

## **The Miracle of Men Twice Born** by John Roach Straton

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. "Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. "Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? "Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?"—John 3:3–10.

The dialogue between Jesus of Nazareth and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, is one of the most informing recorded in Holy Writ. Abysmal ignorance of spiritual things characterized the great man Nicodemus, and perfect knowledge of these spiritual things characterized the One who had nothing considered great upon earth, yet who was the Maker of the world. As man, Jesus knew what was in man, for He was Himself fully, completely and truly man. But He also knew, as God, what was in man, for He was also truly God. He was the God-Man. Therefore, He knew man from both the human and divine viewpoints. What now is Christ's judgment in the light of this perfect knowledge which He possessed of man? His judgment is, "Ye must be born again." The second chapter closes with the statement, "He knew what was in man." The third chapter opens with the statement, "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews," and it was to this man, this religious man, this great ruler of the people, that Jesus said, "Ye must be born again."

He knew man so completely that He saw that even Nicodemus, who was famous because of his high position in the religious life of his people, needed regeneration first of all. Without that, he could not enter into the real treasures of religious truth; and Jesus, therefore, expressed His amazement that one who was a ruler of the Jews did not even know those things. The very kindergarten truth of Christianity is that we must be born again. That is the beginning of all else. Neither the ceremonies with which Nicodemus was familiar nor those which modern men observe nor deeds of charity nor mere mental assent to doctrine is sufficient. "Ye must be born again" is the ultimatum of Heaven, and on no ground whatsoever is it possible to get by it. It is final. It is fundamental.

Scripture throughout proclaims this truth. The ancient prophet, with profound spiritual understanding, stated an impossible proposition when, with noble scorn, he asked, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). And throughout all the New Testament this same note of necessity runs in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles alike. It is summarized in the inexorable statement of Paul: "Neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Gal. 6:15). Out of the heart are the issues of life,

and until hearts of stone and sin are taken out of us, and hearts of flesh to love God are put into us, we cannot please God nor walk worthily before our fellowmen.

### **VERIFICATION BY REASON**

Reason verifies the teaching of Scripture concerning this vital matter. Whatever one may think of the Garden of Eden story, certainly it is true that that story is reenacted in every human life. Each one of us comes to the place of moral responsibility and moral accountability. Each one of us comes to the point where Adam and Eve stood, with the two roads—the road of obedience and the road of disobedience—stretching away before us. The tragic and terrible fact of all human life is that every son of Adam sooner or later takes the wrong road. The accusing voice of conscience itself—and who has not heard it?—proclaims the fact of this disobedience and sin and of accountability to eternal righteousness. Otherwise, what means this inward monitor whose voice accuses when we do that which is wrong and approves when we do that which is right? I was recently reading a great sermon by a great preacher in which he pictured with overpowering eloquence the awful truth that man is a fallen and ruined principality. He pictured the perverted reason. He pictured the imperious passions clamoring like furies for that which they desire. He pictured the royal will weakened and the affections that have in them the capacity of love for the highest, leering upon the lewd, and selfishly following after the things of the flesh.

What does it all mean? It means that we are fallen beings. The very horror with which we face our own bad record proves that we were once heirs of a nobler and higher estate. Our judgment has been warped. Our affections have been prostituted. Our wills have been weakened by something external to ourselves, so that alone we never are our best possible selves. What is it that thus has changed man? It is sin. This it is that has separated between us and God. The first letter in that word is in the form of a serpent, and the word itself is a hiss; and the hiss of the serpent of sin has been heard through all the centuries from Eden's dark day of rebellion down to the present tragic hour.

"Ye must be born again." The whole story of earthly history and all of human experience proclaim this truth with trumpet notes. What means the travail that history records, if it does not mean this? What mean the lust and the jealousy, the rapine and the wrong, the murder and the robbery which have marred the record of the race, if man is already right? Ah no, man in his natural state is not right! Individual experience and even the most casual observation of contemporary life must tell to the thoughtful the same story that history and Scripture are telling: "Ye must be born again." I knew of the case of a bright young man who broke his old mother's heart, all but wrecked the life of a trusting young wife, smirched the good names of his children with infamy, went to the very door of the pit of human degradation; then, in the mercy and the grace of God, he was given a new heart, righted as far as he could the wrongs of his past, and climbed back to honor and success. He was a young man who had a fair start in life. He came from a good family, and through the influence of that family, he was given a position of responsibility in a bank.

For a season he made good, but then, starting at the social card table, playing merely, as it is stated, for "innocent amusement," he drifted further and further until the gambling fever was in his veins. To get money with which to pay his gambling debts and to put up larger stakes on the horses, he "borrowed" secretly from the bank, fully intending to replace that which was taken; but it was the old story of the fool and his money being soon parted. Thus disgrace fell upon him, and through that and the wild excitement of the gambling fever, he began to drink and then to drift. His family and friends rallied to him and tried to brace him up, and for a little season he did, in connection with the new year, "turn over a new leaf." But that mere resolution of a human will soon failed him. Though another position had been secured for him, he soon failed in that and again drifted.

He left his family and became practically a tramp and a wanderer upon the face of the earth, bloated and palsied from alcoholic poison. He walked among his fellows like the evil shadow of a once noble manhood. One day he met an old acquaintance—a Christian man—upon the streets of the city. The man stopped to shake hands with him and to give him a sympathetic word of cheer. This youth, who was a failure, said to him, "I have decided what I am going to do: I am going to South America and make a new start." But the friend, who was friend enough to deal honestly with him, said, "Well, what good will that do? You had a splendid start in the bank and failed; then your family and friends saved you from prison, and you had another start in another city; but again you failed. Now you say you are going to South America, but the first man you will meet when you step off the steamer in that new land will be your own old self. All your weaknesses and the downward pull of your habits, your carelessness and your irreligion are in you, and no outside conditions can possibly give you success until the inside is changed." Then he laid a sympathetic hand upon his shoulder and said, "My dear friend, there is but one thing that will cure you and give you victory and success, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. You must be born again."

The Holy Spirit used that simple and sympathetic message. It went like an arrow of conviction to that guilty heart, and through it that young man was led to repentance and to the renunciation of his old habits of life. God gave him a new heart, and he went back to his home city and made good. He reestablished the honor of his name, returned to his home, and went forward in useful and productive service to God and man. There is no other way: "Ye must be born again."

## **SOCIAL SALVATION**

This truth is the only key to social salvation. We are hearing a great deal in this age about "social service." The modernists are trying to change Christianity from a supernatural, divine religion, into a religion of bald naturalism, having nothing higher nor better than mere enthusiasm for humanitarian relief and betterment of earthly conditions. It is an idle dream which is being indulged by some who have lost their faith through the wrong teaching and the miseducation of the times. The race will never "evolve" into a man-made kingdom of God. Social service cannot change hearts; and however much we may alter environment, until the heart is altered, nothing really vital has been done.

First things must be kept first; and even social-service enthusiasm can lead us astray unless we balance it with the eternal truths of God. Failure will be written above the doors of the church if she departs from her faith and if she surrenders her message of eternal life. If she consents to the substitution of mere morality in place of spirituality, her doom is sealed. If she seeks to exploit the altruistic practices of the Christian Faith as a substitute for the Faith itself and commits herself to an earthbound, time-limited, humanitarian program, which can only be a by-product and never become the full program of the true church, then her usefulness will be at an end. Supernatural salvation and not natural human betterment is her true mission in the world. Modernism cannot steal the ethics of the cross while it rejects the truth of the cross. When they started out, the early Christians did not say, "We must overthrow this rotten government and reform these vicious social and economic conditions; then perhaps our message will have a hearing and our cause a chance." If they had done that, we would never have heard of them nor of the church.

Even in the midst of the awful conditions of Athens and Corinth, Paul "determined not to know any thing...save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Those early Christians clearly saw that Christ's plan was not so much to change institutions as to change hearts, and they understood that the mission of the church is to furnish society with the "twice-born men" necessary for carrying forward any true reform. Such men alone can serve as the foundation for all righteous laws and all genuine social service. We have it illustrated in the instance of Zacchæus the publican. Before he met Jesus Christ, he was an antisocial individual, an exploiter of the people, a robber of the poor, and he had been successful with it. He was rich. When he met Jesus Christ, his heart was changed. He became a saved man, but Jesus Himself said, "This day is salvation come to this house." Because of that change within his own heart and life, Zacchæus stood and made his confession. He offered the half of his goods for the poor and planned ample restitution, declaring that he would return fourfold all that had been gotten by wrong accusation. His conversion not only made him right with God, but right also with his fellowmen.

Unless religion goes that deep, then it accomplishes nothing at all. The early followers of Jesus understood all this clearly. Like their Master, they rebuked organized iniquity and sin in high places; but as the foundation for all really effective social-service work, they saw the fundamental need of individual regeneration. They understood that social service cannot be substituted for personal salvation. We need to understand that truth today. Mere reform, apart from Christ, cannot permanently heal the sores of our society. Jesus did not say, "Ye must be reformed again," but He did say, "Ye must be born again." Again, He said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." He cannot even "see" it! Yet some are imagining that we can bring in the kingdom merely by righteous laws and improved social and economic conditions!

We need the old-fashioned truth of regeneration as the basis of all our thinking. It is a truth great enough to serve as a foundation for our entire philosophy of life. With the object lesson of modern Germany before us, we may as well be done with dreaming of a man-made perfect society and ideal state. We cannot build a good society out of bad men any more than we can build a good house out of rotten boards. We cannot reform this sin-

cursed world into the kingdom of God, and the church today needs to get back to her main job! Let us face again the profound truthfulness of the Scripture statement that "out of it [the heart] are the issues of life." Therefore, we must be born again—given new hearts—born from above—born of the Spirit. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." How obvious it is, in the light of all Scripture, history and experience, yet how slow men are to yield themselves to the eternal truth of God!

## **THE MYSTERY OF REGENERATION**

But someone takes his place by the side of Nicodemus and asks, "How can these things be? How can a man be born when he is old?" This brings us face-to-face with the "how" of regeneration. Jesus had to face it, and He did face it and answered the question. Let us stand with Him and see the answer. First, He admitted that there was a mystery here that cannot be fully understood: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Men, with all their learning, cannot solve the mystery of the wind. Indeed, we are surrounded on every side with mysteries that are beyond our understanding. Tell me tonight the mystery of electricity by which this building is lighted.

Explain to me that mysterious power which you do not understand, yet which you will trust yourself to and which will carry you home on the subway or the car. Tell me how it is that the rainbow is hung upon the dark bosom of the storm. Tell me how the gateway of the morning is pressed open and the beauty of a new day is ushered in. Tell me how the heavens are frescoed with the irresistible fascination of the sunset or the majestic beauty of the passing storm. Tell me how it is that the sunlight can fall upon the little patch of black dirt in your backyard until it thrills with the mysterious power of a new birth, and out of that mud and darkness there springs the beauty of the lily and the rose! Give me an answer to the how of these miracles, and then perchance I will be able to tell how God Almighty sends the sunshine of His love to kiss the soil of a sin-darkened heart and to bring forth from it the fair flowers of righteousness and truth.

Yet, mysterious though it is, there are some things that we can know about regeneration. We know, for one thing, that it is from God and by His power. While we do not understand the mystery of the wind, God understands it; and it blows not by chance or haphazardness, but according to the plans of the Almighty and through the laws which He has ordained, and so we know that regeneration is the gift of God's love and that it comes to us by His divine power. This is, in essence, just what Jesus said to Nicodemus: "The wind bloweth where it listeth. You do not understand it, Nicodemus, because you cannot see its end from its beginning; but God understands it. So is every one that is born of the Spirit."

## MAN'S SIDE

And then Jesus led Nicodemus to the next great step in the understanding of this truth. He pointed him first to God's side, then He pointed him to man's side. He said to him: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: "That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."—John 3:14–16.

Jesus started with regeneration and ended with the atonement. He recalled to the memory of Nicodemus that incident in the history of Israel with which, as a ruler of the Jews, he was fully familiar.

There came a time when, during the wilderness journey, deadly serpents came into the camp. They were stinging the people on the right hand and on the left, and multitudes were dying. Moses came to God in consternation and asked Him what to do. God told him to erect in the midst of the camp a brazen serpent upon a pole, and God promised him that everyone who looked upon that serpent should live—that there would be healing from the poison of the serpent through the look of faith upon that which God thus planned.

We can imagine that scene. We can imagine an Israelite's coming into the tent of a friend who was sick unto death. We can see the man lying there with wan and wasted cheek, with bloodshot eyes, with the fever of death in his face, and with his doom settling dark about him. We can hear the visitor saying to him, "Come, look upon the serpent, and you shall live."

We can hear the poor sufferer replying, "What possible good could that do? Do you not see that I am so feverish that I can scarcely turn over my hand? that I am so near gone that I can scarcely see to look?" Then we can hear the solicitous friend saying, in the light of his own experience: "Ah, but I know it will cure you because it has cured me. It makes no difference how far you have gone or how weak you are. God has provided a means of healing, and if you will obey and look, you shall live. Come! Come!" Then we can see him slipping his strong arm under that wasted form. We can watch them as they totter together to the door of the tent. We can see the friend pointing, yea, lifting the chin of the sufferer and saying to him, "Look! Look, man, before it is too late!"

Then as he looks, we can see the light coming back into his closing eyes. We can see the flush of returning health coursing through his sunken cheeks. We can see the quick breath leaping again into his lungs. We can hear him exclaiming, "Why, isn't it wonderful! I am feeling better. Isn't it amazing! Why, I am well! Well! I am healed! Glory to God, I am saved!" "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," said Jesus, "even so must the Son of man be lifted up." Do you hear that inexorable must? It is the measure of the love of a merciful God for a race of unworthy sinners. It is the proclamation of the pardon of Heaven for a rebellious world. And man's side—what is it? It is to obey God and

exercise faith. It is simply to look to Jesus on the cross as Redeemer. There is life for a look at the crucified One; There is life at this moment for thee.

"That whosoever," Jesus said, "believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Will you have it? Then through the mercy and the grace of God in Christ Jesus, will you stop pondering the how of regeneration and accept the glorious fact itself? Will you believe and live? "But," you ask, "how may I know that I have been born again?" Because God tells you that when you believe, you are born again: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (I John 5:1). Do you want any more than that, O friend? Do you need any more than the love of God and the holy Word of God that, through your faith, the tides of new life are certainly flowing into you and giving you a new heart and transforming you from a child of the Devil into a son of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ of the eternal glories?

Oh, believe me tonight! God is good! God is great! He is equal to the task even of saving your soul and transforming your life; and according to the measure of your faith and the depths of your humility, it shall be unto you!

### **STOOPING LOW FOR POWER**

A few weeks ago I was at Niagara Falls. I always delight to visit that spot of beauty and of earthly glory. I never weary looking at the majesty of the Falls. I have seen them in their winter garments of glistening snow and ice. I have seen them in the radiance of the spring, adorned as a bride for her husband. I have seen them in the meridian splendor of midsummer. I have seen them again when autumn was drawing her Indian shawl about her shoulders and when every leaf on every tree and every little bush and blade of grass—even those in the clefts of the rocks and along the rugged sides of the frowning gorge, as well as in the beautiful parks surrounding the Falls—were flaming in the splendor of crimson, saffron, bronze and gold. I have thought too in such times not only of the beauty but of the power of the Falls. And I have observed that those who would translate that potential power of the mighty cataract into useful service must go down beneath the level of the Falls.

I have observed too that the lower the level on which the prayer is made, the greater is the volume of the power that comes in response. On this recent visit there to Niagara, I was conducted by a committee of distinguished citizens through some of those great manufacturing plants. They took me into one of the paper mills where much of the paper that our country uses is manufactured. In going through that establishment, I noticed with some surprise that those who were guiding me did not start upon the upper floors of the towering building where the paper comes out smooth, white and beautiful, but we put on rubber coats and went down, down, down, through story after story, going lower and lower toward the bottom of the great gorge through which rushes the turbulent river below the Falls.

There at the lowest depth, almost at the very edge of the river, on the very first floor of that basement part of the factory, I was shown the powerful machines that tear the logs to pieces that they may be transformed first into wood pulp, then into the shining paper that brings us the world's news in our favorite daily, or the charming stories that delight us in magazines and beautiful books. There are those machines—grim and awful monsters—and into their ravenous mouths the workmen were feeding the logs. There were rapidly whirling discs of stone, with jagged teeth upon their edges. As the logs were pressed in, these teeth tore them. They gnawed and mangled and stripped them bare. Thus they broke the logs into minute pieces of pulp wood, and this was taken then upon the bosom of the passing stream of water that rushed through the troughs and carried on and up. They mixed with it, on its upward journey, certain chemical elements to make it white and strong. All impurities were carefully screened out of it, and step by step, as the stream of molten wood and chemicals flowed along, it was dried out until at last it began to assume a certain consistency so that it would hold together.

Then, finally, it was passed over large heated rollers, the last bit of moisture being thus dried out of it, and it came spinning out, at the end of the last machine—smooth, white, beautiful paper! What a miracle it all is! Rough, uncouth logs, grimy with soil and obstinate in their tough fiber, yet transformed (the very same substance!) into soft, smooth, useful, beautiful paper—bringing us the world's news and delighting our hearts with history, poetry, romance and art from all the past ages! If man can do that, then what cannot God do? If man can take tough, filthy logs and make them over into forms of grace and beauty, then cannot the living God take even our sordid and stubborn hearts and transform them into new hearts that shall become temples of truth and altars of worship to the glory of the Almighty?

Who just now will yield himself to the power of this infinite, wise and compassionate God? He transformed Paul. In an unnumbered multitude of lives, He has gotten to Himself eternal glory through the miracle of regeneration. Oh, my friend, in this very hour He will save you if only you will give yourself to Him in surrender and faith! See the awfulness of your sin and the urgency of your need. See the blessed Saviour, crucified for you and risen again. Call upon Him now with your full faith turned to Him. Trust Christ and be born again. Receive the miracle of the new birth for yourself today.