

# FINALLY ALIVE

What Happens When  
We Are Born Again

John Piper

CHRISTIAN  
**FOCUS**

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PART ONE  
WHAT IS THE NEW BIRTH?

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 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?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"*

John 3:1-10

## I

# THE SUPERNATURAL CREATION OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” He was speaking to all of us when he said that. Nicodemus was not a special case. You and I must be born again, or we will not see the kingdom of God. That means we will not be saved; we will not be part of God’s family, and we will not go to heaven. Instead, we will go to hell if we are not born again. That’s what Jesus says later in this chapter about the person who does not believe on Christ: “The wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). This is no joking matter. Jesus uses hard words for hard realities. That is what love does. The opposite is called pandering.

Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees, the most religious Jewish leaders. Jesus said to them in Matthew 23:15 and 33, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as

yourselves...You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” So the topic of the new birth is not marginal. It is central. Eternity hangs in the balance when we are talking about the new birth. Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

### THE NEW BIRTH IS UNSETTLING

The question we are asking in this chapter is: *What happens in the new birth?* Before I try to answer that question, let me mention a very earnest concern that I have about the way these chapters will be read. I am aware that these chapters will be unsettling to many—just as the words of Jesus are unsettling to us again and again, if we take them seriously. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, Jesus’ teaching about the new birth confronts us with our hopeless spiritual and moral and legal condition apart from God’s regenerating grace. Before the new birth happens to us, we are *spiritually* dead; we are *morally* selfish and rebellious; and we are *legally* guilty before God’s law and under his wrath. When Jesus tells us that we must be born again, he is telling us that our present condition is hopelessly unresponsive, corrupt, and guilty. Apart from amazing grace in our lives, we don’t like to hear this assessment of ourselves, so it is unsettling when Jesus tells us that we must be born again.

Second, teaching about the new birth is unsettling because it refers to something that is done to us, not something we do. John 1:13 emphasizes this. It refers to the children of God as those “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” God causes the new birth; we don’t. Peter stresses the same thing: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again” (1 Pet. 1:3).

We do not cause the new birth. God causes the new birth. Any spiritually good thing that we do is a result of the new birth, not a cause of the new birth. This means that the new birth is taken out of our hands. It is not in our control. And so it confronts us with our helplessness and our absolute dependence on Someone outside ourselves. This is unsettling. We are told that we won't see the kingdom of God if we're not born again. And we're told that we can't make ourselves to be born again.

The third reason Jesus' teaching about the new birth is unsettling, therefore, is that it confronts us with the absolute freedom of God. Apart from God, we are spiritually dead in our selfishness and rebellion. We are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). Our rebellion is so deep that we cannot detect or desire the glory of Christ in the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). Therefore, if we are going to be born again, it will rely decisively and ultimately on God. His decision to make us alive will not be a response to what we as spiritual corpses do, but what we do will be a response to his making us alive. For most people, at least at first, this is unsettling.

#### MY HOPE: STABILIZE AND SAVE, NOT JUST UNSETTLE

In view of how disturbing this can be to the tender conscience as well as the hard heart, I want to be very careful. I do not want to cause tender souls any unnecessary distress. And I do not want to give false hope to those who have confused morality or religion for spiritual life. Pray as you read this book that it will not have either of these destructive effects.

I feel like I am taking eternal souls in my hands. And yet I know that I have no power in myself to give them life. But God does. And I am very hopeful that he will do what he says in Ephesians 2:4-5: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in

our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” God loves to magnify the riches of his life-giving grace where Christ is lifted up in truth. That is my hope: that these chapters will not just unsettle but stabilize and save.

### THE PLAN

So let’s turn now to the question: *What happens in the new birth?* I will try to put the answer in three statements. The first two we will deal with in this chapter, and the third we deal with in the next: 1) What happens in the new birth is not getting new religion but getting new life. 2) What happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. 3) What happens in the new birth is not the improvement of your old human nature but the creation of a new human nature—a nature that is really *you*, and is forgiven and cleansed; and a nature that is really *new*, and is being formed by the indwelling Spirit of God. Let’s take those one at a time.

### NEW LIFE, NOT NEW RELIGION

What happens in the new birth is not getting new religion but getting new life. The first three verses of John 3 go like this:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

John makes sure that we know that Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. The Pharisees were the most rigorously

religious of all the Jewish groups. To this one, Jesus says (in v. 3), “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Even more personally, he says in verse 7, “You must be born again.” So one of John’s points is: All of Nicodemus’ religion, all of his amazing Pharisaic study and discipline and law-keeping, cannot replace the need for the new birth.

What Nicodemus needs, and what you and I need, is not religion but life. The point of referring to new birth is that birth brings a new life into the world.<sup>8</sup> In one sense, of course, Nicodemus is alive. He is breathing, thinking, feeling, acting. He is a human created in God’s image. But evidently, Jesus thinks he’s dead. There is no spiritual life in Nicodemus. Spiritually, he is unborn. He needs life, not more religious activities or more religious zeal. He has plenty of that.

Recall what Jesus said in Luke 9:60 to the man who wanted to put off following Jesus so he could bury his father. Jesus said, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead.” That means there are physically dead people who need burying. And there are spiritually dead people who can bury them. In other words, Jesus thought in terms of people who walk around with much apparent life, but who are dead. In his parable about the prodigal son, the father says, “This my son was dead, and is alive again” (Luke 15:24).

Nicodemus did not need religion; he needed life—spiritual life. What happens in the new birth is that life comes into being

8 Throughout this book, we will not make any significant distinction between the imagery of conception and the imagery of birth. Even pre-scientific, first-century people knew that children were alive and kicking before birth. But the biblical writers did not press the details of gestation in discussing the new birth. In general, when they (and we) speak of the new birth, we are speaking more broadly of new life coming into being whether one thinks of the point of conception or the point of birth.

that was not there before. New life happens at new birth. This is not religious activity or discipline or decision. This is the coming into being of life. That's the first way of describing what happens in the new birth.

EXPERIENCING THE SUPERNATURAL,  
NOT JUST AFFIRMING IT

Second, what happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. Nicodemus says in verse 2, "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." In other words, Nicodemus sees in Jesus' ministry a genuine divine activity. He admits that Jesus is from God. Jesus does the works of God. To this, Jesus does not respond by saying, "I wish everyone in Palestine could see the truth that you see about me." Instead, he says, "You must be born again, or you will never see the kingdom of God."

Seeing signs and wonders, and being amazed at them, and giving the miracle-worker credit for them that he is from God, saves nobody. This is one of the great dangers of signs and wonders: You don't need a new heart to be amazed at them. The old, fallen human nature is all that's needed to be amazed at signs and wonders. And the old, fallen human nature is willing to say that the miracle-worker is from God. The devil himself knows that Jesus is the Son of God and works miracles (Mark 1:24). No, Nicodemus, seeing Jesus as a miracle-worker sent from God is not the key to the kingdom of God. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

In other words, what matters is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. The new birth is supernatural, not natural. It cannot be accounted for by things that are already found in this world.

Verse 6 emphasizes the supernatural nature of the new birth: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The flesh is what we are naturally. The Spirit of God is the supernatural Person who brings about the new birth.

Jesus says this again in verse 8: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The Spirit is not a part of this natural world. He is above nature. He is supernatural. Indeed, he is God. He blows where he wills. We don’t control him. He is free and sovereign. He is the immediate cause of the new birth.

So, Nicodemus, Jesus says, what happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in me, but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. You must be born again. And not in a natural way (metaphorically speaking), but in a supernatural way. God the Holy Spirit must come into you and bring new life into existence.

In the next chapter, we will look at the words in verse 5: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” What do water and Spirit refer to here? And how does that help us understand what is happening in the new birth?

### JESUS IS THE LIFE WE RECEIVE AT NEW BIRTH

But in the space that remains in this chapter, I want to make a crucial connection between being born again by the Spirit and having eternal life through faith in Jesus. What we have seen so far is that what happens in the new birth is a supernatural work by the Holy Spirit to bring spiritual life into being where it did not exist. Jesus says it again in John 6:63: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.”

But the Gospel of John makes something else clear as well: Jesus himself is the life that the Holy Spirit gives. Or we could say: The spiritual life that he gives, he only gives in connection with Jesus. Union with Jesus is where we experience supernatural, spiritual life. Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In John 6:35, he said, “I am the bread of life.” And in John 20:31, the apostle says, “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

So there is no spiritual life—no eternal life—apart from connection with Jesus and belief in Jesus. We will have lots more to say about the relationship between the new birth and faith in Jesus. But we can put it this way for now: In the new birth, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ in a living union. Christ is life. Christ is the vine where life flows. We are the branches (John 15:1–17). What happens in the new birth is the supernatural creation of new spiritual life, and it is created through union with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit brings us into vital connection with Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life. That is the objective reality of what happens in the new birth.

And from our side, the way we experience this is that faith in Jesus is awakened in our hearts. Spiritual life and faith in Jesus come into being together. The new life makes the faith possible, and since spiritual life always awakens faith and expresses itself in faith, there is no life without faith in Jesus. Therefore, we should never separate the new birth from faith in Jesus. From God’s side, we are united to Christ in the new birth. That’s what the Holy Spirit does. From our side, we experience this union by faith in Jesus.

## NEVER SEPARATE THE NEW BIRTH AND FAITH IN JESUS

Here is how John puts them together in his First Epistle: “Everyone who has been *born of God* overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our *faith*” (1 John 5:4). “Born of God” is the key to victory. “Faith” is the key to victory. Both are true because faith is the way we experience being born of God. Being born of God always brings faith with it. The life given in the new birth is the life of faith. The two are never separate.

Or consider how John says it in 1 John 5:11–12: “This is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” Therefore, when Jesus says, “It is the Spirit who gives life” (John 6:63), and, “You must be born of the Spirit” (John 3:5, 8), and, “Believing you may have life” (John 20:31), he means: In the new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith. For Jesus is life.

Therefore, when answering the question *What happens in the new birth?* never separate these two sayings of Jesus in John 3: “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3), and, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (v. 36). What happens in the new birth is the creation of life in union with Christ. And part of how God does that is by the creation of faith, which is how we experience our union with Christ.

## YOU ARE STILL YOU, BUT NEW

In this chapter, we will continue the answer to the question of Chapter 1, *What happens in the new birth?* Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:7, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” In verse 3, he told Nicodemus—and us—that our eternal lives depend on being born again: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” So we are not dealing with something marginal or optional or cosmetic in the Christian life. The new birth is not like the make-up that morticians use to try to make corpses look more like they are alive. The new birth is the creation of spiritual life, not the imitation of life.

We began to answer the question *What happens in the new birth?* with two statements: 1) What happens in the new birth is not getting new religion but getting new life, and 2) What happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself.

## NEW LIFE THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and had lots of religion. But he had no spiritual life. And he saw the supernatural work of God in Jesus, but he didn't experience the supernatural work of God in himself. So putting our two points together from Chapter 1, what Nicodemus needed was new spiritual life imparted supernaturally through the Holy Spirit. What makes the new life *spiritual* and what makes it *supernatural* is that it is the work of God the Spirit. It is something above the natural life of our physical hearts and brains.

In John 3:6, Jesus says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The flesh does have a kind of life. Every human being is living flesh. But not every human being is living spirit. To be a living spirit, or to have spiritual life, Jesus says, we must be "born of the Spirit." Flesh gives rise to one kind of life. The Spirit gives rise to another kind of life. If we don't have this second kind, we will not see the kingdom of God.

## BY THE SPIRIT, IN JESUS

Then, as we came to the end of the previous chapter, we noticed two very important things: the relationship of the new birth to Jesus, and the relationship of the new birth to faith. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the *life*" (John 14:6). The apostle John said, "God gave us eternal life, and this life is *in his Son*. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11-12).

So on the one hand, the new life we need is "in the Son"—Jesus is that life. If you have him, you have new spiritual, eternal life. And on the other hand, in John 6:63, Jesus says, "It is the

Spirit who gives life.” And unless you are born of the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

So we have life by being connected with the Son of God who is our life, and we have that life by the work of the Spirit. We concluded, therefore, that the work of the Spirit in regeneration is to impart new life to us by uniting us to Christ. The way John Calvin says it is: “The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”<sup>9</sup>

Then we saw the connection with faith in John 20:31: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” And we saw the connection in 1 John 5:4: “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” So we summed up what we had seen like this: In the new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith.

### NEW CREATION, NOT IMPROVING THE OLD

Which brings us now to the third way of describing what happens in the new birth. What happens in the new birth is not the improvement of your old human nature but the creation of a new human nature—a nature that is really *you*, forgiven and cleansed; and a nature that is really *new*, being formed in you by the indwelling Spirit of God.

I’ll take you with me on the short version of the trip I took to arrive at this observation. In John 3:5, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” What does Jesus mean by the two terms “by water and the Spirit”? Some

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 538 (III, 1, 1).

denominations believe that this is a reference to water baptism as the way the Spirit unites us to Christ. For example, one website explains it like this:

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church, and made sharers in her mission: “Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.”<sup>10</sup>

Millions of people have been taught that their baptism caused them to be born again. If this is not true, it is a great and global tragedy. I do not believe it is true. So what then does Jesus mean by the words “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit...?”

#### WHY “WATER” IS NOT A REFERENCE TO BAPTISM

There are several reasons why I think the reference to water here is not a reference to Christian baptism.

First, if this were a reference to Christian baptism and it were as essential for new birth as some say it is, it seems strange that it drops out of view in the rest of this chapter as Jesus tells us how to have eternal life. Verse 15: “Whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Verse 16: “Whoever believes in him [will] not perish but have eternal life.” Verse 18: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned.” It would seem strange, if baptism were that essential, that it would not be mentioned along with faith in the rest of the chapter.

Second, the analogy with the wind in verse 8 would seem strange if being born again were so firmly attached to water baptism. Jesus says, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where

<sup>10</sup> [www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/baptism.html](http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/baptism.html), accessed 04-30-08

it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” This seems to say that God is as free as the wind in causing regeneration. But if it happened every time a baby is sprinkled, that would not seem to be true. In that case, the wind would be very confined by the sacrament. It does not sound as if Jesus is thinking in sacramental or baptismal terms.

Third, if Jesus is referring to Christian baptism, it seems strange that he would say to Nicodemus, the Pharisee, in verse 10, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” That makes sense if Jesus is referring to something taught in the Old Testament, which Nicodemus should have known and applied. But if Jesus is referring to a Christian baptism that will come later, and get its meaning from the life and death of Jesus, it doesn’t seem like he would have scolded Nicodemus that a teacher in Israel does not understand what he is saying.

Finally, that same statement in verse 10 sends us back to the Old Testament for some background, and what we find is that water and spirit are closely linked in the New Covenant promises, especially in Ezekiel 36. This text in Ezekiel is the basis for the rest of this chapter.

#### WATER AND SPIRIT IN EZEKIEL 36

Ezekiel is prophesying what God will do for his people when he brings them back from exile in Babylon. The implications are much larger than just for the people of Israel, because Jesus claims to secure the New Covenant by his blood for all who will trust in him (Luke 22:20). And Ezekiel 36:24–28 is one version of the New Covenant promises like the ones in Jeremiah 31:31–34.

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from

all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezek. 36:24–28)

I think this is the passage that gives rise to Jesus words “Unless one is born of *water* and the *Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” To whom does God say, “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (v. 28)? Answer: To the ones to whom he says, “I will sprinkle clean *water* on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses” (v. 25); and verse 26: To the ones to whom he says, “I will give you a new heart, and a new *spirit* I will put within you.” In other words, the ones who will “enter the kingdom” are those who have a newness that involves a *cleansing* of the old and a *creation* of the new.

So I conclude that “water and Spirit” in Ezekiel 36 refer to two aspects of our newness when we are born again. And the reason both are important is this: When we say that a new spirit (or a new heart) is given to us, we don’t mean that we cease to be the human being—the morally accountable self—that we have always been. I was the individual human being John Piper before I was born again, and I have been the individual human being John Piper since I was born again. There is a continuity. That’s why there has to be cleansing. If the old human being, John Piper, were completely obliterated, the whole concept of forgiveness and cleansing would be irrelevant. There would be nothing left over from the past to forgive or cleanse.

We know that the Bible tells us that our old self was crucified (Rom. 6:6), and that we have died with Christ (Col. 3:3), and that we are to “consider ourselves dead” (Rom. 6:11), and “put

off the old self” (Eph. 4:22). But none of that means the same human being is not in view throughout life. It means that there was an old nature, an old character, or principle, or bent, that needs to be done away with.

So the way to think about your new heart, new spirit, new nature is that it is still you and so needs to be forgiven and cleansed—that’s the point of the reference to water. My guilt must be washed away. Cleansing with water is a picture of that. Jeremiah 33:8 puts it like this: “I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.” So the person that we are—that continues to exist—must be forgiven, and the guilt washed away.

#### THE NEED TO BE NEW

But forgiveness and cleansing are not enough. I need to be new. I need to be transformed. I need life. I need a new way of seeing and thinking and valuing. That’s why Ezekiel speaks of a new heart and a new spirit in verses 26–27: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my *Spirit* within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Here’s the way I understand those verses: To be sure, the heart of stone means the dead heart that was unfeeling and unresponsive to spiritual reality—the heart you had before the new birth. It could respond with passion and desire to lots of things. But it was a stone toward the spiritual truth and beauty of Jesus Christ and the glory of God and the path of holiness. That is what has to change if we are to see the kingdom of God.

So in the new birth, God takes out the heart of stone and puts in a heart of flesh. The word flesh doesn’t mean “merely human” as it does in John 3:6 (“that which is born of the flesh is flesh”).

It means soft and living and responsive and feeling, instead of being a lifeless stone. In the new birth, our dead, stony boredom with Christ is replaced by a heart that senses the worth of Jesus.

Then when Ezekiel says in verses 26–27, “A new spirit I will put within you....And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes,” I think he means that in the new birth, God puts a living, supernatural, spiritual life in our heart, and that new life—that new spirit—is the working of the Holy Spirit himself giving shape and character to our new heart.

The picture I have in my mind is that this new warm, touchable, responsive, living heart is like a soft lump of clay, and the Holy Spirit presses himself up into it and gives spiritual, moral shape to it according to his own shape. By being himself within us, our heart and mind take on his character—his spirit (cf. Eph. 4:23).

#### RECEIVE HIM AS YOUR TREASURE

So now let's step back and sum up these last two chapters. What happens in the new birth? In the new birth, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gives us new spiritual life by connecting us with Jesus Christ through faith. Or, to say it another way, the Spirit unites us to Christ where there is cleansing for our sins (pictured by water), and he replaces our hard, unresponsive heart with a soft heart that treasures Jesus above all things and is being transformed by the presence of the Spirit into the kind of heart that loves to do the will of God (Ezek. 36:27).

We will have much more to say about the role of faith in the new birth and how a person may seek the new birth and may help others seek it. But you need not wait. If your heart is drawn to the truth and beauty of Christ, receive him as your life. John holds out this amazing promise: “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

## CONCLUSION

### THE NEW BIRTH AND THE NEW WORLD

Jesus' words "You must be born again" (John 3:7) go to the heart of the world's problems. There will be no final peace, no final justice, no triumph over hate and selfishness and racism without this profound change in human nature.

All other diagnoses and remedies are superficial. They may even be valuable—like laws that restrain people from doing their worst. But without the new birth, people are not changed at the root, and that is where the problem lies. If human beings are not changed at the root, then our innate selfishness will spoil every dream.

Jesus' remedy fits the depths of our disorder. If we only did bad things because of bad circumstances, then there might be hope that changing the circumstances would change our behavior. But our problem is not simply that we do bad things—like slandering others, and cheating in private, and neglecting

our responsibilities, and shunning those who are different, and doing shoddy work, and bending the truth, and gratifying our desires at others' expense, and ignoring the poor, and giving no regard to our Maker.

Our problem is that what we do comes from who we are. "Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit" (Matt. 7:16–17). "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). That's Jesus' explanation of why human beings bear bad fruit. It's not that there's been a drought. No, the tree is diseased.

Jesus' radical remedy will never make sense until we own up to his diagnosis of our condition. The human heart is innately selfish. Jesus had no romantic notions about the best of men. He loved his disciples. He knew they were kind fathers. But he matter-of-factly called them evil. "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children..." (Matt. 7:11). He agreed with the prophet Jeremiah, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9).

Jesus would have approved of the apostle Paul's penetrating description of the layers of our corruption. Humans suffer from "the futility of their minds, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart" (Eph. 4:17–18). At the bottom of our wills—at the root, at the spring—we are hard. There are no exceptions. "For in your sight no man living is righteous" (Ps. 143:2).

Jesus' remedy for this was and is "You must be born again." He put everything in place to make it possible. He lived a sinless life. He died for our sins. He endured the wrath of God in our place. He paid the penalty for our transgressions. He purchased eternal life. He secured all the promises of God. He rose from

the dead. He conquered death and hell and Satan. He reigns at God's right hand and intercedes for us. He will come again to "make his blessings flow far as the curse is found." He did all of that to make the gift of the new birth possible. All those blessings are sure for those who are born again.

The connection between those blessings and us is the new birth. That is Jesus' root remedy for our depravity. Personal and social and global renewal will not be possible without this most fundamental of all changes. It is the root of all true and lasting change.

Someone may say: "I know religious people—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, cultic—who act like vipers. They aren't part of the renewal." Jesus knew them too. But he did not infer from this that the new birth doesn't work. He infers that they are hypocrites. "You clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Matt. 23:25). "You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones" (Matt. 23:27).

Religious fakes were no surprise to Jesus. He prepared his most stinging words for them. They do not contradict the new birth. They confirm it. What could possibly change a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 12:34)? Reformation is not what vipers need. They need regeneration. Religious fraud does not make the new birth nonsense; it makes it necessary.

So if your heartache is for your own personal change, or for change in your marriage, or change in your prodigal children, or in your church, or in the systemic structures of injustice, or in the political system, or in the hostilities among nations, or in the human degradation of the environment, or in the raunchiness of our entertainment culture, or in the miseries of the poor, or in the callous opulence of the rich, or in the inequities of educational opportunity, or in arrogant attitudes of ethnocentrism,

or in a hundred areas of human need caused by some form of human greed—if your heart aches for any of these, then you should care supremely about the new birth.

There are other ways of shaping culture and guiding behavior. But none so deep. None so far-reaching. None so universally relevant. None so eternally significant.

Someday, at the return of the Lord Jesus, the world will be made new. The kingdom of God will come fully. Jesus himself will be the great all-satisfying Treasure in that new and beautiful earth. But not everyone will enjoy it. “Truly, truly,” Jesus said, “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Until we come to him, we will not have life. Not now. Not ever. God gives eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:11). Whoever has the Son has life (1 John 5:12). His word is reliable: “Come to me that you may have life” (John 5:40). If you come, you will be truly, invincibly, finally alive.