

## **Born Again Or Begotten? (Part Three)**

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Among all of the Bible's teachings, the instruction given in John 3 regarding being born again is perhaps the most liable to being misunderstood. In fact, as soon as it was out of Jesus' mouth, Nicodemus misconstrued His meaning, taking Christ's spiritual symbolism literally and physically. Ever since, people have stumbled over various parts of Jesus' teaching in this passage, and usually the stumblingblock is the imagery.

To convey essential, spiritual principles, Jesus uses imagery extensively in the gospels, and perhaps the most in the book of John. Along with John 3's imagery of the new birth, the book contains many references to light, water, bread, blood, blindness, sheep and shepherds, fruit, seed, vines, and several others. In nearly every case, they have spiritual meanings that transcend a plain, literal sense.

The book of John also contains a remarkable witness to the fact that Jesus was constantly being misunderstood. An example appears in nearly every early chapter and continues sporadically to its end. Even in the last chapter, Jesus has to tell Peter three times to feed His sheep before the apostle realizes that His Master is teaching him that he could demonstrate his love for Him by truly caring for His people for the rest of his life.

As we have seen, John 3 contains not only the imagery of the new birth, but other images as well. Last time, we concentrated on John 3:5-6, in which appears the images of "water," "Spirit," and "flesh." In this final part, we will consider the remaining images and a few related terms and concepts.

### **Wind and Spirit**

John 3:7 addresses a false teaching in which Nicodemus was no doubt well-schooled: "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" The fullness of the word *must* as used by Christ here is often misunderstood. People think of being born again as a moral duty that they are required to meet, but that was not Jesus' intention. He does not mean that a person must see to it that he becomes born again. No, Jesus says it in terms of being "something that has to happen *to* you." He intends us to understand that the Father, by an act of His will, must implant His Spirit in an individual's heart for this birth to take place (Romans 9:6-16).

No one can bring about his own human birth; it is the gift of a person's parents. In the same manner, spiritual birth and life are gifts from our Father in heaven. He is sovereign over His creation, and He is engineering the salvation of His Family Kingdom from the birth of each child to his glorification. Did Rebecca's son, Jacob, in any way initiate his calling and receipt of salvation? Yet, though God had chosen him for that while he was still in her womb, Jacob was not actually called and converted until many years after he was born and had produced a life of sinful acts apart from God. Paul explains God's sovereign choice in Romans 9:11-13:

. . . (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

Undoubtedly, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, had been circumcised and therefore had become a party to the Old Covenant in that customary manner. All of his associates—indeed, everyone in the entire Jewish culture—believed essentially the same things regarding salvation. In John 3, however, Jesus is teaching something a great deal different from what Nicodemus had believed all of his adult life. This passage makes it clear that he was having difficulty grasping it. He is being taught that salvation is a gift of God, and God solely and personally initiates it in a circumstance in which the person is essentially passive. God, by means of His Spirit, is entirely sovereign in this matter of producing the spiritual regeneration of which Jesus speaks.

John 3:8 expands on the sovereign character of God's personal involvement in each person's new birth. At the same time, Christ teaches us that we should judge what has happened in the born-again person's life by what it produces. He illustrates this by saying, "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."

This is another verse where people jump to a wrong conclusion, concluding that Christ is speaking of a post-resurrection situation. They do this by assuming that a person is not born into the Kingdom of God until the resurrection. At that time, they will indeed be composed of spirit and be invisible like wind. With that as their assumption, they give themselves the "hatpin test," saying, "I can't possibly be born again yet because I'm still human." We must not fall for this line of reasoning, though, because such a thought directly contradicts the exceedingly clear Colossians 1:13, as well as other scriptures. Once again, people who have concluded this have not correctly analyzed another of Jesus' figurative illustrations. The Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35)! There is another answer, a right answer.

Interestingly, the Greek word underlying "wind" is the same as the one underlying "spirit": *pneuma*. This truth supplies one facet of proper analysis because wind and spirit share a few characteristics: They are both invisible to human sight, and neither can be controlled by humans. In other words, each is sovereign and independent in its actions. The wind does as it pleases. No human can direct where the wind comes from, nor order where it is to go or what it is to do.

However, even though wind is itself invisible, its effects can be seen. In addition, the sound of its movement can be heard, and the changes it produces—such as trees swaying, dust blowing, and clouds passing across the sky—can be seen. In this same manner, the invisible Spirit, by which a person receives spiritual birth and produces spiritual fruit, operates.

Notice in verse 8 that the definite article "the" appears before the word "Spirit." In this case, "Spirit" is not used as a mere general term, but Jesus draws attention to a particular Spirit—the One who causes our spiritual birth, our Father in heaven. He is spirit (John 4:24), and He is holy (I Peter 1:16). Who can order Him about and direct the course of His actions? He does as it pleases Him. His operations are sovereign, and He has power over even the most hardened of sinners.

We can witness the changes that He produces in people by noting that the formerly sinful person is becoming holy; the immoral person is becoming moral; the stubborn, obstinate person is becoming gentle, thoughtful, and helpful. In other words, just as with the wind, we see the effects of an invisible cause. The Father grants regeneration and repentance, and He reveals Himself, bestowing His Spirit and spiritual growth on whomever He will (Romans 9:15-16). He does these things at the times and in the ways that please Him.

The born-again person knows his life has changed and enjoys it, but we do not always grasp how God operates on our hearts to subdue our wills to His. However, if we take up the challenges of God's calling, understanding comes. As Paul says in I Corinthians 2:10: "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God."

It is small wonder that Nicodemus was perplexed by Jesus' instruction. He apparently had never dreamed of a relationship with the Creator God so personal, intimate, and continuous.

### **"Jerusalem Above"**

Some will contend that Galatians 4:26—"but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all"—proves that a Christian is a fetus conceived by the Holy Spirit, and by analogy, is being carried in the womb of the church, awaiting birth into the Kingdom of God at the resurrection when Christ returns. This cannot be so on several counts. The first is Paul's use of the term "mother." In context, it indicates that the "mother" is not carrying a fetus, but rather, she has already delivered a child—actually many children, the born-again Christians who make up the membership of the church.

The second problem begins with a fact that several commentators assert: Neither Paul nor any other of the apostles ever once equate the church with "Jerusalem above." Growing out from this truth is that Paul specifically states that "Jerusalem above . . . is the mother of us all." However, the church is on earth. Paul is using Jerusalem figuratively in his illustration, in the sense of a homeland from which people spring (Galatians 4:25). It is as if the homeland gives birth to the children in question.

In the passage, the apostle is comparing the weakness and slavery of the earthly Jerusalem with the freedom and power of the heavenly one. The children of God spring from the heavenly because that is where our spiritual Father is located. From there, we are governed, our blessings flow, our rights are secured, and our interests are promoted (Ephesians 1:3). Jerusalem above is the city in which our names are registered (Hebrews 12:23) and our citizenship held (Philippians 3:20). Heavenly Jerusalem, which will come down to earth following the Millennium, is the place we all aspire to be when that magnificent event occurs.

There is no scriptural way that this verse can be made to say that the church is our mother and that we are fetuses in its womb. Besides being unscriptural, it is illogical. Are not the members of the church simultaneously also the children of God? How, then, can the children also be the mother? Can a child be carried in its own womb and then give birth to itself? God does not use such strange, illogical illustrations.

### **What Does "Firstborn" Mean?**

"Firstborn" is a term that appears quite frequently in Scripture. People most frequently think of it in terms of Jesus. He was Mary's firstborn (Matthew 1:25). He is also referred to as being "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). In Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5, He is called "the firstborn from the dead." These biblical references are then linked in the minds of some with the belief that the resurrection, as described in I Corinthians 15:50-53, is a Christian's birth into the Kingdom of God, despite the fact that Paul never mentions being born in the context of resurrection (in fact, in I Corinthians 15:8, he uses "born" in terms of his *calling*!). So is this conclusion correct?

The Bible uses the term "firstborn" in a way that some may not realize, and in this way, "firstborn" may not indicate a literal birth at all! Once again, we are dealing with a term that has a spiritual

meaning different from its literal one. Clearly, in the earliest parts of the Bible, "firstborn" indicates the eldest son. Within the Hebrew culture, it indicated a position of strength and the son to whom leadership of the family would pass when the father died. Thus, firstborn was a position of distinction and a fair measure of sanctity.

However, as one continues through the Bible, one begins to find that "firstborn" does not always mean that the person so named is literally the first born. Abraham passed on this right to Isaac, not Ishmael, who was the actual firstborn. Jacob was not Isaac's firstborn ("the older shall serve the younger"), but God certainly esteems him above Esau ("Esau I have hated").

Joseph, son of Jacob from Rachel, was not literally Jacob's firstborn. When the true eldest son, Reuben, disqualified himself, the right of firstborn did not automatically pass on to the second born, Simeon. Instead, Jacob passed that title of prominence and its prerogatives on to Joseph (I Chronicles 5:1-2). Surely, God had a hand in this transference. This clearly shows that God Himself does not necessarily follow the traditions of Israelitish culture but awards this prominence to the one prepared for the responsibility.

A great deal of further evidence of the use of the term "firstborn" flows directly from God Himself. Ephraim was not Joseph's firstborn, as Genesis 48:13-22 clearly shows. Jacob gave him that prominent position and title by God's inspiration. God commanded Moses to say to the Pharaoh of Egypt, "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exodus 4:22). Many nations were "born" long before Israel, but God gave the title of preeminence, "firstborn," to Israel. Later, in Jeremiah 31:9, God says, "For I am Father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn."

God uses "firstborn" in ways that we are generally unfamiliar with but that are nonetheless consistent with its use elsewhere in both Scripture and secular writings:

» Job 18:13: "It devours patches of his skin; the firstborn of death devours his limbs."  
Here, Bildad refers to a disease that he describes as powerful and deadly.

» Isaiah 14:30: "The firstborn of the poor will feed, and the needy will lie down in safety." The phrase indicates the poorest of the poor.

» Psalm 89:27: "I will make Him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth."  
This refers first to David, who was not himself a literal firstborn son, but also and more importantly, to Jesus Christ.

In these examples, "firstborn" is being used as a superlative, indicating preeminence, special quality, or significance to God. When it refers to Jesus Christ, it implies a preferential status, priority, dignity, sovereignty, and oneness with God. His relationship with God is unique, of the highest and greatest significance and quality. His relationships to creation, man, and especially to His brethren are also unique.

### **Christ Is Preeminent**

Colossians 1:15-20 illustrates this use:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible,

whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

This passage clearly demonstrates that, just because the term "firstborn" is used, it does not mean the subject was literally born first, as occurs physically to mammals. In terms of a mammal's birth, Exodus 13:12 provides God's initial definition of a *firstborn*: "That you shall set apart to the Lord all that open the womb [*that open the matrix*, KJV]." So we must ask: Whose womb was opened so Jesus could be firstborn over creation? Whose womb was opened so Jesus would be the firstborn from the dead? Of course, Jesus did not have to be born again because there was never a time when He was not already and still God.

Colossians 1:15 makes this especially clear. How can the Creator possibly have been born when He is before all things? He existed before all things as God (John 1:1-3). Colossians 1:18 uses the term again, but also answers why the Greeks used the term in this manner. They used the term to indicate preeminence, priority, and first in rank from a beginning. In this case, the beginning is when the things that were created came into existence.

Thus, in verses 15-17, Christ is preeminent over the physical creation by virtue of His being Creator. In verses 18-20, Paul shows Christ as being preeminent in God's plan of redemption because He is the Savior/Redeemer. How could He be born into God's Kingdom when He was never apart from it (Luke 17:20-21)? Jesus indeed was Mary's firstborn, but He was never born again as His spiritual brethren are, as His teaching in John 3 shows. When resurrected, He was not literally born, but was transformed and glorified—changed, as I Corinthians 15:51-54 clearly describes, from being physically dead to the fullness of spiritual life. He was not born into the Kingdom of God as humans are physically born in this life.

When describing spiritual realities, the use of the term "firstborn" changes. Spirit beings are not born; they are created, changed, or transformed, and come into existence. The Bible says nothing of angels, which are spirit beings, being born. *Born* can, on some occasions, simply mean "to come into existence; to be delivered, to begin." The "birth" of the United States was in 1776. It was a beginning, but it was not born as a baby is. We might say a person is a "born musician" or say a concept or idea was "born." Each simply indicates that a state of prominence began at a particular time.

Romans 8:29 uses "firstborn" in this manner. It is not indicating a literal birth, as in human families, but that Jesus is preeminent over all who follow Him in God's Family by virtue of Him being Savior and Redeemer. In relation to Jesus, the Bible uses "firstborn" in its figurative sense, not its literal one. For example, Hebrews 1:6 reads, "But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, 'Let all the angels of God worship Him.'" Here, "firstborn" is being used in the same manner as in the Old Testament when God calls Israel and Ephraim "My firstborn." He is establishing priority, uniqueness, and preeminence for His Son over all others. He is not saying He is literally a firstborn.

In Hebrews 12:23, the entire church is named as the "church of the firstborn." This is clearly not indicating a literal birth, but the title is used to give significance to, elevate, and indicate the Christian church's association with Jesus Christ and His priority and preeminence.

If one still desires to believe that "firstborn" may indicate, in some isolated contexts, a literal spiritual birth, then one must ask, "When does the birth take place?" Everything we have seen so far shows that the Bible directly says it takes place at the beginning of the salvation process, not at its end. The end of the process is a *glorification* through a resurrection. The Bible describes this as a change (I Corinthians 15:51-54) or a transformation (Philippians 3:21; II Corinthians 3:17-18), not in terms of birth.

Jesus Christ was never "born again." He had no reason to be regenerated. He always had a spiritual mind to enable Him to "see" the Kingdom of God, and He was always in the Kingdom of God, so there was no reason for Him to enter it again. Since He never went through, or needed, a spiritual birth, His title of "firstborn from the dead" is not an instruction on how a Christian is spiritually born. He was not born again by a resurrection, and thus the resurrection from the dead is *not* the model for how we are born again either.

### A Few Closing Comments

Although *gennao* can technically mean "begotten," the weight of Scripture is heavily on it meaning "born" rather than "begotten," even in scriptural areas far removed from the John 3 controversy. Notice this example from I Peter 1:22-25; 2:1-3:

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, *having been born again*, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because "All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever." Now this is the word by which the gospel was preached to you. Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, *as newborn babes*, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. (Our emphasis throughout.)

In I Peter 1:23, the phrase "having been born again" is *anagennao*, which comes from *gennao*, and means "to beget or (by extension) bear (again)." The apostle makes quite clear in I Peter 2:1-2 that he considers those he is writing to as already born, rather than unborn and within a womb. Only a child already born would feed on milk, or Peter's metaphor would be totally wrong.

A similar circumstance appears in Hebrews 5:13-14:

For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Again, the metaphor pictures an already-born child who eats and drinks.

Paul castigates the members of the Corinthian congregation because of their spiritual immaturity, describing them as babies who needed milk:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to *babes* in Christ. I *fed you with milk* and not solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able. (I Corinthians 3:1-2)

The metaphor of eating and drinking only works if we are considered already *born* spiritually. We *were spiritually begotten* by the Father at some point in the past through His calling, but we have progressed beyond that begetting to a spiritual birth long before the resurrection of the dead. There is not a single verse that shows us to be begotten but not yet born.

The analogy of being begotten and in the womb of the church is not only scripturally wrong, it is totally inadequate when God commands us to do practical activities normal to Christian life. A child in a womb cannot pray, study, fast, serve, consider, choose, sacrifice, humble himself, repent, forgive, be merciful, walk in the Spirit, rejoice, love, use wisdom, be discreet, intercede, or bring glory to God.

Does finding elements of an ancient born-again practice in pagan religions rule out consideration of it being a godly doctrine? Not in the least! When has Satan not attempted to counterfeit God's truths in His counterfeit religions? It would be surprising if some elements of God's truth did not turn up in his ancient perversions. It is his standard practice in his attempts to confuse.

Does this mean that I have converted to Protestantism? Not at all! Protestants have misused Christ's teaching in John 3 by linking it to the false Doctrine of Eternal Security (sometimes called "Once Saved, Always Saved"), which asserts that salvation is a finished work upon the sinner's justification. The Bible shows in many places that such is not the case.

At that point in a convert's spiritual life, redemption has been completed, but salvation is far from complete. Is a baby complete fresh out of the womb? The child has been "freed" from the womb, but a great deal of growth must take place before he attains maturity. In like manner, much growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ lies before the convert (II Peter 3:18). He must grow to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). We must prove our conversion and glorify our Father.

God is creating. It is a progressive work. From each of the apostles as well as Jesus, there are multitudes of warnings about falling away before our spiritual pilgrimage is complete. Understand that none of these efforts to remain faithful and grow earns salvation. How can one earn what is freely given? Yet, Paul clearly declares in Ephesians 2:10, "We are . . . created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." He also states plainly in Philippians 2:12 that we must "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling." Christian works are our part of God's process to transform us into His Son's image.

All that these three articles have attempted to do is to clarify the terms used in Jesus' instruction on born again, as gleaned from God's Word. In the end, the begotten-again analogy is found completely lacking in describing what happens to begin our spiritual life. What has not changed in the least is its practical application to Christian life.

However, what has been clarified should impress upon us even more forcefully that, because our names are already entered into the Book of Life, we are already in God's Family Kingdom with our citizenship already issued, and there is every reason we should make it to the end. Therefore, we should be all the more responsible and urgent to bring glory to our God. There is much yet to do.