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CHAPTER 2: NEW LIFE

JOHN 3:3 – *“Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”*

WE meet with a great many people in Meetings of this kind who seem to have a general notion of their obligation to serve God, and a desire to do so. They feel that they are not right – are not quite what they ought to be, and would like to be if they were going to die; and they desire to be so. They are sincere, so far as they go; but they seem to have no definite idea of that experience which is necessary in order to make them right; they do not understand how they are to be saved.

Nicodemus seems to have been one of this class; he seems to have come to the Saviour with these general sort of notions. I dare say he thought he was a pretty good man; but he wanted to be a better one. There was the same dissatisfaction, the same disquiet in his soul that there is in every human soul till it finds God, and which nothing else can ever satisfy; because God has made us for Himself, and until we find the end of our being we can never rest; we are like Noah's dove, wandering hither and thither and finding no rest for the soles of our feet. It was just so with Nicodemus. He wanted something. He had heard of this Teacher; nay, had probably heard Him speak, and felt that He was a teacher come from God and like a great many other Nicodemuses since, he felt the words of the Teacher to BE TRUE; but he had a great many 'ifs' and 'buts' about it. He wanted to hear more, and so sought a private interview, no doubt thinking that he could bring out his own personal difficulties, and get more light in that way; so he makes a sort of introduction to our Lord, and begins in a way which would lead us to think that he expected that Jesus would enter into an elaborate conversation as to the orderings and method of his outward life; but Jesus stopped him right in the middle of his introduction with a doctrine that utterly confounded him; it was so adverse to all his preconceived notions, and so utterly beyond any of his present conceptions. One can imagine him fairly gasping as he looks at this wonderful doctrine, for he seems to have comprehended its magnitude, its importance, and its definiteness a great deal better than many of the Nicodemuses of these days, but he stumbles at the difficulty, and begins immediately, as people do now, to ask, "How can this be?" The Saviour does not retract, or explain away, or go one iota from what He has previously advanced. He not only does not weaken His assertion, but He strengthens it by a "Verily, verily." He says, "Do not be surprised. I admit there are



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difficulties. You cannot understand, and I cannot explain how this great spiritual change is wrought; but I tell you it must take place both in you and in every other candidate for My kingdom."

This text ought to be rendered, "Except ANY ONE be born again, he cannot" – mark the term; it is not "shall not," but "cannot" – "enter into the kingdom of God." This new birth is a necessity of the case, as if the Saviour had said to Nicodemus, "You are a purely natural man; you live a merely natural life, actuated by natural instincts, hopes, and aspirations; whereas My kingdom is a SPIRITUAL KINGDOM, and its subjects are spiritual people, actuated by holy motives, holy desires and purposes; therefore it is indispensable that this great change should take place in you before you can become a member of My kingdom. You must be born again." And, in answer to the surprise of Nicodemus, He says, "Marvel not, neither reject this doctrine because you cannot comprehend it, for you encounter quite as great mysteries every day of your life; for instance, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth." This is a great mystery, yet you know the wind does blow because you see its results and you feel its power. It is just so with the operations of the Spirit; we see its results and feel its power, and know that we are under its influence.

It would seem that under the surprise there was lurking some repugnance in the mind of Nicodemus to this doctrine, which is so obnoxious to human pride, self-sufficiency, and morality. Nicodemus betrays his utter ignorance of spiritual truth by the question, "How can a man be born when he is old?"

Now, mark, I want you who are anxious about your souls, to note this: the Saviour here lays down a DEFINITE EXPERIENCE, which He DECLARES ALL MUST PASS THROUGH; no matter what a man may be, or what he may do, or what he may believe, if he have not this experience, "he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." And, Oh! how we see it illustrated every day around us – people like Nicodemus, moral, amiable, and religious in their way, and yet have never been born again; and we know that they do not, as a matter of fact, enter the Kingdom of God. They know nothing of that Kingdom which is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. They cannot enter the Kingdom of God because this great internal change has never taken place in them. I want you, my friends, to mark this well. Don't let Satan tempt you, or anybody persuade you, to rest short of this new birth. You must remember that there is not a glorified spirit in heaven nor a sanctified saint on earth who has not passed through it. Some may have experienced it in childhood, and therefore not



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have a very distinct recollection of the time; but every saint has experienced it.

Well, then, just let us for a few minutes try to find out what the Saviour intended by this new birth. Evidently He meant the beginning of true spiritual life to the soul. He intimates that so great a change must take place in our souls as could only be illustrated by the great change which takes place in our bodies at our natural birth. I want you carefully to mark the terms used by the Saviour here, and also the figure. We cannot follow it out; but I will confine my remarks to its meaning. By the terms used, our Lord evidently signifies an alteration, or change, passing upon something which before existed.

Mark, the Saviour does not say, 'Except a man be born, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God,' – for everybody is born – but 'Except a man be born again.' In another place this change is called 'the regeneration of the Spirit' mark, not generation, but regeneration. The soul existed before; but it is to be regenerated by the Holy Ghost – that is, the old soul is born into a new life. Again, this change is spoken of as being "renewed in the spirit of our minds." The same idea, you see – that what previously existed shall be renewed, transformed, and changed in character. In another place this change is spoken of as having the 'heart purified,' in another as having it circumcised, and in others as having it washed, cleansed, etc.: all terms, you perceive, showing that this new birth is not a new creation in the sense of having a new soul, or a new something apart from ourselves introduced into us, to live alongside the old unrenewed wicked heart till death, when I suppose in such a case one would have to go to Hell and the other to Heaven! No; neither the Saviour nor the Bible teaches any such nonsense, but they teach that this new birth is a renewal of the old soul, making the man himself a new creature in Christ Jesus; hence the figure used by our Lord truly illustrates His meaning, seeing that the natural birth is not a new creation, but the introduction of something previously created into a new life.

Just so the soul, when it is born again, is introduced into a new life, into new relations with God and man, new duties, new obligations, new responsibilities, a new world! What a glorious experience to know that we have passed from death unto life, from the kingdom of Satan into the Kingdom of God! Then comes power to walk in the statutes of the King, and to enjoy the pleasures of the Kingdom. People often say, 'Religion will deprive me of all that has hitherto constituted the joy of my life. Yes; but the joy of your life will be CHANGED; your appetites will be changed. Have you not known people in a severe sickness to lose their appetite for things of which they were previously



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very Well, that is just what God does for the soul. He takes away the appetite for those things which have been their joy in their unconverted state, and gives them new tastes, new joys, new impulses, and new aims in life. Old things are passed away, and all things are become new. But, further, I want to show the necessity for this great change – why the Saviour so emphatically insists on it; although surely the fact that He does insist on it ought to be sufficient. Seeing that man was the rebel, having broken the law and thereby excluded himself from the Kingdom of God, it was for God to dictate the conditions on which He would receive him back. God has fixed these conditions, and no less than three times in a few verses in this chapter our Saviour has laid them down. It is useless to kick against them, or to ignore them. We can do so if we like, but that will not alter them. God will not depart from them in order to meet our obstinacy.

Nevertheless, as we observed at the beginning, this is not an arbitrary arrangement. God has always good reasons for what He does, and in this instance there is an indispensable necessity in the nature of the case. This necessity arises out of the fact that all hearts are depraved by nature, and therefore out of harmony with God and incapable of entering into the privileges and duties of His Kingdom.

Does any man ask for proof of this depravity? We might cite the testimony of Scripture, and quote numbers of passages which directly or indirectly assert that the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. We might also refer to the history of our race – a history written in blood and watered by tears; but we prefer to come to experience. What does your own heart say? Ah, there is the difficulty. You readily admit that a portion of the race is depraved; and if the Saviour had confined His declaration to the openly wicked and profane, you would admit its necessity. But when He declares that EVERY ONE must be born again or he cannot enter His kingdom, you perceive this declaration includes you, and those whom you love; and your heart says, I was never a drunkard, or immoral, or profane; I never wronged anybody. I have always led a good, respectable, moral life, therefore I don't see why I should be classed with the reprobates of creation, and be required to go through a change which may be very necessary for them.

My friends, it was to one of your class exactly that our Saviour declared this necessity. Nicodemus was respectable, and moral, and withal a religious man in his way, a master in Israel; and yet Jesus assures him over and over again that neither he nor any one can enter His kingdom without this new birth.



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You see this change is to take place in the heart, not `merely in the life; and your heart is as bad as anybody else's! If you doubt this, just ask yourself a few simple questions. You say, I do none of these wicked things to which you refer. Perhaps not. But why? Your circumstances have been more favourable. The restraints of Providence, such as kind friends, education, Christian influence, and other causes, have modified your outward life not because your heart is any better. But for these restraints you would have been as wicked as many around you.

But though you are not outwardly wicked, have you not sufficient evidence of the sinfulness of your heart in other directions? For instance: You are conscious that you have no true religion. You don't even profess to have. You practise none of the duties or exercises of religion. You have never truly repented of and forsaken sin. You don't truly pray and habitually read God's Word. You are not even striving to love God with all your heart, and your neighbour as yourself. No; you live in indifference towards God, and in the rejection of both His law and Gospel.

What further proof can you require of the depravity of your heart than this? But, further, you know, not only that you have no true religion, but also that there is much in your heart that is opposed to God. You entertain hard and dishonouring thoughts of God. Your heart often rebels against His government, in order to meet your own evil propensities; and your rebellious will often sets itself in open defiance of His purposes. You know that God commands you to repent and to forsake sin – asks for your heart and your love – and requires you to form your plans and purposes with respect to His will and glory. But you systematically ignore both, and form them with reference to your own ease, pleasure, gain, or ambition. With all your boasted morality, you have thought, and felt, and desired, and done many things for which your own heart has condemned you, and which you would not for the world confess before this assembly. I ask you why you have thus thought and acted contrary to the dictates of your conscience. Because your heart is depraved, alienated from God, and committed to self and Satan.

Therefore, you see how this heart-depravity unfits you for the Kingdom of God. The true service of God is obedience prompted by love. `If ye love Me, keep My commandments.' `Why call ye Me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say?' `The first and greatest commandment is this, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.' How can a man love God when his heart is estranged, and full of sin and rebellion and selfishness? Impossible!



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Sinner, you hear the Bible and your conscience calling on you to love God. You feel that you ought, and perhaps you have tried, but you cannot. Your heart will love the world, pleasure, sin, business, anything but God. The moment you turn your thoughts towards God, instead of love and desire there springs up repugnance and dread. Why is this? Because your heart is wicked, and therefore it is contrary to its evil nature to love God. Before you can love Him, your wicked heart must be changed. And this is the reason why you cannot enter His kingdom except ye be born again.

Further, the natural unrenewed heart is incapable of entering into the enjoyments of the Kingdom of God on earth or in Heaven. Nothing seems to puzzle unsaved people more, with respect to the Salvation Army, than the happiness of our people. Sinners don't understand and cannot appreciate the joys of the spiritual Kingdom; they are spiritually discerned; to the natural man they are foolishness. he cannot know them.

One of the chief of these enjoyments is knowing and loving God. To the wicked the very thought of God is misery. But the pure in heart see Him, have fellowship with Him, and rejoice in the light of His countenance. His smile is more to them than thousands of gold and silver.

Another of the joys of the Kingdom is the communion of saints – the very sight of each other makes real saints happier; and interchange of thought, and feeling, and desire fills them with unspeakable joy. They realize that oneness with each other for which the Saviour prayed, "That they all may be one, as we are one."

But nothing is more irksome to the unconverted than intercourse with real saints; in fact, they cannot endure it, and always run away from it when possible. Sinners find their happiness here in eating and drinking, reading novels, dress, business, going to concerts, theatres, etc., from which, to say the least, God is shut out. Unconverted people would be wretched without these and kindred occupations and amusements. But the Kingdom of God provides occupations and joys of an entirely different character. Therefore, for the sinner to enter into these he must be born again.

Further, this depravity unfits man for the enjoyment of the Kingdom of God on high. If the joys of Heaven consisted of a continuation of the employments of earth, then sinners would be happy there. But Heaven is a holy place, prepared for holy beings, whose employment will be to serve God continually: "They serve Him day and night in His temple." Their happiness will consist in their



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perfect love and complete obedience to His will. The multitude which John saw, who had on white robes – emblematical of the purity of their hearts – had been washed and made white in the Blood of the Lamb.

Sinner, would you like to appear in such a place, surrounded by those beings, with your unchanged, selfish, worldly heart? Supposing God would let you enter, do you think you would feel at home there? Are you prepared for the enjoyments of Heaven? No; verily, if you were admitted, you would seek the first opportunity to escape. The light of that glorious abode would be more intolerable to you than the darkness of Hell itself. Why? Because your heart would be out of harmony with it all, and you would stand self-revealed before that glorious company.

Do you not see, then, how true are the Saviour's words, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God?" Do you say, "Well, I admit the truth of what you say, but what can I do? If I am thus depraved, and can only be fitted for the Kingdom of God by this new birth, what can I do? Can I do anything to help myself?" Yes, you can. In this case the figure used by our Saviour is not a perfect illustration, as figures seldom are. Though you are, in one sense, dead in trespasses and sins, yet the Spirit of God has already breathed upon your soul, and He now waits for the response of your will in order that He may accomplish this great change in you. It is vain for you to sit there in INACTION, WAITING TO BE BORN. You must follow the directions of the Holy Spirit, in complying with the conditions on which alone the change can be wrought.

You say, "You don't know the difficulties in my case." No, I don't; but I know this; that if you are WILLING, though you were possessed with a legion of devils, God is able and willing to cast them out, and to renew you in the spirit of your mind. I know that the whole legion of them cannot resist His power, if you will only fall at His feet and yield whatever may be the point of controversy between you and God. If you are willing to be born into the Kingdom, God has pledged Himself to bring you in.

You say, "I desire it; I want to be a new creature in Christ Jesus. I would like to be able to enter into the privileges and enjoyment of the Kingdom; but there is one thing in the way." Ah, that is the reason why many of you have been standing outside so long. Will you come to the point tonight, and trample that one thing under your feet? If you will, the strong arm of Omnipotence is reached out to you, and the Almighty hand will grasp you and plunge you into the flood, the all-cleansing



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flood of your Saviour's Blood; and you shall know what it means to be born again, to become a new creature in Christ Jesus. May the Lord help you to yield just now! Amen.

From a series of lectures by Catherine Booth in 1883.