

“Born of God”

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There are few texts that have been the subject of more anxious inquiry than 1 John 3:9: “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.” This is made much of by the self-styled “holiness” people, who use it to bolster up their own claims to perfection. They seem to take it for granted that they are specially referred to in the text, and think that all one has to do to be beyond the reach of sin is to profess to be born again. On the other hand, there are some who think that such a condition as the text describes is impossible in this life, and that it refers to the life to come, claiming that the new birth is at the resurrection. A question having been asked as to the meaning of the text, we take space for a brief exposition of it.

In the first place we would say that being “born of God” is a change that takes place in this life, and not at the resurrection. John says in this same chapter: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God” (1 John 3:1, 2). Men are not by nature children of God. Paul says that the “children of disobedience,” who walk according to the lusts of the flesh, “fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind,” are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:2, 3). To the unbelieving Jews, who sought to murder Christ because He reprovved their wicked deeds, the Saviour said, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do” (John 8:44). Now since “all have sinned” and are consequently by nature the “children of wrath,” children of the devil, it follows that those who are now the sons of God have become so by the new birth.

Again, being born again is a prerequisite to obtaining the life to come. Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). And He repeated the statement in these words: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (v. 5). These texts not only show that the new birth takes place before the resurrection, but they also set us on the track of what the new birth is.

We learn that in the new birth both water and the Spirit have a part. This reminds us of what Paul says in Rom. 8:14-16: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The possession of the Spirit shows that we are sons of God, and that we are Christ’s. (Rom. 8:9). It is called “the Spirit of adoption.”

The first work of the Spirit upon the hearts of men, is to "convict the world of sin" (John 16:8). Conviction of sin, if not stifled, will necessarily drive the soul to Christ (see Rom. 7:24, 25; 8:1); and Paul says that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). But if a man in Christ is a new creation, it must be that he has had a new birth; therefore we know that one who is born of God is one who is in Christ.

Now read Rom. 6:1-3: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?" And also Gal. 3:26, 27: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Here we learn, what has already been stated, that sons of God are they who are in Christ; and we learn also that we put on Christ, or are ushered into Christ, by baptism. Now connect with these texts 1 Cor. 12:12, 13, where baptism and the Spirit are coupled together, as in John 3:5. 1 Corinthians reads: "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit."

Thus the Spirit convicts of sin; the convicted sinner repents and flies to Christ for cleansing from sin; he shows his acceptance of Christ by being baptized, and rises to walk in newness of life, a new creation in Christ, if he abides in Christ. This is the new birth, or, as it is commonly called, conversion.

But what has this to do with the statement in 1 John 3:9 that whosoever is born of God "does not sin?" We shall see, when we have examined one or two texts more which relate to the new birth. We have already seen that the Spirit of God is the prime factor in effecting the new birth. It first works upon the heart, to convict of sin. But how does the Spirit convict of sin? Through what does it operate? In Eph. 6:17 we are told that the sword of the Spirit is the word of God. Then since the word of God is the Spirit's sword, it must be by means of the word that the Spirit convicts of sin. In support of this conclusion we read: "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:12, 13).

Then the word of God,—and by this the law is specially referred to,—has much to do in the work of conversion, or the new birth. Without it, the Spirit could make no impression on the heart; and so the psalmist ascribes to it a leading place in the work of conversion, saying, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul" (Ps. 19:7). Now we are prepared for a text which will bring us right back to the one with which we started. We quote: "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" (1 Peter 1:22, 23).

In these texts last quoted we find the word of God brought to view as the seed by which men are begotten as sons of God. Now read once more the text which we are studying: "Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). Why does one not commit sin? Because the seed by which he was begotten remains in him. And what is that seed? The word of God and the Spirit of God.

That the possession of the word of God in the heart is a guard against sin, is shown by the psalmist, who, speaking of the righteous man, says: "The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide" (Ps. 37:31). And again he says: "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11).

This statement about the law of God being in a man's heart, reminds us of what the Lord Jesus said, through the psalmist, of Himself: "Then I said, "Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:7, 8). Now since David says that the law in the heart keeps a man's feet from slipping, we will examine a notable instance in the life of our Saviour, to see how it works.

After Jesus was baptized, He was led into the wilderness to be tempted. After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, the devil said to him: "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" (Matt. 4:3). How did Jesus meet this temptation? Not with parleying, but with the words, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (v. 4). That settled the question once for all.

Then the devil took Jesus up and placed him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down" (v. 6). Again the prompt reply came: "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God'" (v. 7). Here again, from the fullness of the word which was hidden in His heart, Jesus drew a weapon which foiled this attack of the enemy.

Once more the devil plied his temptation. Taking Jesus into a high mountain, he showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, promising them all to him if he would but for one moment worship Satan as God. Quick as thought came the words from the lips of Jesus, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (v. 10).

Notice that Jesus met every temptation with a text of Scripture. But these temptations were suffered and recorded for our benefit, that we might learn how to resist.

Again: Faith is said to be the Christian's shield. "Above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one" (Eph. 6:16). But faith cannot be separated from the word, for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). One's faith is just equal to the amount of the word that he has—not committed to memory, simply—but hidden in the heart. Now we can understand 1 John 5:18: "We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him." The object of a shield is to protect the person from being hit by missiles. In ancient times, when men fought with swords and bows, the man who received all the blows on his shield kept himself, so that he was not touched. So in the Christian warfare, the one who receives the assaults of Satan upon the shield of that faith which is the outgrowth of God's own word, will keep himself untouched. Thus it was that Christ came off unscathed in His contest with Satan.

Once more: In John 15:7 we read: "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you." That is a comprehensive promise. "You will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you." What will be the constant request of the one who abides in Christ? It will evidently be for more of a likeness to Him. David expressed it when he said: "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple" (Ps. 27:4). Dare anyone say that such desires will not be satisfied? They must be because Jesus said: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). Not filled with a good, happy feeling; not filled with complacency; not filled with self-conceit; but filled with righteousness - right doing - obedience to God's commandments; as righteousness is inseparably connected with meekness. (Zeph. 2:3; Ps. 25:9).

From this brief study it will be seen that 1 John 3:9 does call for perfect obedience. So does the whole Bible. The Bible makes no provision for a little sin to be retained. Christ died that He might present to Himself "a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). This is the requirement. And surely if one abides in Christ, and if the word of truth by which he was turned from sin, still remains in him, it will continue to have the same effect that it had at first, and will keep him from sin. This does not mean that the individual will necessarily be perfect in knowledge, nor that he will be in a position where there is nothing more to gain; but it does mean that so far as he has knowledge of the law of God he will walk in it. He will be one of the "undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord!" (Ps. 119:1).

Such an one will never boast of his goodness. He will be too much occupied in keeping from falling, to boast, and how will he keep from falling? "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith" (Heb. 12:2). The more he beholds Christ, the more will he feel his own nothingness in comparison; this will beget humility; humility will beget trustfulness; and trustfulness will bring strength. Thus he will be "strong in the Lord and in the power of His might," and, going on from strength to strength, will at last appear in Zion before God.

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EXTRA: The following two quotations are also from E. J. Waggoner and are fitting here:

- "Before any man becomes the born bondman of Christ, he has to be born again. But this new birth implies a previous death, and that death is by crucifixion. (See Gal. 2:20)."
- "Now do not think that this being born from above is done once and then that is the end of it. Oh, no. It is enough to be born as a baby once, but we must be born from above every day. So you see you shall need to read and believe and think on God's words very often, for it is God's word that is the living seed that causes you to be born from above."