

## CHAPTER TWO

# WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

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Not many years ago the rumor began circulating that a popular rock star had been “born again.” Reaction from the Christian community was predictably enthusiastic. But when he learned of his alleged conversion, the rock star quickly put an end to the rumor: “It was reported that I was born again. That’s not true. What I said was that I was into *porn* again.”

One little letter can make quite a difference.

I find myself skeptical when I hear that public figures have been converted. Even if the individual does acknowledge a commitment to follow Christ, his or her lifestyle rarely seems to reflect a corresponding change. There is often no evidence of repentance. There is no involvement in a local church. As ordinary citizen Joe Six-Pack observes this apparent contradiction, he inaccurately concludes that this is what it means to be born again.

Charles Colson is a notable exception to the pattern. A former attorney and presidential aide in the Nixon administration, Colson was convicted and imprisoned for his role in Watergate. It seemed suspicious when, during this period, he claimed to have submitted his life to Christ. But this was no scheme for reducing his sentence. Colson’s conversion was genuine, as evidenced by his new lifestyle. His book *Born Again* gives an eloquent and powerful account of his authentic encounter with the gospel.

Although the phrase “born again” is commonly used in today’s culture, its theological implications have been obscured. For example, when retired heavyweight boxer George Foreman returned to the ring, sportscasters spoke of his career being “born again.” Politicians who experience a setback and then regain popularity are sometimes referred to as born again. And many people think of born-again Christians as a hyperactive fringe group within the Church, unaware that the new birth is a biblical prerequi-

**Meditate on 1 Peter 2:2-3.** What is the “milk” described here? Why is pure milk essential for spiritual growth?

““ Becoming a Christian is not making a new start in life; it is receiving a new life to start with.<sup>1</sup>

””  
— Thomas Adams

site for being a part of the Church at all!

Even the mature Christian can fail to understand this critical phrase. Yet if we ever hope to change as God intends, we must

begin with an understanding and experience of regeneration—the new birth. Here’s where the whole process of sanctification begins.

**1** Which of the following phrases best describes, in your opinion, what it means to be born again?

*(Answer is printed upside down at bottom of page)*

- Making a decision to start living a better life
- Renewing a long-lost commitment to Christ
- Asking God to forgive your sins and live in your heart
- Telling all your former friends they’re going to Hell
- None of the above

## The Education of a Pharisee

The phrase “born again” didn’t originate with President Jimmy Carter. It originated with Jesus Christ. Let’s discover where he introduced it and how he meant it to be understood as we eavesdrop on a brain-bending conversation in the third chapter of John.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. He commanded great respect in Jerusalem as a theologian and teacher of the law. In light of his position and prestige, it’s surprising

that Nicodemus would pay a private visit to Jesus. After all, Jesus lacked the formal training Nicodemus and his peers valued so highly. Besides, this blue-collar rabbi had just wreaked havoc in the Temple and insinuated he had unique authority from God (Jn 2:13-22). But Nicodemus was intrigued by Jesus’ teaching, and he could not deny or dismiss the miracles taking place. So, with a certain degree of humility, the prominent religious insider called on the uneducated carpenter from Galilee:

Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.  
(Jn 3:2)

One thing could be said for the Pharisees—they knew the importance of etiquette. By addressing Jesus as “Rabbi,” Nicodemus was expressing respect for his status as a teacher and a willingness to learn. But his next statement was one he would quickly regret: “Rabbi, we know....”

Answer: None of the above. For a biblical definition, read on.

Not the recommended way to begin a conversation with the Son of God.

Jesus could have confronted Nicodemus for his arrogant attitude and ended the conversation there. Instead, he chose to help Nicodemus see how limited his knowl-

““ We rarely take this teaching [that man cannot enter the kingdom of God] sufficiently seriously, perhaps because it cuts from under our feet the last vestiges of our natural self-sufficiency. It highlights the biblical teaching that our salvation is all of grace. The one thing necessary is the one thing we ourselves cannot perform!<sup>2</sup> ””

— Sinclair Ferguson

edge really was. His method?

A quick game of Biblical Jeopardy. Category:

Regeneration, for \$200.

“I tell you the truth,”

Jesus replied, “no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (vs. 3).

The Lord’s statement perplexed Nicodemus. “How can a man be born when he is old?” he asked. “Surely he

cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Nicodemus could not comprehend what Jesus meant, nor was he accustomed to being addressed this way. It was typically his place to give the answers, not grope for them. He may even have been in the Temple when Jesus, as a 12-year-old boy, amazed the priests with his questions. But Jesus was no longer an adolescent.

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus continued, “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit...You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’” (vs. 5,7).

But Nicodemus was surprised. In fact, he was shocked. “How can this be?” he asked.

At this point Nicodemus needed two Tylenol. Adding to his difficulty was a sense of humiliation, especially when Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, *we speak of what we know*, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” (vs. 11-12).

It’s easy to look down on the humbled scholar, but let’s

““ The new birth is not only a mystery that no man understands, it is a miracle that no man can undertake.<sup>3</sup> ””

— Richard Baxter

subject ourselves to the same examination: Do we understand what Jesus was saying about being born again? Are we surprised at Jesus’ statements? Unless we’ve reached the place where, like Nicodemus, we

**For Further Study:**

Read Matthew 19:23-26.

What are the odds, apart from God’s intervention, of a person entering the kingdom of God?

**2** Does focusing on the individual parts of Jesus' remarkable statement give you any fresh insights?

*You*

*must*

*be born*

*again*

**For Further Study:**

How does Abraham's fathering of Isaac and Ishmael show the contrast between our efforts and God's? (See Genesis 21:1-13 and Romans 9:6-9)

ask "How can this be?", it's unlikely we have fully understood the mystery and miracle of regeneration.

### **Nothing to Contribute**

What Jesus intentionally omitted was any suggestion that Nicodemus was personally responsible for being born again. In fact, he said the opposite: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (Jn 3:6).

It's not hard to see why Nicodemus would find Christ's comments so confusing. Having misunderstood and misinterpreted the law, the Pharisees sought to establish their own righteousness before God. Nicodemus would have assumed that being born again (whatever that meant) involved some effort or contribution on his part. Most of us would assume the same. And it is exactly that assumption Jesus was challenging.

"You must be born again" is not a command to believe in Christ; it is a statement clarifying what *he* must do in us. "Regeneration is a change wrought in us by God," writes C. Samuel Storms, "not an autonomous act performed by us for ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

Pause a moment to consider the staggering implications of Christ's words:

■ Though absolutely essential to the Christian life, regeneration cannot be achieved by human effort.

■ God is the sole author of the new birth; it is not a cooperative effort.

■ Regeneration is an experience we must have but only God can provide.

It's not because Nicodemus lacked intelligence that he found the Lord's words so perplexing; it's because they required a paradigm shift in his thinking. They revealed how helpless and dependent he was on the mercy of God.

Before we continue, let me clarify one point. I'm not minimizing the importance of repentance and faith. These must characterize our response to regeneration, and they are essential to conversion and our ongoing sanctification. But from my perspective they are the result of the new birth, not the cause. Theologian A.A. Hodge cautions us to

“ One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher’s sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, ‘*How did you come to be a Christian?*’ I sought the Lord. ‘*But how did you come to seek the Lord?*’ The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, *How came I to pray?* I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. *How came I to read the Scriptures?* I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that he was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, ‘I ascribe my change wholly to God.’<sup>15</sup> ”

— Charles H. Spurgeon

**Meditate on  
Titus 3:4-7.**

Recognizing the source of our salvation (v.5) strengthens our hope for eternal life (v.7).

maintain Scripture’s perspective: “Whatever man may do after regeneration, the first quickening of the dead must originate with God.”<sup>16</sup>

Consider this carefully. Appreciate what a radical transformation is required, and how incapable and impotent you are to produce it. Regeneration is the distinct work of God alone. As J.I. Packer says, “It is not a change which man does anything to bring about, any more than infants do anything to induce, or contribute to, their own procreation and birth.”<sup>17</sup> We are not born “of human decision ...but born of God” wrote John (Jn 1:13).

A new, righteous nature has been imparted, of which God is the sole author. In

addition, we have the assurance that “he who began a good work in you [regeneration] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Php 1:6). That should produce some serious rejoicing!

We no longer need to worry whether our will power and self-discipline are sufficient. They’re not. Being conformed to the image of Christ is not ultimately dependent on our ability. Rather, we can be confident concerning our growth in godliness because of God’s definitive work. He has put within us a new disposition, a passion for righteousness. “This,” says J. Rodman Williams, “is the greatest miracle that any person can ever experience.”<sup>18</sup>

**Let There Be Life**

What actually occurs when one is born again?

J.I. Packer says the word regeneration “denotes a new beginning of life...it speaks of a creative renovation wrought by the power of God.”<sup>19</sup> When God regenerated you, he called into being something that did not previous-

**Meditate on**

**1 Peter 1:23.** How does this analogy add to your understanding of the new birth?

ly exist. The Bible describes it this way: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2Co 4:6). The parallel here between our regeneration and creation is intentional. Our regeneration was no less a creative act of God. The same God who said, “Let there be light” spoke to us one day and said, “Let there be life.” *And there was life!*

The new birth can also be viewed as a resurrection. Though we were dead in sin and were incapable of altering this condition, we have now been made alive to God by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Theologian R.C. Sproul explains this in greater detail:

The Spirit recreates the human heart, quickening it from spiritual death to spiritual life. Regenerate people are new creations. Where formerly they had

no disposition, inclination, or desire for the things of God, now they are disposed and inclined toward God. In regeneration, God plants a desire for himself in the human heart that otherwise would not be there.<sup>10</sup>

“A dead man cannot assist in his own resurrection,” observes W.G.T. Shedd.<sup>11</sup> Had it not been for the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, who gave us a new life complete with a new nature and a new desire to please, serve, obey, and glorify God, we would still be spiritually dead and hostile to God.

Regeneration is distinct from other facets of our salvation. For example,

while justification alters our legal status before God (that is, we are declared righteous rather than guilty), regeneration transforms our fundamental nature. This internal change is so radical and extensive that we are now described as new creations. The image of God corrupted at the fall is recreated through the new birth and progressively renewed through sanctification. But unlike sanctification, regeneration is not a process. It does not take place gradually or by degrees. It is a sovereign and *instantaneous* work of God in our lives.

Please don’t misunderstand me. Not everyone is regenerated with all the dramatic experiences Paul had. Here is

**3** Here’s the situation: You are a youth specialist who counsels kids with a rare mental disorder—They are absolutely convinced they gave birth to themselves. What kind of anxieties would you expect this to produce in them?

(Would you expect to see similar anxieties in Christians who don’t understand God’s role in regeneration?)

a man who was supernaturally blinded for three days and audibly addressed from heaven. Yet Paul wasn't the only

“ Regeneration is a change which is known and felt: known by works of holiness and felt by a gracious experience.<sup>12</sup> ”

— Charles H. Spurgeon

person born again in the Book of Acts. When Lydia heard the gospel at a women's prayer meeting, "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Ac 16:14). That's all there was to it. Paul's eyes

were temporarily blinded, and Lydia's heart was quietly opened. Different experiences, yet the result was exactly the same.

**For Further Study:**

Who is "the one who makes men holy"? (Hebrews 2:11) For what stages of our sanctification is he responsible? (Hebrews 12:2)

Often we are tempted to measure the authenticity of a conversion by the experiences accompanying it. Everyone enjoys hearing about the gang leader or drug dealer whose life is dramatically changed. But suppose you're a Lydia. You were just driving along in the car one day, listening to a tape somebody had loaned you, and with nobody to witness it God gently opened up your heart. You didn't hear any voices, the car didn't swerve off the road. Nothing dramatic. But by the time you got to work you knew, even if you couldn't explain it, that something significant had happened. You were different. You had been born again.

I've had the privilege of visiting the spot in England where John Wesley was born again. Consider his simple account of that moment: "I felt my heart strangely warmed within me." Hardly what one would describe as

an explosive experience, and yet the validity and impact of Wesley's regeneration is undeniable.

Whether discreet or dramatic, each new birth has this in common: it has been exclusively and entirely authored by God. The plot and the characters are unique, but the story line is always the same. We are new creations. The old has gone, the new has come.

**4** In the space below, or at the bottom of this page, draw a simple timeline of your life, starting at birth and extending to the present. Then indicate when you experienced each of the following: regeneration, justification, sanctification, repentance, and faith. Which happened at a specific point in time? Which are ongoing?

**A Futile Resolution**

It's not only in his gospel that we find John including remarkable statements about regeneration. Let's close by looking at these startling words:

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. (1Jn 3:9)

Have you ever read this verse and been confused? It can't possibly mean what it says...can it? Few people can exist even an hour or two without sinning in some way or another. Perhaps the real meaning of the verse got lost in translation. On the other hand, we worry, *What if it is accurate? That doesn't seem to be my experience...Does this mean I haven't been "born of God"?*

John isn't implying that real Christians are *incapable* of sinning. That's evident from the first chapter of this same letter, where he wrote, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1Jn 1:8). No—sin is still very much present, and though its dominion over our lives has been destroyed, we could yield to its influence at any time. But in writing that those born of God "cannot go on sinning," John shows that regeneration has made us incapable of *continuing to sin*.

John's meaning in this passage, according to Anthony Hoekema, is that the Christian "does not keep on doing and enjoying sin, with complete abandon...[H]e or she is not able to keep on sinning with enjoyment, to keep on living in sin."<sup>14</sup> John R.W. Stott sums it up more simply: "The believer may fall into sin, but he will not walk in it."<sup>15</sup> Do you see the difference?

Suppose I were foolish enough to test John's assertion by making this personal resolution: "In the next six

months I will seek to develop a lifestyle of sin." This obviously is not something I would desire or recommend. However, I don't believe I would be able to carry out such a resolution. Why? Because I have been born of God. I now have a new heart, a new life, and a new inclination to pursue righteousness and please God. Though I still commit sins, because of his regenerating power I am incapable of devoting myself to sin or continuing in it. I will never again be able to enjoy sin as a lifestyle. Only a divine act could have accomplished this.

No longer are we helpless or defenseless in our daily confrontation with sin. We are not destined to walk in continual disobedience and defeat. God has internally,

“ Regeneration occurs primarily in the central area of man's being, namely, his heart or spirit. In this deepest level of human existence there is a decisive change.<sup>13</sup>

— J. Rodman Williams



**Meditate on  
Ephesians 4:22-24.**  
What characterizes the  
“new self” we have  
become through  
regeneration?

supernaturally, and fundamentally transformed us. We now possess the desire and ability to please him for the rest of our lives. Motivated and empowered by grace, we can anticipate a lifetime of progressive and definitive change.

This is where sanctification begins—in the security and confidence that we have been born again, not by our own effort but by the power and purpose of God. ■

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. What are some words that a non-Christian might use to describe a typical “born again” Christian?
2. What is one possible reason celebrity conversions are so frequently superficial?
3. Thomas Adams has written, “Take away the mystery from the new birth and you have taken away its majesty.”<sup>16</sup> What makes regeneration mysterious?
4. Is it a struggle for you to believe that God was solely responsible for your rebirth?
5. If Lydia and Paul represent the extremes of the born again experience, where would you be on the spectrum?
6. Discuss the timeline you sketched on page 21. Any questions about the sequence of salvation?
7. Read Hebrews 12:2. How does this “unconditional guarantee” affect your view of sanctification?
8. Has this chapter prompted you to think differently about the new birth?

**RECOMMENDED  
READING**

*The Christian Life* by Sinclair Ferguson (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989)

*God’s Words* by J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981)

## NOTES

1. Quoted in R.C. Sproul, *Born Again: Leader Guide* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, Inc., 1988), Chapter I, p. 14.
2. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 55.
3. Quoted in R.C. Sproul, *Born Again: Leader Guide*, Chapter III, p. 20.
4. C. Samuel Storms, *Chosen for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 108.
5. Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), pp. 164-65.
6. Quoted in R.C. Sproul, *Born Again: Leader Guide*, Chapter III, p. 19.
7. J.I. Packer, *God's Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 151.
8. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology, Volume II: Salvation, The Holy Spirit, and Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 37.
9. J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, pp. 148-149.
10. R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), pp. 171-172.
11. Quoted in R.C. Sproul, *Born Again: Leader Guide*, Chapter III, p. 19.
12. Quoted in R.C. Sproul, *Born Again: Leader Guide*, Chapter II, p. 17.
13. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology, Volume II*, p. 50.
14. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 100.
15. John R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 136.
16. Quoted in R.C. Sproul, *Born Again: Leader Guide*, Chapter II, p. 16.