

**The Gospel of John (17);
“Jesus, Nicodemus, and the New Birth” (part 4) (3:8-12)**

Introduction:

We have addressed for several weeks the setting forth of Jesus and his instruction to Nicodemus on his need to be born again in order to receive salvation. The Lord made it very clear to him that he must be regenerated, that is, born again, in order to enter the kingdom of God. One must be cleansed from sin—“born of water”—and given spiritual life—“born of water *and* spirit”—to enter the promised kingdom of God. But how do you determine that this has occurred in a person? Today we will consider how to assess and identify a true work of grace by the Holy Spirit, distinguishing it from that which is not.

Let us turn and once again read our passage that we have been considering -- John 3:1-15.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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.”

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

⁴Nicodemus 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?”

⁵Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The 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.”

⁹Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?

¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

We have been addressing this very important matter of the new birth, or regeneration, which the Lord Jesus declared is essential, if a person is to see and enter the kingdom of God. The Lord told Nicodemus indirectly that his ethnicity as a Jew, his life-long effort to keep the law of God, his devotion and commitment to live as a strict Pharisee, and his being a prominent teacher of Israel, that all of these qualities and achievements counted for nothing toward his future entrance into the glorious kingdom of God. Nicodemus would not be saved from his sin unless God did a sovereign work of grace in his soul. Jesus told Nicodemus, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Last week we concluded with a word in anticipation of verses 11 and 12. We will first consider the meaning of these verses, then we will address the matter mentioned above. Here in verses 11 and 12 we read that our Lord asserted the truth and reliability of His witness. Jesus said,

¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

It is at this point that the narrative transitions from a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus to a straight monologue of the Lord Jesus. It may transition into John the Apostle's own testimony at some point rather than it being exclusively the words of the Lord Jesus. But it is difficult to discern the shift, however, from the words of Jesus to those of John the apostle. In other words, "red letter" editions have their problems here. Some favor concluding our Lord's words to Nicodemus only through with verse 15. My Reformation Study Bible in the NKJV has red letters of Jesus' speech through verse 21. [And so, the editors have Jesus speaking forth John 3:16.¹]

Here in verse 11 we read of another occasion in which our Lord began his statement with the double words, "Amen, Amen", or, "Verily, Verily." It is translated in our NKJV as "Most assuredly." This is actually the third occasion in this passage (cf. 3:3, 5, 11). The doubling of this word spoken by Jesus is unique to John's Gospel and is found 25 times of which three are here.

It is interesting that in verse 11 the Lord changed from speaking first person singular, "I" to first person plural, "We."² Jesus said, "***We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.***" Who does the "We" include? Whom was Jesus including with Himself? There are several different proposals.

First, perhaps by our Lord's reference to "We", He was referring to both His own witness and that of John the Baptist. This was the understanding of **William Hendriksen**:

"The reference in all likelihood to Jesus himself and John the Baptist. The term *testify* immediately reminds one of what was said with reference to the Baptist (cf. 1:7, 8, 34). Besides, 3:5 points to the work of the forerunner."³

A second proposal was espoused by **Matthew Poole** (1624-1679) who thought that Jesus was referring only to His own witness and no other. "Christ speaketh only of himself, though he speaketh in the plural number, for in the next verse he saith only, 'If I have told you earthly things'; he let Nicodemus know that he spake nothing but what he was certain of."⁴

A third proposal is that of **D. A. Carson**, who believed that Jesus spoke using the "We" in order to somewhat mock what Nicodemus said in verse 2.

"The simplest explanation for the plurals in this verse is that Jesus is sardonically aping the plural that Nicodemus affected when he first approached Jesus (v.2). 'Rabbi', Nicodemus said, 'we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. ...' 'I tell you the truth', responds Jesus, 'we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen' – as if to say, 'We know one or two things too, we do!'⁵

There is a fourth proposal in that Jesus used the pronoun "We" in order to refer to His witness and the witness of His disciples. Perhaps **Herman Ridderbos** best explained the issue most thoroughly:

To be sure, 3:11, in distinction from 3:31 and other passages, speaks of "we," as a fact that has given rise to divergent interpretations. Some think that Jesus here identifies himself with the prophets, but then one has to take "what we have seen" as referring to visions, which certainly does not fit Jesus. Others think the reference is to Jesus and John, a view that in my opinion is no less improbable (in view of "we

¹ One of my pet peeves of the ESV is the combining of sayings of different persons into one paragraph. In my ESV version of the Reformation Study Bible, which is not a red letter edition, the editors put the words of both Nicodemus and Jesus in the same paragraph (verses 9-15). But then they place verses 17 through 21 into a separate paragraph, but they leave the quotation marks at the beginning and the end of this paragraph. Who is speaking? It is not clear, but one would assume they are placing the verses of 16 through 21 on the lips of Jesus.

² Verse 11 is a problem with those translations that provide pronouns of deity with initial capital letters (of which I favor). My NKJV which is reflected in these notes, capitalizes the pronoun "We." But if our Lord intended to refer to the witness of Himself and His disciples, then there is a problem with the capitalization of the English pronoun.

³ William Hendriksen, **John**, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 132.

⁴ Matthew Poole, **Commentary on the Holy Bible**, vol. 3 (Hendriksen Publishers, 2008), p. 291.

⁵ D. A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 199.

have seen”). Nowadays many interpreters understand the “we” as the “we” of the church (the so-called *pluralis ecclesiasticus*). But such a change of subject from Jesus to the church is hard to accept because verse 11b is introduced with the emphatic “I say to you” and because in verse 12 Jesus again speaks of himself in the first person.

“Bear witness,” in the Johannine (forensic) sense, is used, apart from Jesus himself, especially of his disciples as those “who were with him from the beginning,” who on that basis bore witness concerning him (cf. 15:27; 19:35; 21:24), and of whom it can therefore be said—though in another sense than of Jesus himself (cf. 1:18; 6:46; see, however, also 14:7, 9)—that they bear witness to what they have seen and heard (cf. 1 John 1:1ff; John 1:14). Accordingly, in verse 11b the plural presumably relates not only to Jesus but also to his disciples as those whom he brought into his mission from above from the beginning (cf. 6:69).⁶

There is a fifth proposal, that when Jesus used the pronoun “We” as having born witness, that Jesus was referring to Himself and the other two persons of the Holy Trinity, that being His witness along with that of the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is certainly put forward later in the Gospel, but the immediate context probably does not support this view. To understand it in this way would have Jesus asserting a thought that He has not introduced to His hearer, nor had John to his readers.

Our Lord pretty well dismisses the credibility of Nicodemus in his refusal, not just his inability, to receive his witness. **Verse 12** records our Lord’s words to him, “*If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*” Here the earthly things are what Jesus had been discussing directly, the matter of the new birth, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the illustration of the wind. The heavenly things speak of other matters that our Lord did not address in this hearing. Unless Nicodemus understood and embraced the beginning of new life before God, how could he comprehend or even need to learn of the richness of blessing that his new birth would bring to him?

Nicodemus has found Jesus’ teaching hard to understand, but Jesus turns that incredulity into a fundamental Christological question. Nicodemus had approached Jesus with a certain amount of respect (v. 2), but he had not even begun to appreciate who Jesus really was. At bottom, Nicodemus’ failure was not a failure of intellect but a failure to believe Jesus’ witness: *you people do not accept our testimony*. The failure to believe was more reprehensible than the failure to understand, since it betrayed a fundamentally inadequate appreciation of who Jesus is.⁷

The point of the passage was not to instruct Nicodemus in how to become born again. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in that work. What Jesus was pressing upon Nicodemus was that he realize his dependence on God to show him mercy and to manifest His grace in bringing him to salvation. But it is not as though there was nothing that Nicodemus could do and should do. He was to believe on the Son so as to have everlasting life. We will see this put forward when we begin to address John 3:13ff, next week, Lord willing.

Now we have shown that Jesus taught that the new birth was due to the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit who creates spiritual life in sinners. He compared the work of the Holy Spirit to the wind. After affirming again the great need of Nicodemus in verse 7, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again,’” He said of the work of the Holy Spirit in verse 8:

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.”

There is mystery in this work of the Holy Spirit. He is sovereign in His work in souls, choosing in whom and when He creates spiritual life within them, which then leads them and enables them to come to

⁶ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 133.

⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 199.

Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. No, we cannot see or control the working of the Holy Spirit, but our Lord does say that of the wind that “you hear the sound thereof.” In other words, we may see the evidences that the Holy Spirit has been at work in a soul, even if we cannot see Him working directly upon the soul. We may know the Holy Spirit has wrought new life by the evidences of life in the man or woman, boy or girl, in whom the Holy Spirit has created spiritual life.

The work of the Holy Spirit in imparting spiritual life is instantaneous. Here it is likened to a new birth. Elsewhere it is set forth as a spiritual resurrection. Regeneration causes a sinner who is spiritually dead to pass from spiritual death into a state of spiritual life. It is an act of God likened to creation from nothing (Cf. 2 Cor. 4:6). There was no life one moment and the next moment there was life.

Now, although some Christians and speak of the moment in which God caused them to be born again, not all can do so. But it is really not important to know when you were born again, but it is important to know that you have been born again. I have asked people, “How long have you been a Christian?” On occasion the answer has been given me, “all my life.” I tell them, “That’s too long.” No, if you are a Christian, it happened before you came to faith, more than likely *just* before you believed on Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. That experience of the new birth may have been at a young age. Many, if not most, may never know exactly *when* it happens, but it is critical to know *that* it has happened.

But how does one know that a true work of the Holy Spirit has been done in one’s soul? We will speak to this question, but first realize that when God purposes one of His elect to be born again, the Holy Spirit may cause that new birth to be manifest in different persons in different degrees. The Holy Spirit may work in subtle ways in a person, in others His work of grace may be quite sudden and remarkable. The new birth may cause a slow but eventual thorough transformation of a sinner into saint, or it may transform a person suddenly and remarkably.

And so, *because of the miraculous and sudden work of the Holy Spirit in causing people to be born again, coming to Christ in faith can often manifest itself in a sudden, radical transformation of a person’s life.* A man can leave the house one morning one kind of man and come home that night a new man, having been transformed utterly and thoroughly. This is a remarkable thing when it occurs. Numerous testimonies could be recounted. I could recount my own experience of being born again. And some here could recount their experiences. But here is an account of a man, whose conversion occurred in the 19th century. It is of the transformation of a man who became a well-known preacher. His name was **Sam Jones**. He had been trained as a lawyer. And although Christian parents had raised him, he had become a hopeless drunk and wife-beater. Here is the account:

In August, 1872, there was a dramatic change. News came while he was on a six-week drinking binge that his father was seriously ill. On his deathbed, his father’s words pierced the heart of young Sam. “My poor, wicked, wayward, reckless boy. You have broken the heart of your sweet wife and brought me down in sorrow to my grave. Promise me, my boy, to meet me in Heaven.” Overcome with emotion, Sam fell to his knees and took his dying father’s hand, “I promise!” he shouted. “I’ll quit drinking and set things straight. I’ll meet you and mother in heaven.” The father died and Sam kept his vow. He tells about his last encounter with drink:

“I went to the bar and begged for a glass of liquor. I got the glass and started to drink and looked into the mirror. I saw my hair matted, the filth and vomit on my clothes, one of my eyes totally closed, and my lips swollen. And I said, ‘Is that all that is left of the proud and brilliant lawyer, Sam Jones?’ I smashed the glass on the floor and fell to my knees and cried, ‘Oh God! Oh God, have mercy!’ The bartender ran to my side and thought I was dying... and I was. I said, ‘Just let me alone.’ I picked myself up and staggered to my cheap rooming house and said to the ladies running it, ‘Would you do me a favor?’... I asked them to bring me a pot of black coffee. I went through three days and nights of hell, but when the morning came, something had happened to old Sam Jones. I went down to the clothing store and said, ‘I want you to give me a new suit. I got saved last night. Sam Jones is coming back.’ Not only did I get a suit, but shirts, ties, coat, everything I needed and as I left, the merchant stuck a \$100 bill into my hand. I went to the barber for I had not had a shave in over a month. I asked for a bath, a shave, a haircut. I put on my new clothes, I looked pale and weak. I left to go to my wife whom I had beaten until she was black and blue. She didn’t even recognize her own husband. I said, ‘Honey, God has given you a new husband and the children a new daddy, and I wonder if you will forgive me and start all over again.’ She

grabbed me in her arms and cried, ‘Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I have been praying for this!’ And I have been going round the country bragging about Jesus ever since.

Over the years of our own ministry we have seen and heard of some quite remarkable workings of the Holy Spirit bringing His people to faith in Jesus Christ. Let me just recount a few of these. I remember quite clearly when I was a young man, perhaps 22, in the middle 1970s. I was going door to door in Plano, Texas, speaking to people about the Lord. I knocked on a door and a lady answered. I introduced myself to her and she then showed great surprise. She was speechless for a few moments. She said that she was not a Christian, but that she was attempting to read her Bible. She said that she was on her knees praying that the Lord would send someone to tell her the way of salvation, when I knocked on her door. She welcomed me into her living room and she was quite ready to hear everything I had to say as I opened the Scriptures to her.

I recall another occurrence in the 1980s. We had an older lady visiting our church. She did not tell me much about herself. She came for about 6 or 8 weeks. She asked me one Sunday if I would visit her good friend named Flo. The next Saturday I stopped by Flo’s apartment. She asked me in, but I could tell that she was very nervous and rather fearful. She did not look well at all. She did not look at me the entire time I visited with her. She just looked down at the floor and she was wringing her hands. I learned that she and this lady who was attending church were longtime friends who were heavy drinkers, going to the bars night after night. She did not look up, but she listened as I read the Scriptures and gave her the gospel of Jesus Christ. She had made no gesture and had not spoken. I could not get her to respond to me. I finally asked her, “Flo, would you not want to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as your lord and Savior, and pray to Him to forgive you and accept you?” She immediately dropped to her knees on the floor and began to cry out in prayer to the Lord Jesus to forgive her of sin and save her from damnation. As I said, she was not a well woman. She began to hyperventilate and seemed to struggle catching her breath. She fell back on the couch. I was so concerned that I called 911 and the ambulance came. Before they left for the hospital the EMT assured me that she was stabilized and would be fine. I learned later that she was released from the hospital that evening. The next morning her friend came to church. I asked how Flo was doing. She told me that Flo had died in the night. The Lord at the last of her life showed great mercy unto her, and gave her new life as evidenced by her faith in the Lord Jesus to save her from her sin.

I would like to recount one more incident, although I am sure I could speak of many, if I thought about it for some time. This was quite a remarkable conversion. Sometimes the Lord’s work of bringing salvation to an individual is seen in the unusual ways that He brings the gospel to someone’s hearing. We had a man in our church in Munich, a very godly and a very intelligent, accomplished man. He was a nuclear physicist. He had also become one of the church’s elders. Mary and I had lunch one afternoon with him and his wife when he told us his story. **Satish Puri** was born in India, raised in the Hindu religion, but had become disillusioned with Hinduism by the time he moved to Boston as a young man. He was a secularist. He had come to Boston to obtain his Master’s degree at MIT. Afterward, in the latter 1960s, he moved to the San Francisco Bay area to attend Stanford University where he obtained his PhD in physics. He and Carol, a native Californian, met there and married and later moved to Munich where he was privileged to work and teach at the famous Max Plank Institute for over 25 years. Satish worked on the theoretical issues-- doing the mathematics—of nuclear fusion. He took me on a tour one day of their facility and he showed to me the large molecular collider that they used in their experimentation. They would suspend plasma in midair with large magnets in this large donut-shaped collider that filled a large room. The plasma would heat up for short bursts up to 30 times the temperature of the surface of the sun, at which time they would shoot atoms into the plasma. There was an observable anomaly when the atom hit the plasma that no one could explain. Satish told me that he believed that he had solved the problem, and that if his theory held up, it would change fundamental views of nuclear physics of the time. He asked if I wanted to see his work which he had just completed that week. He brought me about 6 pages of hand written mathematic equations with calculus symbols.⁸ I asked him how long he had been working on this paper. He said that the idea originally came to him 17 years before, but he had been working on these 6 pages for 8 years, if I recall rightly. But what is most important about Satish was a very devout Christian. He would give lectures in schools on young earth creationism. And he would give his

⁸ Here is his paper that was based on the figures he showed me that afternoon:

http://pubman.mpdl.mpg.de/pubman/item/escidoc:2131019/component/escidoc:2131018/IPP_4_273.1.pdf

testimony of coming to Christ. Here was his testimony. At the end of the 60's he had met Carol at a Timothy Leary conference in San Francisco. Leary was a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, who was the leading advocate of 'recreational' drug use, particularly LSD. He coined the popular phrase of the day: "Turn on, Tune in, Drop out." Carol immediately fell for Satish. Those were the days of the hippies. The Beatles had brought to America a great interest and desire for eastern religions and mysticism. And for Carol, she found the "real" thing in Satish. But, again, Satish no longer had interest in such things. But Carol would "drag" him to Hindu temples in the Bay Area. On one occasion she insisted that they attend a Hindu temple in Berkeley, I believe, because the young Hindu guru had taken a two year vow of silence, and that two years was about to expire, so he was to declare to his gathering the sum of the wisdom that he had acquired through his meditation. Satish told me there were about 400 people present, all sitting about this man in his lotus position. The time came for the guru to speak and the first words out of his mouth were, "I have been a fool; Jesus Christ is the answer." The guru preached Jesus Christ to the gathering. Satish said that he and Carol and maybe half of those present were converted to Christ. The guru later became a pastor in New Jersey. The Lord sometimes does quite remarkable things in order to bring the gospel to His people to cause them to be born again.

Now in all of our discussion regarding the new birth, I think that it is important that each of us ask our self, "Do I have the evidence in my life that I have been truly born again?" In speaking of sudden and remarkable conversions, as we have done, some begin to question whether or not they have been born again, for they did not undergo the kind of transformative experience that others have related. But it is very important to understand that this work of the Holy Spirit in causing a person to be born again does not evidence itself in people in the same way and to the same degree. Sometimes the transformation is quite remarkable and is apparent to anyone who sees the transformation take place in the life of an unbeliever becoming a Christian. But as we have already said, many times the creation of new life in the sinner is much more subtle. It begins in an imperceptible manner and the change in the person's character is only observable over time. Regeneration or the new birth can be like a small seed planted in the soil, that begins to germinate and inch upward through the earth only to burst forth in clear light to be a vital and living thing. This seems to be how Peter described the new birth in 1 Peter 1:22f.

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, ²³having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever...

The Lord Jesus spoke of the growth of the kingdom of God in this manner:

²⁶And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. ²⁸For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mk. 4:26-29)

Here the Lord was speaking of the small almost imperceptible growth of the kingdom of God. But this parable is often used also to describe the work of grace in the soul. Clearly life has begun in the soul, but it is not immediately seen or evident. But in time it will be evident to all.

It takes wisdom to recognize that the new birth has actually taken place in a person. For that which is true must be distinguished from false manifestations that look like new life but actually are not. This is particularly true in children growing up under the influence of Christian parents. God can regenerate a baby, causing new life to begin at a very young age. John the Baptist had been filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. But there is no way of knowing that child has been born again through observation until the evidence of new life in Christ begins to manifest itself in the life of the child. And even then, it is difficult to ascertain whether the child is manifesting attitudes and actions that flow from a regenerate heart, or that which is seen is simply a compliant child to his or her godly parents. But time will bear out the presence or the absence of the influence of the Holy Spirit in the child's life.

But I have also seen this subtle transformation in the lives of adults. One begins to attend church and there seems to be no evidence of true life. But in time there is a little “movement”, as subtle as the quickening of a baby developing in the womb of a mother that first begins to move. There is first seen a stirring of interest in spiritual matters. There is in time an increasing interest and pleasure taken in the Word of God. A crisis may occur in his life, and he chooses to obey God’s Word rather than take the course that he would have formerly chosen. He plods on slowly, but he plods along farther. And in time he shows himself to be one of the steadiest, most faithful of servants, not in any ostentatious manner, but he is characterized by stability, commitment, and consistency in his faith. He may seem to bring forth fruit only thirty fold rather than a hundredfold, but that it is spiritual fruit wrought by the Holy Spirit no one would deny. The point we are emphasizing is that the work of the Holy Spirit is manifested in different degrees in different people, and it is not always clear that a work of grace has begun or is even present. But time will bear it out; time will reveal the reality of spiritual life or its absence.

In the sermon of **Charles Spurgeon** (1838-1892) that I gave out two weeks ago with our sermon notes, he gave attention to this matter by focusing on the words of our Lord in John 3:8, which again 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.*” He first described how the Holy Spirit creates life in some people we might have thought the least likely to become Christians:

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... 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!

We should be mindful that “the LORD’S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save” (Isa. 59:1). The Lord is able to save anyone that He purposes to save. He may do so suddenly and thoroughly and quite remarkably. We should expect “surprising conversions”, for that is how the Lord often works in His world, when He puts forth His power to cause spiritual life to spring up in one’s soul.

But then Spurgeon noted that the Holy Spirit works in different ways, in different degrees, and in different people. Again, Spurgeon compared the Spirit’s work to the force of wind:

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... 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... 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...

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."

The point of what we have been saying is that we should expect God to do remarkable and sudden works in people's lives in bringing them to salvation. But at the same time, we should not despise the day of small things (Cf. Zech. 4:10). If you would like to read an excellent book regarding this matter, I would recommend *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, by **Jonathan Edwards** (1703-1758). In this book he speaks of the revival called the Great Awakening that swept through the New England colonies during the mid 1730's and early 1740's. He also wrote in this book the reasons he believed that the Holy Spirit ceased to bless toward the end of the revival.

But what Edwards does record is that the Word of God sets forth true indicators of a work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to salvation through the new birth. In his book Edwards gave a very helpful section on *the biblical evidences of a true work of the Holy Spirit* having brought new life to an individual. Actually he did so in two parts. First, he set forth certain characteristics in people who claim to be saved that are often assumed to be so, but based on mistaken evidences of the new birth. He then set forth true biblical evidences of the new birth. We will recount these:

I. Evidences of the New Birth -- by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

Edwards addressed this matter in two parts. First, there were many in the established churches who rejected the revival that was taking place in many churches during the days of the Great Awakening, the great revival that swept through the northeastern colonies and in England as well. Many in established churches denied that God was really doing a work of salvation on a large scale. And so, Edwards first cited a number of common characteristics and happenings in the churches that were falsely argued that they discredited the work as of God. And so, Edwards first set forth *9 negative signs*, saying that just because you see these things it does not mean that the revival is not of the Spirit of God.

A. Negative signs; or, what are no signs by which we are to judge of a work—and especially, what are no evidences that a work is not from the Spirit of God (i.e. what are not true evidences to determine whether or not a true work of the Spirit is experienced)

1. Nothing can be certainly concluded from this, that a work is carried on in a way very unusual and extraordinary; provided the variety or difference be such, as may be comprehended within the limits Scriptural rules.

Allow me to “translate” Edwards’ way of expression. There were those in his day who dismissed the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing revival to his community and elsewhere because there were unusual experiences among the people. There were extraordinary testimonies of great and prolonged conviction of sin, of great degrees of joy and assurance that virtually overwhelmed people. Here Edwards was saying that simply because people have not themselves experienced what was said to be happening and experienced, is no reason to discredit the movement as not a work of the Holy Spirit.

2. A work is not to be judged of by any effects on the bodies of men; such as tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of body, or failing of bodily strength.

These were common experiences in places that the Great Awakening was occurring in the mid 1730’s in Massachusetts and Connecticut. There were those in the established churches who sought to discredit Edwards and the revival because of “enthusiasm” and manifestations of great emotion and ecstasy. It was said of those who were in the church at Enfield that on the occasion Jonathan Edwards preached to them that they cried out in this manner. Here is an account of an eyewitness that was in that service, which was written in a broken style:

We went over to Enfield where we met dear Mr. Edwards of Northampton who preached a most awakening sermon from these words—Deut. 32:35 and before the sermon was done—there was a great moaning and crying out through ye whole house—“What shall I do to be saved?”—“Oh, I am going to hell”—“Oh what shall I do for Christ” & c. So the minister was obliged to desist (pause in his preaching) – the shrieks and cries were piercing & amazing—after some time of waiting the congregation were still, so a prayer was made by Mr. W & after that we descended from the pulpit and discoursed with the people— Some in one place and some in another—and amazing and astonishing power God was seen--& several souls were hopefully wrought upon that night, & oh the cheerfulness and pleasantness of their countenances yet received comfort—oh God would strengthen and confirm—we sung a hymn & pray & dismiss the assembly.⁹

Again, many in the established churches of New England rejected what was taking place in the revival because they heard and saw these extraordinary reactions of people. Jonathan Edwards explained why it was most reasonable to see these kinds of manifestations, and therefore their observation should not be cause of rejecting what God was doing:

It is easily accounted for from the consideration of the nature of divine and eternal things, and the nature of man, and the laws of the union between soul and body, how a right influence, a true and proper sense of things should have such effects on the body, even those that are of the most extraordinary kind, such as taking away the bodily strength, or throwing the body into great agonies, and extorting loud outcries. There are none of us but do suppose, and would have been ready at any time to say it, that the misery of hell is doubtless so dreadful, and eternity so vast, that if a person should have a clear apprehension of that misery as it is, it would be more than his feeble frame could bear, and especially if at the same time he saw himself in great danger of it, and to be utterly uncertain whether he should be delivered from it, yea, and to have no security from it one day or hour. If we consider human nature, we must not wonder, that when

⁹ Iain Murray, **Jonathan Edwards; A New Biography** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 169. This was the occasion when Edwards preached, “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God”, on July 8, 1741 in Enfield (today CT).

persons have a great sense of that which is so amazingly dreadful, and also have a great view of their own wickedness and God's anger, that things seem to them to forbode speedy and immediate destruction. We see the nature of man to be such that when he is in danger of some terrible calamity to which he is greatly exposed, he is ready upon every occasion to think that now it is coming. –When persons' hearts are full of fear, in time of war, they are ready to tremble at the shaking of a leaf, and to expect the enemy every minute, and to say within themselves, now I shall be slain. If we should suppose that a person saw himself hanging over a great pit, full of fierce and glowing flames, by a thread that he knew to be very weak, and not sufficient to bear his weight, and knew that multitudes had been in such circumstances before, and that most of them had fallen and perished, and saw nothing within reach, that he should take hold of to save him, what distress would he be in! How ready to think that now the thread was breaking, that now, this minute, he should be swallowed up in those dreadful flames! And would not he be ready to cry out in such circumstances? How much more those that see themselves in this manner hanging over an infinitely more dreadful pit, or held over it by the hand of God, who at the same time they see to be exceedingly provoked! No wonder that the wrath of God, when manifested but a little to the soul, overbears human strength.¹⁰

After Edwards set forth the reasonableness of men to be overcome bodily by the fear of hell, he went on to describe how reasonable it was for those who had been saved from their dreadful condition, who came to see and understand the mercy and love of God for them in Christ, that they, too, may be overcome with emotion even to the loss of all bodily strength.

So it may easily be accounted for, that a true sense of the glorious excellency of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of His wonderful dying love, and the exercise of the truly spiritual love and joy, should be such as very much to overcome the bodily strength. We are all ready to own, that no man can see God and live, and that it is a very small part of the apprehension of the glory and love of Christ which the saints enjoy in heaven, that our present frame can bear; therefore it is not at all strange that God should sometimes give His saints such foretastes of heaven, as to diminish their bodily strength. If it was not unaccountable that the queen of Sheba fainted, and had her bodily strength taken away, when she came to see the glory of Solomon, much less is it unaccountable that she who is the antitype of the queen of Sheba, viz., the Church, that is brought, as it were, from the utmost ends of the earth, from being an alien and stranger, far off, in a state of sin and misery, should faint when she comes to see the glory of Christ, who is the antitype of Solomon; and especially will be so in the prosperous, peaceful, glorious kingdom which He will set up in the world in its latter age.¹¹

3. It is no argument that an operation on minds of people is not the work of the Spirit of God that it occasions a great deal of noise about religion (i.e. true Christianity).

Edwards wrote of this:

Surely, it is no argument that the minds of persons are not under the influence of God's Spirit, that they are very much moved: for indeed spiritual and eternal things are so great, and of such infinite concern. That there is great absurdity in men's being but moderately moved and affected by them; and surely it is no argument that they are not moved by the Spirit of God, that they are affected with these things in some measure they deserve, or in some proportion to their importance.¹²

4. It is no argument that an operation on the minds of a people is not the work of the Spirit of God that many who are subjects of it have great impressions made on their imaginations.

5. It is no sign that a work is not from the Spirit of God that example is a great means to it.

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions* (Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1972), pp. 63f.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 65f.

Some had reasoned against the revival claiming that people were simply mimicking the excesses of others they witnessed. Edwards argued that God often uses the means of examples in Scripture to move His people in the direction that He would bring them by His grace. “It is agreeable to Scripture that persons should be influenced by another’s good example.”¹³

6. It is no sign that the work is not of the Spirit of God that many who seem to be the subjects of it are guilty of great imprudence and irregularities in their conduct. “We are to consider that the end for which God pours out His Spirit is to make men holy, and not to make them politicians.”¹⁴

7. Nor are many errors in judgment, and some delusions of satan intermixed with the work, any argument that the work in general is not of the Spirit of God.

8. If some, who were thought to be wrought upon, fall away into gross errors, or scandalous practices, it is no argument that the work in general is not the work of the Spirit of God.

9. It is no argument that a work is not from the Spirit of God that seems to be promoted by ministers insisting very much on the terrors of God’s holy law, and that with a great deal of pathos and earnestness.

“If there really be a hell of such dreadful and never-ending torments, as is generally supposed, of which multitudes are in great danger—and into which the greater part of men in Christian countries do actually from generation to generation fall, for want of a sense of its terribleness, and so for want of taking due care to avoid it—then why is it not proper for those who have the care of souls to take great pains to make men sensible of it?”¹⁵

Now after Edwards had set forth negative signs that are no reason to discredit a work of the Spirit of God, he then set forth five positive evidences that what occurs in a person is a true regenerating work of the Holy Spirit:

B. Positive signs; or, what are distinguishing Scriptural evidences of a work of the Spirit of God.

Edwards wrote, “Having shown, in some instances, what are not evidences that a work wrought among a people is not a work of the Spirit of God, I now proceed in the second place, as was proposed, to show positively what are the sure, distinguishing Scripture evidences and marks of a work of the Spirit of God, by which we may proceed in judging of any operation we find in ourselves, or seeing among a people, without danger of being misled.”¹⁶ In other words, here are the evidences of a true work of the Holy Spirit. Those who are born again will be characterized by these five qualities or characteristics. He based his comments on verses in 1 John 4.

1. When the operation is such as to raise their esteem of that Jesus who was born of the Virgin, and was crucified without the gates of Jerusalem; and seems more to confirm and establish in their minds in the truth of what the gospel declares to us of His being the Son of God, and the Savior of men; it is a sure sign that it is from the Spirit of God.

“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.” (1 John 4:2f)

¹³ Ibid, p. 68.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 70.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 73.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 75.

2. When the Spirit that is at work operates against the interests of satan's kingdom, which lies in encouraging and establishing sin, and cherishing men's worldly lusts; this is a sure sign that it is a true, and not false spirit.

"You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them." (1 Jn. 4:4f)

Edwards wrote, "So that we may safely determine, from what the apostle says, that the spirit that is at work amongst a people after such a manner as to lessen men's esteem of the pleasures, profits, and honors of the world, and to take their hearts from an eager pursuit after these things; and to engage them in deep concern about a future state and eternal happiness which the gospel reveals, and puts them upon earnestly seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and the spirit that convinces them of the dreadfulfulness of sin, the guilt that it brings, and the misery to which it exposes must needs be the Spirit of God."¹⁷

3. The spirit that operates in such a manner as to cause in men greater regard to the Holy Scriptures, and establishes them more in their truth and divinity is certainly the Spirit of God.

"We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." (1 John 4:6)

4. Another rule to judge of spirits may be drawn from those compellations given to the opposite spirits, in the last words of the 6th verse, "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

"These words exhibit the two opposite characters of the Spirit of God, and other spirits that counterfeit His operations. And therefore, if by observing the manner of the operation of a spirit that is at work among a people, we see that it operates as a spirit of truth, leading persons to truth, convincing them of those things that are true, we may safely determine that it is a right and true spirit."

5. If the spirit that is at work among a people operates as a spirit of love to God and man, it is a sure sign that it is the Spirit of God.

This truth is set forth in 1 John 4:6-21. Edwards wrote:

In these verses love is spoken of as if it were that wherein the very nature of the Holy Spirit consisted; or, as if divine love dwelling in us, and the Spirit of God dwelling in us were the same thing; as it is also in the last two verses of the foregoing chapter, and in the 16th verse of this chapter. Therefore this last mark which gives the true Spirit he seems to speak of as the most eminent: and so insists much more largely upon it than upon all the rest; and speaks expressly of both love to God and men...¹⁸

Now Jonathan Edwards was addressing primarily how to assess a movement or work occurring among the collective people of God. But what is true of the whole church is true of the individuals of the church. These five positive descriptions of a true work of the Spirit are validation tests of an individual who professes to be a Christian, having been born again of the Holy Spirit.

(1) The one who is born again by the Holy Spirit is brought to esteem Jesus Christ as He is set forth in the Holy Scriptures; Jesus Christ is his sole object of faith for his salvation, and for whom he is brought to desire, to love, and to devote his life. (2) The one who is born again is brought to hate sin and desire liberty from it even as he loves and desires to exhibit righteousness in his life. (3) The one born again by

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 76f.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 79.

the Holy Spirit is brought to desire and magnify the Holy Scriptures as his sole authority in matters of faith and practice. (4) The one born of the Holy Spirit is brought to love the truth that is in God's Word, the truth that is in Jesus Christ. (5) The one who is born again by the Holy Spirit has been brought to love God and to love mankind, especially Christian men and women.

What are the implications for us of this doctrine of regeneration, or the new birth?

1. How desperate we are in need of the grace of God!
2. How earnestly and jealously we should guard the role of the Word of God!
3. How very prayerful we should be for ourselves as we witness and for others who hear!
4. How diligent we should be to preserve and employ the means of grace God has prescribed!
5. How careful we should be to ascribe all glory to God!

May we pray that God be merciful and gracious to our church, our land, our world at this time. He brought a great work to pass in the early days of our nation, and He could do so again today if He so willed. Let us pray to this end.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way.
The Lord be with you all. (2 Thess. 3:16)
