ashamed to confess Christ before men.

There is one more diversity I would very shortly notice. Remember there is diversity in the feelings which the Spirit first excites. Each feeling is moved sooner or later, but they are not moved always in the same order. The new birth shows itself in some by causing exceeding fear--they are filled with a strong sense of God's holiness, and they tremble because they have broken His law continually. Others begin with love--they are full of affection towards Him who died for them, and no sacrifice seems too great to make for His sake. But all these work one and the Same Spirit; in this man He touches one string and in that another. But sooner or later all are blended in harmony together, and when the new creation has fully taken place, fear and sorrow and love may all be found at once.

Beloved, time will not allow me to go further with this subject today. I have endeavored to show you this morning who is the Worker, the Cause of the new birth--it is not man but God the Holy Ghost; what the means are through which He generally conveys it--preaching, the Bible, and prayer. And lastly I have shown you there are many diversities in His operations. With some He begins in infancy, with some in full years, with some few in old age. On some He comes down suddenly and on some gradually, in some He first moves one sort of feelings and in some another. But whatever be His operations, without the Spirit none can be born again.

And now, in conclusion, tell me not [that] you mean to wait lazily and idly, and if the Lord gives you this blessed change, well, and if not you cannot help it. God does not deal with you as if you were machines or stones. He deals with you as those who can read and hear and pray, and this is the way in which He would have you wait upon Him. Never was doctrine so surrounded with promises and encouragements and invitations as this. Hear what Jeremiah says: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people." Again: "They shall be my people, and I will be their God: and I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me forever, for the good of them, and of their children after them." Then what Ezekiel says: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes." Then lastly what the Lord

Jesus says: "Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find: every one that asketh receiveth: your Heavenly Father shall give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him." And this is what we want you to do. Until you pray for yourselves in earnest, we know there will be little good done. And if any prayerless man shall say in the day of judgment, "I could not come to Christ," the answer will be, "You did not try."

Then quench not the Spirit, grieve not the Spirit, resist not the Spirit. His grace has been purchased for you. Strive and labor and pray that you may indeed receive it. And then God has covenanted and engaged that He shall come down like rain on the dry ground--like water to wash away your soul's defilement, like fire to burn away the dross and filth of sin, and the hardest heart among you shall become soft and willing as a weaned child.