

# The Person and Work of God the Holy Spirit

## A Study

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### Part I - The Person of God the Holy Spirit

#### Lesson 2 - The Life Giver

During the turbulent times of the 1970's, Jimmy Carter spoke of having been "born again." Around that same time, Charles Colson, who had been an adviser to President Nixon, released a book recounting his conversion to Christ. It was titled simply "Born Again".

Suddenly, a term that had been common only among evangelical Christians was catapulted to national prominence. And since then, the term "born again" has been adopted for all kinds of uses that have nothing to do with the kind of spiritual conversion Carter and Colson had in mind.

For instance, an athlete who experiences a comeback in his career might speak of being "born again" with respect to his skills. There is a sense in which the true meaning of this important term has become obscured by its frequent use and misuse.

The idea of being born again, of experiencing a spiritual rebirth, comes directly from the teaching of Jesus. We find that teaching in the third chapter of John's Gospel, where John records an encounter between Jesus and a Jewish leader named Nicodemus. John writes,

#### John 3:1-21

- 1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;**
- 2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."**
- 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."**
- 4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"**
- 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.**
- 6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.**
- 7 "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'**
- 8 "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."**
- 9 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"**
- 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?**
- 11 "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.**

- 12 "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"
- 13 "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.
- 14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;
- 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.
- 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.
- 17 "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.
- 18 "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.
- 19 "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.
- 20 "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.
- 21 "But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

Now Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, apparently because he did not want to be seen publicly with Him, but he came with flattery, complimenting Jesus as "a teacher come from God." However, Jesus cut him short and said,

#### **John 3:3b**

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."**

Jesus said that rebirth is a necessary condition for entering the kingdom of God. It is the *sine qua non*. If you are not regenerate, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus did not understand Him, he interpreted Jesus' words in a crass, physical way. He asked,

#### **John 3:4b**

**"How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"**

Jesus answered him a second time and said,

#### **John 3:5b**

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."**

So, the idea of being born again or experiencing rebirth was not invented by Jimmy Carter, Chuck Colson, or evangelical Christians in general. It is found in the teaching of Christ Himself.

And this teaching is extremely important, because in it, Jesus mentions a necessary condition for entering the kingdom of God. It distresses me somewhat to hear a person say,

*“I am a born-again Christian.”*

What’s wrong with such a statement? Well, what other kind of Christian is there? If rebirth is absolutely essential in order to get into the kingdom of God, as Jesus said it is, there cannot be such a thing as a non-born-again Christian. To say “born-again Christian” is like saying “Christian Christian.” It’s a redundancy, a kind of theological stuttering.

On the other hand, is it possible to be a “born-again non-Christian”? I have heard people say, “I’m a born-again Muslim” or “I’m a born-again Buddhist.” I want to tell them that if they are born again in the New Testament sense, they no longer are Muslims or Buddhists. The only people who are born again are Christians.

### **From Spiritual Death to Life**

It is very important that we have an accurate understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in spiritual rebirth. One of the best places to gain such an understanding is in the second chapter of the apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

We read there,

#### **Ephesians 2:1-6**

**1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,**

**2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.**

**3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.**

**4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,**

**5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),**

**6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus,**

The language and imagery the Apostle uses in this text has to do with life and death. He declares that Christians have been “**made... alive.**” But if they are now alive, what were they previously? They were,

#### **Ephesians 2:1b**

**... dead in trespasses and sins...**

So, Paul is talking about some kind of resurrection, a transformation of people who are dead to new life. We need to understand what kind of death is in view here. Paul is not talking about *physical* resurrection because he is not talking about physical death. The people who have been made alive by the Holy Spirit were living, breathing biological specimens before that experience. Before I became a Christian, my heart was beating, my lungs were filling and

emptying, and my brain was active (although my teachers wondered at times). But I was *spiritually* dead. I was dead to the things of God because I existed solely and completely in what Jesus and the Apostles call **“the flesh.”**

In His conversation with Nicodemus, after He explained that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit, Jesus went on to say,

### **John 3:6-8**

**6 “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.**

**7 “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’**

**8 “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**

Here Jesus distinguished between the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of human flesh. And when He said,

**“That which is born of the flesh is flesh.”**

... He was speaking of people, and He was not simply saying that human beings are born with physical bodies, but that they are born fallen. This means they do not have spiritual life. Instead, they are born spiritually dead.

There may be nothing in all of sacred Scripture that is more repugnant to modern man than this assertion that every human being is born into a state of spiritual death. This idea is repugnant even to the broad Christian community. Most professing Christians acknowledge that there is some defect in the human race, that we are all sinners and none of us is perfect. But not one Christian in a hundred really believes that every human being is already spiritually dead when he or she comes into the world. Even Billy Graham used to talk about the natural man being mortally sick, to the extent that he is ninety-nine percent dead, but he would not go to one hundred percent.

So pervasive is the rejection of this idea that some of the leading spokesmen for Christianity are willing to contradict it. They do not embrace the idea of total spiritual death.

Yet, that is clearly what Paul is saying. We are “dead on arrival” *spiritually*, not just weak, ailing, critically ill, or comatose, but stone cold dead. There is no spiritual heartbeat, no spiritual breathing, and no spiritual brain-wave activity. We are spiritually stillborn, and so we remain unless God the Holy Spirit makes us alive.

### **Following a Course and a Prince**

When Paul tells the Ephesians,

#### **Ephesians 2:1**

**“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air”**

... he was addressing genuine Christians. But all Christians at some point in their lives are non-Christians, and all non-Christians manifest a pattern of behavior. Paul says that those who are spiritually dead follow a course and a prince.

In **Romans 3**, Paul writes:

**Romans 3:10-12**

**10** as it is written, "***THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;***  
**11** ***THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;***  
**12** ***ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.***"

He says everyone has “turned aside,” has gone out of the way. As lost people, if “by nature” we do not seek God is it any surprise that we should depart from the way to God? It is fascinating to me that in the New Testament, followers of Christ did not refer to themselves as “Christians.”

**The Acts 11:26**

**They were first called Christians at Antioch**

... but it is believed that the term was created by non-Christians to hurl derision on them. The Word or the phrase that Christians used to describe themselves initially was people of “The Way” (**The Acts 19:9, 23**), because they had heard Christ speak about two ways, a narrow way and a broad way (**Matt. 7:13–14**). The vast majority of people are moving down the wrong road.

In fact, we all start on this road, for the broad way is the course of the world. Paul says,

**Ephesians 2:3**

**Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.**

To be spiritually “dead” is to be worldly- to be “of this world”. It is to buy into and follow slavishly the values and customs of the secular culture. Not only do the spiritually dead follow the course of this world, they also follow “**the prince of the power of the air**” (v. 2).

Is there any question about who Paul has in mind here? This is his title for Satan, “**the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience**” (v. 2). All those who are spiritually dead follow the desires of Satan in rejecting God and His righteous requirements.

This then is our natural state. This is a picture of what theology calls Original Sin- that state of mortal corruption, of spiritual death, into which we all are born.

**A Work of Re-Creation**

It is the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit to come to people who are spiritually dead, who are walking according to the course of this world and according to the prince of the power of the air, fulfilling the lusts of their flesh and of their minds, and to *re-create* them as He regenerates them.

To “regenerate” means “to generate anew.” By means of regeneration, the Spirit gives life to people who have no spiritual life. Regeneration is a work that the Holy Spirit does immediately upon the souls of people. When I say “immediately,” I do not mean “quickly” but “without any intervening medium.” He does not give a person a dose of medicine. Instead, the

Spirit directly brings spiritual life out of spiritual death. We see this immediate working expressed in the Words the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary:

**Luke 1:35b**

**... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.**

In that situation, Jesus' life was generated immediately and directly, not through the normal reproductive processes. In this sense, we see a kind of recapitulation in redemption of the power the Holy Spirit manifested in creation. The same God who created the world also redeems the world.

The work of creation was trinitarian just as the work of redemption is trinitarian. We see this clearly in **Genesis 1**, where we read,

**Genesis 1:1-2a**

**1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**

**2 The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep...**

These are the first sentences of sacred Scripture. Immediately after these verses, we read a brief description of God's activity in the midst of this darkness, emptiness, and formlessness,

**Genesis 1:2b**

**... and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.**

The Holy Spirit is pictured in the New Testament as a dove. Here He is possibly depicted as a mother bird hovering over her chicks to protect them. Jesus expressed something of this concept when He lamented over the city of Jerusalem and said,

**Luke 13:34&35 (NASU)**

**34 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her!* How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen *gathers* her brood under her wings, and you would not *have it!*"**

**35 "Behold, your house is left to you *desolate*; and I say to you, you will not see Me until *the time comes when you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'*"**

God the Holy Spirit hovered over the creation to guide and protect it, and so He does in the work of regeneration.

Scripture makes clear that one of the things that God and God alone can do is to bring life out of death and something out of nothing. The next thing that happened in creation was God's creation of light,

**Genesis 1:3**

**Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.**

God did not need to turn a switch or rub two sticks together to create a spark to create the light. His sovereign command formed the light. In the same way, His divine power brings life where there is no life.

Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days, and shouted in a loud voice,

**John 11:43b**

... "Lazarus, come forth."

When Jesus spoke those words, Lazarus' heart instantly began to beat and pump blood. Brain activity resumed. Life returned to the body, and he came forth from the tomb. That is exactly what happens to us in our spiritual rebirth. The same Spirit who brought life out of the abyss and who brought Lazarus back from the grave raises us from spiritual death by causing us to be born a second time.

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