

**The Gospel of John (15);  
“Jesus, Nicodemus, and the New Birth” (part 2) (3:1-21)**

**Introduction:**

Let us return in our study of chapter 3 of the Gospel of John in which we read of our Lord Jesus, Nicodemus, and the new birth.

Last Lord’s Day we began to consider this interchange between Nicodemus, a leading teacher of Israel, and the Lord Jesus. I believe that we can say of Nicodemus that he came to Jesus to inquire of Him because he was a genuine seeker after truth about God and to understand more clearly how relate to Him. Nicodemus knew that Jesus was a special man, who had the hand of God upon Him, for no man could do the signs He did, unless God were with Him (John 3:2). But what Nicodemus heard from Jesus confused him, even confounded him. Jesus told him that unless he became born again, he would not see the kingdom of God. Here was a very religious man, who thought, actually everybody thought, that he knew the Hebrew Scriptures thoroughly and that he was one who had endeavored his whole life to live in devotion to God, by ordering his life in a very strict manner according to the law of God. But Jesus essentially told this man that he had nothing to commend him before God, that he was yet spiritually dead. Jesus told him that he needed God to impart to him new life, spiritual life, otherwise, he would never enter that blessed eternal existence in the kingdom of God. In spite of all Nicodemus was and all that he had done, unless the Holy Spirit did an internal, transformative a sovereign work of grace in him, so as to transform him into a new person, he would not see the kingdom of God.

Now there were some Jews in Israel in those days who had been ‘just’ before God, who had lived in the same religious system in which Nicodemus had lived and served. This was but a remnant of Jews, however, chosen by God and saved by God’s grace. They awaited the arrival of the promised kingdom of God, and they would not be disappointed. There was John the Baptist’s parents, **Zacharias**, himself a priest, and his wife, **Elizabeth**, were “both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luke 1:6). Then there was an elderly man, who “was a man in Jerusalem whose name was **Simeon**, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Luke 1:25). And right after we read of Simeon, we are drawn to **Anna**. We read of her that she “did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.” She recognized the infant Jesus as the promised Savior. We read of her, “And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (Luke 1:37, 38). And there was **Nathaniel**, a true “Israelite” in whom was no deceit. We read of him in John 1. And there were others, probably many others, but they were relatively few among the people of Israel of that day; they were but a remnant, a fraction of Jews. God in His sovereign grace had purposed to save a remnant, in order to be true to His promises to the Jewish people. Later the Apostle Paul would write of this remnant, that he was one of their number. He wrote of this as he was stating that God was still bring salvation through Jesus Christ, even though Jewish Christians seemed to be few in number, the majority of Jews refusing to believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Paul wrote,

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup>God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, <sup>3</sup>“LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”? <sup>4</sup>But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” <sup>5</sup>*Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.* <sup>6</sup>And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work. (Rom. 11:1-6)

Most Jews who lived during the days of our Lord's ministry remained in the spiritual condition as Nicodemus, when he came to Jesus that night. They were religious but lost. But they were ignorant of their desperate, damned condition. Paul described these unconverted Jews in Romans 10:1ff:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. <sup>2</sup>For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. <sup>3</sup>For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. <sup>4</sup>For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

<sup>5</sup>For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them." <sup>6</sup>But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down from above) <sup>7</sup>or, "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup>But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): <sup>9</sup>that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup>For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. <sup>11</sup>For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." <sup>12</sup>For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. <sup>13</sup>For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." (Rom. 10:1-13)

This describes the majority of Jewish people during the days of our Lord's earthly ministry and on into the Christian era. When Nicodemus came to Jesus that night, he was as one of these who had "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge." As intelligent, educated, well respected, highly positioned as Nicodemus was, he did not "get it." He thought that salvation, that is, entrance and participation in the promised kingdom of God, would be granted to him because he had so ordered his life in righteousness, that it entitled him to participate in the resurrection onto eternal life.

Paul indicated that Moses had addressed these matters of being zealous for the law of Moses and yet being lost in sin. He taught that if you follow the law, thinking that by keeping it you will attain a high enough degree of righteousness, then you will not have submitted to the only righteousness that will enable you to stand in the judgment, that being the gift of righteousness through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Their own false sense of personal righteousness blinded them to their need of an alien righteousness, one not of their own doing, a righteousness that is granted freely as a gift of God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. This is one reason that Jesus told some religious Jews, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31). This is not because more overtly sinful people are more righteous, but because they may tend to own their sin far sooner and more fully than a self-righteous religionist. They will sometimes more quickly embrace the gift of God's righteousness, for they know with certainty they have no righteousness of their own.

The Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that it would take a transformative work of the Holy Spirit to save him. Only the Holy Spirit could breathe new life in him, and only then would he understand his spiritual poverty, his damned condition, and his need for a work of God's grace apart from any work on his part.

Again, Paul wrote of the inability of a natural man, that is, anyone born in this world as a lost sinner, to comprehend the way of salvation. Only the Holy Spirit can enable a sinner to see his need, to see God's remedy in Christ, to humble himself, to give him the desire to receive this gift of grace, and thereby be saved from damnation and enter into everlasting life. We read of this in **1 Corinthians 2:7-14**. [I have included clarifying comments in brackets for better understanding]:

However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature [Here, "mature" are all true Christians], yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. <sup>7</sup>But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, <sup>8</sup>which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. <sup>9</sup>But as it is written:

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,  
Nor have entered into the heart of man [i.e. fallen man cannot apprehend the way of salvation]  
The things [i.e. the things of salvation] which God has prepared for those who love Him.”

<sup>10</sup>**But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit.** For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. <sup>11</sup>For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup>**Now we have received,** not the spirit of the world, but **the Spirit who is from God,** [so] **that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.**

<sup>13</sup>These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but **which the Holy Spirit teaches,** comparing spiritual things with spiritual. <sup>14</sup>But the natural man [i.e. naturally born, who has not been born again] does not receive the things of the Spirit of God [he rejects them], for they are foolishness to him [they reject the importance of them]; nor can he know them [they are incapable of understanding them], because they are spiritually discerned.

Here, receiving the Holy Spirit sent from God (the Father), so that we might know the true way of salvation (v. 12), is what Jesus referred in John 3 as being “born again.” Let us consider further this interchange between our Lord Jesus and Nicodemus. We will read again **John 3:1-7.**

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

Last week we proposed an outline of this entire dialogue, which is contained in verses 1 through 21. Here it is again:

- I. Nicodemus comes to Jesus (3:1)
- II. The dialogue of Nicodemus and Jesus (3:2-10)
- III. The dialogue becomes a discourse by Jesus to Nicodemus (3:11-21)

We pick up with **verse 4**, in the second section of this outline. We read, “**Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’**”

It is not clear to everyone the precise thinking of Nicodemus that moved him to respond to Jesus with this question. One of the majority opinion,

Nicodemus responds with a counter question that is often taken as affirmation that he misunderstood the ambiguous adverb (i.e. “again” in Jesus’ statement, “you must be “born again”).<sup>1</sup>

In other words, often commentators perceive Nicodemus as sincere, but ignorant. He was simply asking for understanding and clarification. If this is the case, then this might have been his thinking:

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Klink, III, **John.** Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 197.

A man, Nicodemus might have said, is the sum of all his yesterdays. He is the man he is today because of all the things that have happened to him through the years. He is a bundle of doubts, uncertainties, wishes, hopes, fears and habits good and bad built up through the years. It would be wonderful to break the entail of the past and make a completely fresh beginning. But how can this possibly be done? Can physical birth be repeated? Since this lesser miracle is quite impossible how can we envisage a much greater miracle, the remaking of man's essential being? Regeneration is sheer impossibility!<sup>2</sup>

There may be some merit to this argument that those who have not yet experienced the new birth can only understand that which they can see or touch. **J. C. Ryle** wrote of this:

The question of Nicodemus is precisely one of those which the natural ignorance of man in spiritual things prompts a person to ask. Just as the Samaritan woman, in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, put a carnal meaning on our Lord's words about "living water," and the Jews, in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, put a carnal meaning on the "bread of God," so Nicodemus puts a carnal meaning on the expression "born again."—There is nothing in the heart of man in every part and every age of the world is so slow to understand as the work of the Holy Ghost. Our minds are so gross and sensuous, that we cannot take in the idea of an inward and spiritual operation. Unless we can see things and touch things in religion we are slow to believe them.<sup>3</sup>

But the manner in which this question is posed suggests something more in Nicodemus' attitude than just being inquisitive. It may suggest that Jesus' comment somewhat confronted him, perhaps even insulted him. Clearly Nicodemus was ignorant, but he may have also been incredulous. Nicodemus asked a rhetorical question, which seems to suggest that our Lord's statement was illegitimate, or at least inappropriate. And so, the question may be posed,

"Does Nicodemus's response reflect confusion (misunderstanding) or rebellion (a further challenge based upon the rules of dialogue)?" It is most likely a mixture of both.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that we can see a note of hostility on the part of Nicodemus when we consider what the Lord Jesus had just told him. His being born of Jewish parentage and his entire life of achievement and service was just set aside as immaterial with regard to his participation in the coming kingdom of God. Had Jesus been talking to Nicodemus about the entrance of Gentiles or great sinners into the kingdom, Nicodemus might have concurred—"Of course, they need to be born again!" Moreover, "There are references to proselytes who entered the Jewish religion as being like children new born."<sup>5</sup> But Jesus was declaring that Nicodemus was no better off than the crass pagan living in ignorance in a far off land. The Lord Jesus told this Jewish man, this Pharisee, this member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, that unless he became born again, he would never see the kingdom of God!

To possess the privileges of Judaism a man only needed to be born of the seed of Abraham after the flesh. To possess the privileges of Christ's kingdom, a man must be born again of the Holy Ghost.

The change which our Lord here declares needful to salvation is evidently no slight or superficial one. It is not merely reformation, or amendment, or moral change, or outward alteration of life. It is a thorough change of heart, will, and character. It is a resurrection<sup>6</sup>. It is a new creation. It is the passing from death to life. It is the implanting in our dead hearts of a new principle from above. It is the calling into existence of a new creature, with a new nature, new habits of life, new tastes, new desires, new

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 131.

<sup>4</sup> Klink, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, **John**, p. 215.

<sup>6</sup> John 5:25-27.

appetites, new judgments, new opinions, new hopes, new fears. All this, and nothing less than this is implied, when our Lord declares that we all need a “new birth.”<sup>7</sup>

Nicodemus’ initial reaction to Jesus reflects the “natural” and ordinary way in which people who have not (yet) experienced the new birth react to the words of Jesus, or the words of Scripture, for that matter. As we read earlier, “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). If your reaction to our words is similar to that of Nicodemus to the words of Jesus, it does not bode well for your soul! And if you think that we are foolish because we believe these things, then you are only confirming what the Word of God tells us of your inability and unwillingness to hear, believe, and respond to the Word of God. If Nicodemus needed to be born again, so too, must you.

By the way, we should realize at this point in the narrative, the reader has more understanding than this teacher of Israel at this point. The reader has already been informed in the first chapter of the new birth and its result of seeing the kingdom of God (Cf. John 1:13, 51).

The response of Jesus to Nicodemus’ comment is in **verse 5** reads, “*Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’*” Our Lord repeated His assertion of verse 3, but used different words to enhance his meaning. Here He again opened His assertion with the repetition of the word, “Verily” (KJV) [Greek: Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν (*amen, amen*)]. Here in the NKJV it is translated as “Most assuredly.”

The expression “born of water” is found only here in all the Bible. It must be taken figuratively, for no one can be literally born of water. But there is no agreement as to precisely what our Lord meant by His words, “*unless one is born of water and the Spirit.*” **D. A. Carson** wrote, “These words have generated a host of interpretations.”<sup>8</sup> **Leon Morris** wrote, “The explanations of this unusual and arresting expression are many, but most of them fall into one or other of three main groupings.”<sup>9</sup>

(1) Some say that “born of water” refers to *purification*. If so, it would be similar to the idea of the baptism of John the Baptist signifying cleansing from sin. The baptism of the Spirit would then be the life imparted by the Lord Jesus to those who then come to Him in faith. There is need for cleansing (of water) and for new life (of Spirit).

(2) Some believe that “born of water” refers to *procreation*. They would say that Jesus was saying that to be born of water is a reference to physical birth, but being born of the Spirit is spiritual birth. In other words, Jesus was simply saying that one needed to be born physically but also spiritually born anew in order to enter the kingdom of God.

(3) Some say that “born of water” refers to *baptism*, thereby giving a sacramental understanding of these words. They would argue that two baptisms are referenced here, one of water and the other of spirit. To be born of water is water baptism, but to be born of the Spirit speaks of spiritual rebirth. However Jesus rebuked Nicodemus for he should have understood these things; Nicodemus could not have perceived Jesus alluding to a future sacrament of the church.

Here is a fuller discrediting of this view by **Donald Carson**:

Those who adopt this position, of course, are forced to admit that John’s words could have had no relevance to the historical Nicodemus. This part of the account, at least, becomes a narrative fiction designed to instruct the church on the importance of baptism. What is not always recognized is that this

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<sup>7</sup> Ryle, **John**, vol. 1, p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, **John**, p. 215.

theory makes the Evangelist an extraordinarily incompetent story-teller, since in v. 10 he pictures Jesus berating Nicodemus for not understanding these things. If water = baptism is so important for entering the kingdom, it is surprising that the rest of the discussion never mentions it again: the entire focus is on the work of the Spirit (v. 8), the work of the Son (vv. 14-15), the work of God himself (vv. 16-17), and the place of faith (vv. 15-16). An analogy between the mysterious wind and the sovereign work of the Spirit (v. 8) becomes very strange if Spirit-birth is tied firmly to baptism. Some doubt if there is an *explicit* reference to the eucharist (i.e. the Lord's Supper) in John 6 (*cf.* notes on 6:25ff.), casting doubt on the supposition that the Evangelist is deeply interested in sacramental questions. If he were, it is surpassingly strange that he fails to make explicit connections, neglecting even to mention the institution of the Lord's Supper. The Spirit plays a powerful role in John 14-16; 20:22, but there is no hint of baptism. Moreover the allusions to Jesus' baptismal activity (3:22; 4:1), far from fostering sacramentalism, explicitly divert attention elsewhere (*cf.* notes on 3:25-26; 4:2; 6:22ff.). The conjunction of water and Spirit in 1:26, 33 is no support for this position, as there the two are contrasted, whereas in 3:5 they are coordinated.

The entire view seems to rest on an unarticulated prejudice that every mention of water evoked instant recognition, in the minds of the first-century readers, that the real reference was to baptism, but it is very doubtful that this prejudice can be sustained by the sources.<sup>10</sup>

The understanding of our Lord's words in John 3:5 must be based on these conclusions: (1) Jesus was referring to one baptism, not two. (2) The preposition "of" governs both "water" and "Spirit." In other words, they must be seen to be two aspects of one work of grace in bringing salvation.

What, then, is the best way to understand verse 5? Answer: Our Lord spoke to Nicodemus, the teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures, who should have known about these matters, but he did not. The understanding of what Jesus said is found in the Hebrew Scriptures, which Nicodemus should have recognized. In Ezekiel water and Spirit are linked together in God's promise of salvation that people would receive in the age of the Messiah. Again, as **D. A. Carson** stated:

Far more important is the Old Testament background to 'water' and 'spirit.' The 'spirit' is God's principle of life, even in creation (*e.g.* Gen. 2:7; 6:3; Job 34:14); but many Old Testament writers look forward to a time when God's 'spirit' will be poured out on humankind (Joel 2:28) with the result that there will be blessing and righteousness (Isa. 32:15-20; 44:3; Ezek. 39:29), and inner renewal which cleanses God's covenant people from their idolatry and disobedience (Eze. 11:19-20; 36:26-27). When water is used figuratively in the Old Testament, it habitually refers to renewal or cleansing, especially when it is found in conjunction with 'spirit'. This conjunction may be explicit, or may hide behind language depicting the 'pouring out' of the spirit.<sup>11</sup> Most important of all is Ezekiel 36:25-27, where water and spirit come together so forcefully, the first to signify cleansing from impurity, and the second to depict the transformation of heart that will enable people to follow God wholly.

In short, what the Lord Jesus was telling Nicodemus was that unless he was cleansed from his sin ("of water") and given new life (and of Spirit), he would not enter the kingdom of God. In other words, of the three alternative understandings of Jesus' words listed above, the first one is to be preferred.

In verse 3 we read of the new birth enabling one to "*see*" the kingdom of God. Here in verse 5 the new birth enables one to "*enter*" the kingdom of God. "The meaning is much the same; inability to 'enter'

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<sup>10</sup> D. A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 192. An excellent website that lists and rates the best commentaries on individual books of the Bible is <https://www.bestcommentaries.com/>. In their list of about 137 commentaries on the Gospel of John, D. A. Carson is listed as #1 with a rating of "100", which is unheard of. The second rated commentary is rated at 83.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Num. 19:17-19; Ps. 51:9-10; Isa. 32:15; 44:3-5; 55:1-3; Jer. 2:13; 17:13; Ezek. 47:9; Joel 2:28-29; Zech. 14:8.

may be slightly stronger than inability to ‘see’ (i.e. experience). But the crucial difference in the wording is the change from ‘born ἀνωθεν (*anōthen*) (‘from above’, or ‘again’) to *born of water and the Spirit*.’<sup>12</sup>

We now arrive to **verses 6 and 7**, which read,

*‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’*

For several weeks I have been anticipating addressing this verse, with particular attention on the phrase, *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh.”* In thinking upon this I was preparing to launch into addressing the sinful nature of mankind and why that renders all people everywhere unfit for the kingdom of God. And, there is certainly that idea suggested here. But there is more, I discovered. What had narrowed my conception of this verse was the word “flesh”, and that I was imposing on it and restricting to it the meaning that the apostle Paul expresses frequently in his epistles; that is, “flesh” speaks of our sinful nature, that we derived from Adam, that has corrupted our very being. That is why we need to be born of the Spirit, for we are born to the world as sinners.

But there is a broader idea conveyed in John 3:6. This was reflected in one commentary:

This further statement by Jesus serves to reinforce the radical nature of the cleansing and renewal from God. The concept of flesh is not to be simplistically imported from the apostle Paul, for in John “flesh” is merely the body and its limitations, which is sharply contrasted to the source of the children of God, which is supernatural and entirely from the outside of a person (cf. 1:12-13). The point is quite simple: “flesh” and “spirit” are different spheres of reality. Each producing offspring like itself.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, in verse 6 the Evangelist was not narrowly speaking of flesh as our being sinful, although that is also suggested; rather, “that which is born of flesh is flesh” is describing more broadly our limitation as finite, yes, sinful, but principally finite creatures. And as such, we are incapable through natural birth to enter into the kingdom of God which is characterized by another kind of existence in the presence of an infinite God. And so, the Lord Jesus [who Himself had become “flesh” (1:14), but not sinful flesh] told Nicodemus that because he was but a human being, and that a sinful human being, he was unable to enter the kingdom of God to dwell in God’s presence with His people. **John Calvin** (1509-1564) stated it this way:

By reasoning from contraries, he argues that the kingdom of God is shut against us, unless an entrance be opened to us by a new birth, (παλιγγενεσία) for he takes for granted, that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God unless we are spiritual. But we bring nothing from the womb but a carnal nature. Therefore it follows, that we are naturally banished from the kingdom of God, and, having been deprived of the heavenly life, remain under the yoke of death. Besides, when Christ argues here, that men must be born again, because they are only flesh, he undoubtedly comprehends all mankind under the term flesh. By the flesh, therefore, is meant in this place not the body, but the soul also, and consequently every part of it... But if the flesh is contrasted with the Spirit, as a corrupt thing is contrasted with what is uncorrupted, a crooked thing with what is straight, a polluted thing with what is holy, a contaminated thing with what is pure, we may readily conclude that the whole nature of man is condemned by a single word. Christ therefore declares that our understanding and reason is corrupted, because it is carnal, and that all the affections of the heart are wicked and reprobate, because they too are carnal.<sup>14</sup>

**Matthew Poole** (1624-1679) addressed this in his commentary:

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<sup>12</sup> Carson, **John**, pp. 194f.

<sup>13</sup> Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 199.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, **Calvin’s Commentaries**, translated by William Pringle, vol. XVII (Baker Book House), pp. 112.

*Flesh* here signifieth the whole man, whether considered abstractly from the adventitious corruption of his nature, or as fallen in Adam, vitiated and debauched through lust. *And that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*: but that man or woman who is regenerated by the Spirit of grace is spiritual; he is *after the Spirit* (Rom. 8:5), he is one spirit with God (1 Cor. 6:17); he is made *partaker of the Divine nature* (2 Peter 1:4); he *doth not commit* (habitual) *sin* (1 John 3:9). Nothing in operation exceedeth the virtue of that cause that influenceth it; so that no man from a mere natural principle can perform a truly spiritual operation; and from hence it is absolutely necessary that man must be born of the Spirit, that he may be qualified for the kingdom of heaven.<sup>15</sup>

The fact is that there is an infinite distance between us as creatures, and God who is the eternal, infinite Creator. ***“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”***

Our Confession of Faith describes this infinite distance between God and us. The opening paragraph of Article 2, On God and the Holy Trinity, reads this way:

***“The Lord our God is but one only living and true God; whose subsistence is in and of himself, infinite in being and perfection; whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but himself;...”***

In this statement we have it affirmed to us the great distinction that exists between us as creatures and God our Creator. The fact is, that ***God is God, and you are not***. There is a vast gulf between God and human beings. We cannot comprehend what God is in his essence. We could never dwell with God due to this infinite difference between God’s essence and our own, as finite created human beings. ***“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”***

Nicodemus asked the question of Jesus in verse 4, ***“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”*** And Jesus basically responded to him, even if you could do so, and begin life all over again, you would still only be “flesh” born of “flesh.” No you need a different kind of birth, a spiritual birth, whereby God enables you to relate with the Father though He is eternal God, through His Son. And this can only take place if you are born of the Spirit.

There are two reasons for our inability to comprehend God.

(1) First, God’s essence cannot be comprehended by any but himself ***due to the great gulf between us, the Creator/Creature distinction***. This is due to the holy nature of God. This vast difference between us and God is because of His infinite holiness; God *is* holy. Which aside from the thought of being infinitely pure, it means that He is wholly different than the created things that He has made. He is the Creator. He is of a different nature, a complete different essence from His creatures. And because God our Creator is of one essence—an infinite and eternal Spirit, and we His creatures are of another kind of essence—finite, temporal, comprised of body and soul, we cannot comprehend God in His essence.

Holiness is the attribute of God that describes His “otherness” from His creatures, that is, He is distinct and unique from all that He created. We will examine this idea more fully at another time, but for our purposes here we can simply say that for God to be holy means that He is of a completely different kind of essence than that which He created.<sup>16</sup> There is an inherent idea in the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 that God is apart and wholly different from his creation. His essence is completely different from that which He created.

We cannot comprehend the essence of God, who He is in truth, because He is infinite and eternal. God is God and you are not God. You never can be, for there is a vast gulf between God and you. The Creator/creature distinction is so sharp and vast, that we cannot bridge it. We cannot make that journey from our finite being to His infinity. We are creatures. He is the Creator. We are of two wholly different essences. But wonder of wonders, here is the greatest mystery and the greatest miracle of all time, although we cannot become God, ***God has become one of us, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ***. The eternal Son of

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew Poole, **Commentary on the Holy Bible**, vol. 3 (Hendriksen Publishers, 2008), p. 291.

<sup>16</sup> For a study of the idea of holiness in the OT world, see William Snaith, **The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament** (London: Epworth Press, 1983), pp. 21-50.



God condescended to become a man, joining to His divine nature a human nature, and that without sin. In Jesus Christ this Creator/creature distinction was bridged. Jesus Christ the Son of God became man. He is the one and only God/man. Only through Jesus Christ may finite, fallen man come into relationship with his infinite Creator.

This inability to know God is clearly stated in the Scriptures. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians

But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." <sup>10</sup>But God has revealed them to us through his Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. <sup>11</sup>For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup>Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. <sup>13</sup>These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. <sup>14</sup>But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. <sup>15</sup>But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. (1 Cor. 2:9-15)

(2) The second reason that God's essence cannot be comprehended by any but himself is *due to the terrible effects of sin that alienates us from God and renders us unable to know Him*. The effects of sin have further distanced us from God and further rendered us incapable of knowing God, essentially, for who He is. Not only are we *finite* creatures, we are *fallen* creatures, and sin has taken its terrible toll upon us. And so, to make matters egregiously worse, if you can imagine them to be, our sinful condition has even rendered us incapable of understanding and relating as creatures to our Creator as we should. At least before sin, Adam and Eve could meet with God and speak with God, but that was only because God condescended to reveal Himself in a manner that they could comprehend Him. He has never revealed His full glory to the world, except when He sent his Son, in whom the fullness of God dwells. But even of Jesus our eyes are incapable of beholding Him fully. It is as though we were looking at Him through a dark glass, we only have a glimpse of His glory through the eye of faith. But one day we will see Him as He is. And for us that know Him it will be transforming. We will become like Him, glorified in a similar way, but certainly in no way to a similar degree. But to those who do not know Him the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will signal their fearful doom. They will call for the rocks and mountains to fall on them, for before His face even the heavens and earth flee (see Rev. 20). But this blessed beatific vision<sup>17</sup> of God, in which we will see Him for who He is, is only possible for those who have been born of the Spirit, those who have been born again.

**Matthew Henry** addressed both causes of our limitation to dwell with God in his comments on John 3:6. He wrote,

The *necessity* of this change. *First*, Christ here shows that it is necessary in the *nature of the thing*, for we are not fit to enter into the kingdom of God till we are born again: *That which is born of the flesh if flesh* (v. 6). Here is our malady, with the causes of it, which are such that it is plain there is no remedy but we must be *born again*.

1. We are here told *what we are*: We are *flesh*, not only *corporeal* but *corrupt* (Gen. 6:3). The soul is still a spiritual substance, but so wedded to the flesh, so captivated by the will of the flesh, so in love with the delights of the flesh, so employed in making provision for the flesh, that it is mostly called *flesh*; it is carnal. And what communion can there be between God, who is a *spirit*, and a soul in this condition?

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<sup>17</sup> In Christian theology the **beatific vision** (Latin: *visio beatifica*) is the ultimate direct self communication of God to the individual person. A person possessing the **beatific vision** reaches, as a member of redeemed humanity in the communion of saints, perfect salvation in its entirety, i.e. heaven. One day we **will** see God (Cf. Matt. 5:8).

2. How we *came to be so*; by being *born of the flesh*. It is a corruption that is bred *in the bone* with us, and therefore we cannot have a new nature, but we must be *born again*. The corrupt nature, which is *flesh*, takes rise from our *first birth*; and therefore the new nature, which is *spirit*, must take rise from a second birth. Nicodemus spoke of entering again into his mother's womb, and being born; but, if he could do so, to what purpose? If he were born of his mother a hundred times, that would not mend the matter, for still that *which is born of the flesh is flesh*; a clean thing cannot be brought out of an unclean. He must seek for another original, must be born of the Spirit, or he cannot become spiritual. The case is, in short, this: though man is made to consist of body and soul, yet his spiritual part had then so much the dominion over his corporeal part that he was denominated a *living soul* (Gen. 2:7), but by indulging the appetite of the flesh, in eating forbidden fruit, he prostituted the just dominion of the soul to the tyranny of sensual lust, and became no longer a *living soul*, but flesh: *Dust thou art*.<sup>18</sup>

Is it any wonder that Jesus would say in **verse 7** to Nicodemus, “***Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’***”?

By the way, there is something in the Greek text that is not conveyed in our English translations. Pronouns can be either singular or plural. And so in English, the first person singular pronoun is “I.” The first person plural pronoun is “we.” The third person singular pronoun is either “he”, “she” or “it.” The third person plural pronoun is “they.” In English, however, the second person singular and plural pronouns are spelled the same way: “you.” Context determines if a single “you” is being addressed or if two or more are being addressed as “you.” But in Greek the second person singular and plural pronouns are spelled differently [singular: σοι (*soy*); plural: ὑμᾶς (*humas*)]. In verses 3 and 5 Jesus said to Nicodemus “You (singular) must be born again.” But in verse 7, when Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Do not marvel that I said to you (sing.), ***You*** (plural) must be born again”, Jesus used the ***plural*** second person pronoun, not the singular. The Lord Jesus spoke of all humanity as “you” not just Nicodemus as an individual. All human beings are in need of being born again, and we should not marvel that this is so.

By natural birth people become members of an earthly family; to become members of the family of God, to receive the spiritual nature which alone can gain admittance to his kingdom, a birth ‘from above’ is necessary.<sup>19</sup>

We will conclude today with our brief consideration of **verse 8**, which reads, “***The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.***”

**Charles Spurgeon** gave 3 sermons on this text over the years of his ministry.<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of one of them he attempted to express the depth of meaning in this verse:

Our Savior's words are infinite. Some men use a great deal of language to convey very little meaning; but our Saviour compacts boundless instruction into short sentences. If all the preachers in Christendom were to preach from this one verse for the next twelve months, they would still leave much of its teaching undeveloped.<sup>21</sup>

John 3:8 is one of the clearest statements of the sovereignty of God in the dispensing of His grace to bring salvation. Actually, the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit is set forth. The “wind” is a metaphor for the

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 884.

<sup>19</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 85.

<sup>20</sup> These were, by volume number and sermon number, 11:630; 23:1356; and 35:2067. Spurgeon had a way with words. He once gave an exhortation to endure: “By perseverance the snail reached the ark.” He also once said, “I know that the Gospel is true because it has survived so many preachers.”

<sup>21</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 35, sermon #1987 (Pilgrim Publishers), p. 53ff.

Holy Spirit. The Greek word for “wind” and “breath” (Τὸ πνεῦμα, *to pneuma*), is the same Greek word for the Holy “Spirit” (Τὸ πνεῦμα). [And in the Old Testament the Hebrew word for “wind” or “breath” is רוּחַ (*ruach*), and the Hebrew word for “spirit” is also רוּחַ (*ruach*). Clearly the Lord Jesus was teaching that the Holy Spirit is sovereign in whom He creates spiritual life, even the breath of eternal life.

Just as the wind does what it wants to do when it wants to do it, so does the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in His operations. **Spurgeon** spoke of this:

The Holy Spirit is like the wind because He is absolutely sovereign. Preachers scarcely like to tell their congregations nowadays that God gives His grace according to His own good pleasure. I learned, when I was a boy, that the chief end of man was to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. But I hear now, according to the new theology, that the chief end of God is to glorify man and enjoy him forever. Yet this is the turning of things upside down. The glory of God is still the chief end of the world’s existence. And whether men will have it so or not, the Lord has settled it. “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” So that, “it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs but of God that shows mercy.” No voice is more glad than mine to preach the free salvation of God to them that perish. But God has not sunk His sovereignty in His bounty. Jehovah still reigns and the wind blows where it wishes and not where man wills that it shall blow.<sup>22</sup>

The new birth cannot be wrought by any individual and his “free” will. The Holy Spirit comes to the sinner and breathes in spiritual life. It is as God first breathed into Adam and that lifeless body became a living soul. So it was with everyone who has ever been born again. The Holy Spirit had come to that one and essentially breathed into that soul spiritual life. The result and manifestation of that new birth was a desire to know the Lord, to seek the Lord, to please the Lord, to walk in faith and obedience to the Lord, alongside the Lord’s people. May He do this great work of sovereign grace in many souls in this day.

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May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,  
so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Rom. 15:13)

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

# Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit

## “The Spirit and the Wind”

A sermon delivered by

**C. H. Spurgeon**

On Thursday evening, February 2, 1888

“The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it but cannot tell from where it comes and where it goes. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit.” John 3:8

OUR Savior’s words are infinite. Some men use a great deal of language to convey a very little meaning. But our Savior compacts boundless instruction into short sentences. If all the preachers in Christendom were to preach from this one verse for the next twelve months they would still leave much of its teaching undeveloped.

*These words remind us of the Holy Spirit.* Is it not to be feared that we have lost a great deal of power in our lives because we have not been sufficiently mindful of the power of the Spirit of God? When our Savior compared the Holy Spirit’s operations to the movements of the winds did He not show us how absolutely needful they are, *how indispensable they are?* Imagine a world without winds! Why, we should soon stagnate into death. Without wind what would be the use of the great highway of the sea? A thousand mischiefs would follow—ininitely more than we could calculate—if henceforth the air had no motion and there were no living, breathing winds. Without the Spirit of God, the scene were infinitely worse. O ship of the Church, how could you speed over the sea of time? The trees of the forest would no more clap their hands. Stagnation of progress would take place. The dry bones of the valley would lie unquickened and even the odors of the rose of Sharon would no more be shed abroad. We must have the Spirit of God. Even as the Sun of Righteousness brings healing beneath His wings so does the Holy Spirit bring all that is living to us all. Let us adore the third Person of the Trinity in Unity and think of Him often, with deep reverence in our spirits, so that we never go to work, nor to prayer, nor even to the singing of a hymn without seeking that He would Himself be the life of the holy engagement.

With the view of bringing out the Truth about the Spirit of God, I shall first mention *certain minor lessons contained in the text.* Then, *the lesson of the mystery of the Holy Spirit.* And thirdly, *the mystery of the man that is born of the Spirit.* For it is not merely said, “so is the work of the Spirit.” But “so is everyone that is born of the Spirit.” The child of a mystery is himself a mystery.

**I. First, there are CERTAIN MINOR LESSONS TO BE TAUGHT HERE.** The Spirit of God is like the wind. Note well that *His operation is unexpected.* The wind blows where it wishes so that you know not what wind to expect. In this land, especially, we can never tell what wind will blow tomorrow. A few days ago it was the south-west and it brought a rapid thaw. But the next morning it was nearly north and a frost was upon us. We may well put vanes upon our public buildings, for without them we could never tell from the day of the year or the season of the year, from what quarter the wind would come. I feel thankful when I remember that, like the wind, the Holy Spirit blows where He wishes for I cannot tell where next He may operate. Perhaps tomorrow He may save a prince—it would be an unexpected thing. Another day He may save some great backslider, who knows? He may graciously work upon the more degraded part of the people or He may deal with certain of our great merchants and bring them to His feet. He that knows the work of the Holy Spirit must have learned to expect the unexpected. The last thing expected in Jerusalem was that Saul of Tarsus would be converted. But he was converted. And you may now hope that the most violent opposer of the Gospel may become a trophy of its power. And might not that same wind blow on *you* who come here simply to be a spectator of solemnities—willing to hear what the preacher has to say but not at all desirous to be affected by it? How often have we seen men and women the least likely, the very first to be impressed by this Divine power? O heavenly Wind blow where the feeble faith of Your people has scarcely dared to think that You can come, and where every influence has operated to shut You out!

The movement of the Holy Spirit is like the wind, too, because *it is inexplicable*. Who can tell me why the wind was north-west on Monday, or why it was east on Friday? There are persons who profess to tell us but they use great words which mean nothing. As a general rule, science signifies bamboozlement, riding upon hypotheses, or mystifying with long words. The explanations of modern *savants* are often more difficult to understand than the fact which requires the explanation. Now I cannot tell why the Spirit of God works here or there. Why was England favored with the Gospel when other nations, who were in advance of Britain in civilization, were left without it? Why is it that the islands of the sea seem almost always to accept the Gospel, while continents are left in darkness? “He gives no account of His matters”—take that for your answer. It is all that He will give you.

The Holy Spirit moves like the wind *for suddenness and freeness*. None of us can raise the wind. We use the expression, but the fact is beyond our power. The wind comes without our call or direction. Who shall tell whether tomorrow we shall wake up with a thaw or a sharp frost? The wind springs up just where it likes and moves just where it pleases. And it is so with the Holy Spirit. I grant you that prayer such as that of Elijah can chain the winds and stay the clouds, or unseal the bottles of Heaven and bring down the rain—but it is because the Lord wills it. Still, the Spirit is absolutely free and He moves as the dew which tarries not for men, neither waits for the sons of men. If He wills to break forth tomorrow across this country with His Divine energy He cannot be stopped. If, in answer to the prayers of His people, He should be pleased to work in India or in China, as I trust He will, we shall soon see how free is the blessed Spirit to bring glory to God. God may be glorified thereby. The Spirit is like the wind—His movements are not to be accounted for.

And, next, the Holy Spirit is like the wind because *He is absolutely sovereign*. Preachers scarcely like to tell their congregations nowadays that God gives His Grace according to His own good pleasure. I learned, when I was a boy, that the chief end of man was to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. But I hear now, according to the new theology, that the chief end of God is to glorify man and enjoy him forever. Yet this is the turning of things upside down. The glory of God is still the chief end of the world’s existence. And whether men will have it so or not, the Lord has settled it. “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” So that, “it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs but of God that shows mercy.” No voice is more glad than mine to preach the free salvation of God to them that perish. But God has not sunk His sovereignty in His bounty. Jehovah still reigns and the wind blows where it wishes and not where man wills that it shall blow.

Further, the Spirit of God is comparable to the wind because of *the variety of His operations*.

The wind does not blow at all times alike. Soft and mild, it brings us summer heat. Rough and rugged, it makes us bind our cloaks about us as the sharp breath of winter chills us to the bone. The Spirit of God works differently at different times, according to the necessity of the case and according to His own will. For He blows as He wishes as well as where He wishes. Sometimes I have almost trembled to pray for the power of the Holy Spirit. I remember a Brother praying that we might be filled with the Spirit of God and I was but very young then but ventured to ask him whether he knew what he meant. He looked at me with astonishment when I added, “Where He comes He is the Spirit of judgment and the Spirit of burning.” It is a blessing, no doubt, to be filled with the Spirit. But who may abide the day of His coming? Like the Lord Jesus, He is as a refiner’s fire. We might have had the Spirit much more copiously had we been able to bear His wondrous work within us. I know He is a Comforter but I know also that His fan is in His hand. He is a searcher as well as a healer, a destroyer of evil as well as a creator of good. Thus you see that His working is not always of one kind. One gracious soul has gone out weeping, broken-hearted—the Spirit of God had wounded the heart. Another has gone forth rejoicing in full salvation—it was the Spirit of God. One day the Word of God comes like a hammer and a fire—at another time it drops like the gentle dew from Heaven upon the parched heart. All these are works of the same Spirit. Judge not, I pray you, so as to deny this humble hope or that trembling trust to be of the Spirit, for the Spirit works all good things. Even in the same individual the Spirit of God works very differently at different times. One day He makes us leap like young harts upon the mountains. And then Naphthali is a hind let loose—the Spirit of God is on him. At another time the true Prophet is shut up and cannot come forth. He is filled with sighs and groans which cannot be uttered and the Word of the Lord is as a pent-up fire in his bones. But the Spirit of God is as much in the silence as in the eloquence—possibly more so—for the flesh may go with the first but it is the Spirit

which works in the second. Let us not judge ourselves to be abandoned by the Spirit of God because after autumn eventides, in which we sat under our own vine and fig tree, we have had wintry nights of darkness, leafless and fruitless. Don't you know that the Spirit of God is that Wind which passes over the green field when the flowers are all in bloom and the grass withers and the flower fades because the Spirit of the Lord blows upon it? Surely the people are grass. The withering work of the Holy Spirit is as necessary for our eternal benefit as when the Spirit, at another time, opens the buds of those fair flowers which shed their perfume at the feet of love. Note then, that like the wind, He varies in His modes of manifestation.

And note, again, the Spirit of God is like the wind because *His operation is manifest*. "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound thereof." Yes, we cannot see the wind but we can hear it. So may you hear the Spirit of God. When you hear the Scriptures and read the Word, the Spirit of God speaks to you. It is well to hear the Spirit whisper in the ear of conscience when He presses home the Truths of God and makes the mind to feel its power. Sweetest of all is it when the newly-opened ear hears the Spirit of God speak to it with its own peculiar, "still small voice." Then it is sweetly true. "You hear the sound thereof." My dear Hearers, do you know anything about this? Has the Spirit of God so worked in you that you have recognized the sound? It is a manifest work—have you felt it?

Yet, in all respects, the work of the Spirit of God remains *mysterious and wonderful*. Men cannot tell us much about the wind but when the wind rises to a tornado and carries everything before it, we see what the wind can do. I would to God that we had a cyclone of the Holy Spirit! What a sweep it would make of a great many rotten Church buildings which now stand upright! Many a magnificent pile would fly before it like dust and chaff from the summer's threshing-floor! But the Spirit of God, whether He works so gently that He scarcely disturbs the tear that hangs in the eye like a dewdrop on a blade of grass, or whether He comes with such tremendous force that the most stubborn infidelity is swept away before it—in either case it is very marvelous—for He is God and He works after the Divine manner. I am half inclined to pause here and say, "For the rest of our time let us worship in the presence of this mighty God, who does His pleasure and works the will of the Most High forevermore."

## **II. But I must take you on—in the second place to consider THE GREAT LESSON OF THE MYSTERY WHICH IS TAUGHT US BY THE SYMBOL OF THE WIND, WHICH IS THE TYPE OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD.**

Now dear Friends, concerning the wind, our Savior says, "You cannot tell from where it comes and where it goes." Yet we know that it comes from the east, or the south and passes on its way and it goes towards the west. The text cannot mean that we do not know the direction of the wind, or the direction in which the Spirit of God is moving, for we do know that. We know that He is a power that makes for righteousness and for eternal life. But then, we do not know where any wind begins to blow. No one can explain where the north wind commences. The heathen had an idea about the wind rushing out of a cave, or of its being let loose from a bag. We know that this is but a dream. We cannot imagine a place where the wind starts on its journey. And we do not know when the Spirit of God begins to work in any person's heart, or even in our own. Some persons are troubled because they cannot tell the day of their conversion. Let them not be troubled about that question. Even those who know that on such-and-such a day they took a decided step, and the light burst in upon their spirit, will find, if they look back, that a great deal of gracious experience went before their decision to prepare their minds for the final step. We do not know how early the Divine processes begin within a soul. Our very parentage has something to do with it. That we were born of such-and-such godly parents is a part of the arrangement of Divine Grace. I do not think you can tell, with regard to yourself, when the first gracious thought was sown in you when first you lived towards God. You can tell when you first perceived that you believed in God. But there was an experience before that. You cannot put your finger upon such-and-such a place and say, "Here the east wind began," nor can you say, "Here the Spirit of God began to work on me."

Neither can we always tell what was the first process. Does a man pray first or believe first? If he prays without faith he will not be heard. Which comes first, repentance or faith? A repentance that has no faith in it is no repentance. A faith that has no repentance with it is no faith. These gracious products are like the spokes of a wheel, they all move at the same time. When the wheel of spiritual life moves we cannot tell which grace in it moves first. The processes of Divine Grace may, in your case, begin with a downcast

soul and in the case of another person they may begin with a lifting up of holy faith. We cannot tell from where it comes.

Neither can we always tell the exact means of our receiving the Spirit. You say it was by this minister's preaching. Be grateful. But before that sermon an unknown person did a deal of plowing within your heart. How would the one have sown had not the other plowed? Many a man who thinks he has never done any good will find out at the Last Great Day that he did much more than he fancied and that he accomplished an essential part of the work though it remained hidden. "You cannot tell from where it comes."

Equally mysterious is the other point as to "where it goes." We know which way the Holy Spirit points but you cannot tell where He goes—that is to say what special fashion His work will take in the person who has received it tonight—whether it shall go towards a deeper and deeper sense of sin and the life shall be most noticeable for its repentance. Or whether it shall rise into a higher and a higher view of Christ and the life shall be noticeable for its joyfulness. You cannot tell where it goes. How far the Grace of God can go in any man is impossible for us to say. Let none of us begin to measure by ourselves and say, "Nobody can be holier than I am. Nobody can have more Divine Grace than I have." Brothers and Sisters, you yourself can obtain ten times as much Divine Grace as you now have. You are but a babe yet. You do not know what the stature of a man in Christ may be. The boy converted but a week ago may become a Moffat or a Livingstone. The girl who is now a trembling Believer, you cannot tell what a Mary or Hannah, God may make her. You cannot tell where the Spirit goes. When Martin Luther's father first taught Martin about Christ and prayed for him, he could not tell how the Spirit of God in him would work and how the whole world would be the better for the miner's son. "You cannot tell where it goes." Oh, if some of you get the Spirit of God just now, I cannot guess what it will make of you! There are wonderful possibilities sleeping within the breast of every man who receives the Spirit of God. Should the Spirit work in you, you would not know yourself in the sanctifying experience of a thousand years time. And what are a thousand years? Project yourselves beyond the growths of time to that grandest of all growths, when "we shall be like He, for we shall see Him as He is." Even then you have not reached the end of the Divine way. You cannot tell where it goes. You are yet to outstrip the angels. Jesus your Lord is the First-born and you are to be one of the First-born's many Brethren. Measureless advancement lies before you. I have opened the window—look through and contemplate with the eye of faith what yet may come of the entrance of the Grace of God into your heart! You cannot tell where the north wind stays its course, nor where the east wind falls asleep. Is there such a place? You have not seen where it begins, nor can you guess where it shall end, yet even when you are in Glory the life which the Spirit imparted to you here shall be your life.

### **III. The last few minutes must be occupied with THE LESSON CONCERNING THE MYSTERY OF THE MAN HIMSELF—"So is everyone that is born of the Spirit."**

The Spirit-born man is a mysterious person. Only those who are like he is can pretend to know him. Even they do not know him. And what is more wonderful—he does not know himself. Perhaps no man is more amazed at him than the godly man himself. He has experienced a change but he cannot describe it to you. He knows the things in which he is changed—the effects of the Spirit—but how it was worked he knows not. As no man can tell anything about his first birth, so neither can he describe his second birth—it remains a mysterious operation even to him who has passed through it. "Oh," said one to me, "Sir, either the world's quite altered, or else I am." So, indeed, it is—everything is changed. The world itself is altered and in some things it seems altered for the worse. We find we are not at home in it, though we used to be. We should not know ourselves if we met ourselves. And when, unfortunately, we do meet ourselves, we fall to quarrelling with ourselves—for we have no greater enemy anywhere than our own selves. It is a strange thing that we should have to say so—but the greatest paradox that can be is a regenerate man still in a body which remains under corruption. The man is a strange mixture of old and new, nature and Grace. While he is himself a mystery to himself, his sorrows are a mystery to other people and they cannot make out why he is sad. His business prospers, his children are about him, he has good health and yet he is mourning. And if they hear him say, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" They reply, "This is a wretched man, though he ought to be the happiest of beings!" From the best man in the world we hear the deepest sigh that he is not better. The man that thanks God who can give him the victory

is the man who groans in the battle. The world does not understand this. It cannot make out how we can fight and yet be at peace. How we can be torn asunder, yet never torn away from the Cross. How we can live by dying and die every day in order that we may never die at all. The Believer's riddle is a very hard one. He is a mystery as to his sorrows and his joys—these are secrets with which the world cannot intermeddle. This is a mysterious business—a man in poverty, rich. A man in affliction, rejoicing. A man alone, yet in the best of company. The unregenerate cannot comprehend this singular person.

The man that lives near to God is a mystery, more or less, at all times. He is not all he desires to be, nor all he hopes to be but he is far beyond what he ever expected to be. Strange impulses move him at times so that he does things which he cannot himself account for. He feels that he is bound to do them, and he does them, and has the warrant of having done rightly in the result of what he does. I am sure that every child of God who walks in the light of His countenance will understand what I mean when I say that we are moved in singular ways. So moved that we ourselves hardly know how. But so moved that Wisdom is justified of all her children. Strange is the power of the Holy Spirit over the heart of the regenerate. And this is made manifest in the singular changes of which they are the subjects. God's own people know what it is to sound the deeps and outsoar the heights. Up, up, up, where the callow lightning first spread his wings, we mount in ecstasy. And then down we go, down into the abysses where sea-monsters have their dens—such strange beings are we when under the highest power. The wind sighing through the trees, or singing amid the cords of an Aeolian harp is not more strange than the experience of a genuine child of God. I know what it is to run before Ahab's chariot with Elijah and I am afraid I know what it is to faint under the juniper and need to be awakened that I may partake of food, that I may go forty days in the strength thereof. The Christian man does not understand himself but his varying experiences go to make up that sickness of self and fondness of Christ which is so desirable.

I will give you two words you cannot explain, just to show the mystery of our manhood. "Spirituality"—now then, turn to your dictionaries and see whether they define it. You know what it is—you cannot tell me and I shall not tell you, because I cannot. There is another word—"unction." You know what it is. If you hear a sermon that has none of it you know what the absence of it is. But when an unction rests upon the Word, can you tell me what it is? I cannot tell you. But I pray that I may have that unction myself. Of course, the ungodly make jests upon the expression, because it has no meaning to them. Yet the children of God delight in it.

Do not expect the world to understand you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. But inasmuch as Christ has chosen you out of the world, do not expect that the world will know you. If it knew Him not, who was so much better and clearer than you, how should it know you? And you, my dear Hearers, who are not born again, to whom all this must seem a foreign language—I pray you to believe that there is something which you need to understand and that in order to understand it you must be born again. May the Spirit of God make you feel, experience, and enjoy this mystery by causing you to know the power of that gracious word, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life"—if you believe in Jesus, if you look to Him, if you trust Him—if the Holy Spirit has given you faith, He has begun His work in you and He will carry it on and perfect it to the praise of His glory forever. May it be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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