

Born Again

The Apostle Peter writes his first letter to believers who have been "begotten again" to a "living hope"; a hope which leads on to "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away" (1 Peter 1:3-4). Yet he is very conscious of the transient nature of human life, for he quotes the words from Isa. 40:6-8: "All flesh is grass ... the grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away . . ." (1:24). Of what use would an incorruptible inheritance be to corruptible heirs?

Peter's answer would be, "None"; for like Paul he would say, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, neither doth corruption inherit incorruption" (1 Cor. 15:50). But did you notice that peculiar expression, "begotten again"? There lies the solution of the problem. Peter returns to the idea when he says these believers have been "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible" (v. 23); as though a germ of new life had entered into them, bringing forth a new birth of a kind befitting them for an eternal inheritance. From what source can such a form of life be generated?

The quotation from Isaiah gives the answer: "All flesh is as grass . . . but the word of the Lord endureth for ever". "And this", says Peter, "is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you" (1:25). They have received the message of Good concerning Christ, and Peter says that as a result they are born again of incorruptible seed "through the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (v. 23).

In this language there is a good deal of figure. Put in more literal terms, they have accepted a new belief which has changed their outlook and manner of life. Paul describes it as being "renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph. 4:23); and so radical is the change, where it is genuine, that he can liken it to a change to a new personality modelled on a more God-like pattern. He says: "Ye have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man which is renewed after the image of Him that created him" (Col. 3:9-10).

John, in his first letter, has much to say on the characteristics of those who are born or begotten of God. He says that they cannot be living in the habit and practice of sin; nor can they live without love towards their brethren born of the same Heavenly Father; nor can they deny Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). Men who do so have clearly not undergone that rebirth;

or if they have, then the new life must have been extinguished in them. They are not those to whom John writes: "Beloved, now are we the children of God" (3:2).

Rebirth is therefore (1) a mental change through receiving the knowledge of truth; (2) a moral change through bringing the course of life into line with it; and (3) a change in relationship to God through being accepted as His "sons". And where there has been rebirth there must be continued growth if the "new man" is not to perish, for Peter urges those who have been "born again" to be like "new born babes", longing for "the sincere milk of the word" that they may "grow thereby".

Yet moral and spiritual change alone would not fit mortal men for an immortal inheritance. The argument of Paul in 1 Cor. 15 is that before men can enter the Kingdom of God they must undergo a bodily transformation, and this will take place when the Lord Jesus Christ returns from heaven to raise the dead and administer judgment (1 Cor. 15:22-23, 51-52; compare 2 Tim. 4:1). This change he describes by saying, "This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality . . . Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:53-54). It is a change to what Paul calls a "spiritual body" -- which does not mean an immaterial body (for this would be a contradiction in terms!) but a body "clothed upon" with life, changed from a state of humiliation to a state of glory like that of the risen Christ (2 Cor. 5:4; Phil. 3:21).

But this change is impossible without the mental and moral change which man undergoes by "conversion". It completes and perfects a process begun in his mortal life by his belief of the Gospel and his obedience to its demands in baptism. It is the outcome of that "begetting" which is brought about by the working in his mind of the imperishable "word of God". Therefore it is not of human origin, and the right or privilege of calling themselves sons of God is not a human gift: "As many as received him (that is, Christ), to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). From God comes the new birth, for it is brought about by His will working through the "word" given by His Holy Spirit; and by the power of that Spirit those who continue in faith will ultimately be changed to "spiritual bodies". Jesus doubtless has in mind the whole transformation, from its beginnings in mortal life to its completion in the future, when he says to Nicodemus: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God ... Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3: 3-6).