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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Ten

The New Birth

When people repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, they are “born again.” What exactly does it mean to be born again? That is what this chapter is all about.

In order to understand what it means to be born again, it first helps to understand the nature of human beings. Scripture tells us that we are not just physical, but also spiritual beings. For example, Paul wrote,

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your *spirit* and *soul* and *body* be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thes. 5:23, emphasis added).

As Paul indicated, we can consider ourselves to be three-part beings consisting of spirit, soul and body. Scripture does not precisely define those three parts, so we do our best to differentiate between them by our understanding of the words themselves. We usually conclude that our *body* is our physical being—the flesh, bones, blood and so on. Our *soul* is our intellectual and emotional being—our mind. Our *spirit* is obviously our spiritual being, or as the apostle Peter describes him, “the hidden person of the heart” (1 Pet. 3:4).

Because the spirit is invisible to the physical eye, unregenerate people tend to discredit its existence. The Bible, however, is very clear that all of us are spiritual beings. Scripture tells us that when a person dies, it is only his body that ceases to function, while his spirit and soul continue to function as always. At death, they vacate the body (as one) to stand judgment before God (see Heb. 9:27). After judgment, they go to heaven or hell. Eventually every person’s spirit and soul will be reunited with his or her body at its resurrection.

The Human Spirit More Defined

In 1 Peter 3:4, Peter referred to the spirit as the “hidden *person*,” indicating that the spirit is a *person*. Paul, too, referred to the spirit as the “inner man,” indicating his belief that the human spirit is not just a concept or a force, but a person:

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our *outer man* is decaying, yet our *inner man* is being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16, emphasis added).

The “outer man” obviously describes the physical body, whereas the “inner man” defines the spirit. While the body grows older, the spirit is renewed daily.

Notice again that Paul refers to both body and spirit as *men*. So when you imagine your spirit, don't imagine a spiritual cloud. It is better to imagine a *person* with a form who looks like you. If your body is old, however, don't think that your spirit looks old. Imagine how you looked in the prime of your life because your spirit has never grown older! It is renewed day by day.

Your spirit is the part of you that is born again (if you have believed in the Lord Jesus). Your spirit is joined with God's Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:17), and He is the one who guides you as you follow Jesus (see Rom. 10:14).

The Bible teaches that God is also a spirit (see John 4:24), and so are angels and demons. They all have forms and they all exist in the spiritual realm. The spiritual realm, however, cannot be perceived with our physical senses. Attempting to contact the spiritual world with our physical senses would be comparable to trying to feel radio signals with our hands. We cannot perceive with our physical senses that radio waves are traveling through a room, but that doesn't prove there are no radio waves present. The only way to tune in to the radio frequencies is to turn on a radio.

This is also true of the spiritual realm. Just because the spiritual realm can't be perceived with the physical senses does not disprove its existence. It does exist, and whether people realize it or not, they are part of the spiritual realm because they are spiritual beings. They are either spiritually related to Satan (if they have not repented) or spiritually related to God (if they are born again). Some spiritualists have learned how to relate to the spiritual world through their spirits, but they are contacting the realm of Satan's domain—the kingdom of darkness.

Eternal Bodies

While we are on the subject, let me take a moment to mention something about our bodies. Although they will eventually die, our physical deaths will not be permanent. There is a day coming when God Himself will resurrect every dead human body. Jesus said,

Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds, to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment (John 5:28-29).

The apostle John wrote in the book of Revelation that the resurrection of the bodies of the unjust will occur at least one thousand years after the resurrection of the bodies of the righteous:

And they [the saints who were martyred during the tribulation period] came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection.¹ Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection...they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4b-6).

The Bible also informs us that when Jesus returns to catch away the church, all of the dead bodies of the righteous will be resurrected and joined together with their spirits as they return from heaven with Jesus to Earth's atmosphere:

¹ Because John says that this is "the first resurrection," it leads us to believe there were no other mass resurrections prior to this. Because it takes place at the end of the world-wide tribulation when Jesus returns, it contradicts the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture, as we know there will be a mass resurrection when Jesus comes from heaven at the rapture of the church according to 1 Thes. 4:13-17. We will study this in more detail in a later chapter titled *The End Times*.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those [as spirits] who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout...and the dead in Christ [their bodies] will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thes. 4:14-17).

God formed the original man from the dust of the ground, and it will be no trouble for Him to take the elements of every person's body and re-form them into new individual bodies from the same materials.

Concerning the resurrection of our bodies, Paul wrote:

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body....Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep [die], but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:42-44a, 50-53).

Notice that the outstanding characteristic of our new bodies is that they will be immortal and imperishable. They will never grow old, get sick, or die! Our new bodies will be just like the new body that Jesus received after He was resurrected:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; *who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory*, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself (Phil. 3:20-21, emphasis added).

The apostle John also affirmed this wonderful truth:

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, *when He appears, we shall be like Him*, because we shall see Him just as He is (1 John 3:2, emphasis added).

Although this is impossible for our minds to fully understand, we can believe it and rejoice in what lies ahead! ²

Jesus on the New Birth

Jesus once spoke to a Jewish leader named Nicodemus about the necessity of a rebirth of the human spirit by the action of the Holy Spirit:

Jesus answered and said to him [Nicodemus], "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 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?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to

² For further study on the subject of the resurrection, see Dan. 12:1-2; John 11:23-26; Acts 24:14-15; 1 Cor. 15:1-57.

you, 'You must be born again'" (John 3:3-7).

At first, Nicodemus thought Jesus was talking about a physical rebirth when He said that a person must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus, however, made it clear that He was speaking of a spiritual rebirth. That is, a person's spirit must be reborn.

The reason that we need a spiritual rebirth is because our spirits have been infected with an evil, sinful nature. That sinful nature is often referred to in the Bible as *death*. For the sake of understanding, we will refer to that evil nature as *spiritual death* so we can differentiate between it and physical death (which is when the physical body ceases to function).

Spiritual Death Defined

Paul described what it means to be spiritually dead in Ephesians 2:1-3:

And you were *dead* in your trespasses and sins, 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. 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 (emphasis added).

Paul was obviously not referring to physical death because he was writing to physically alive people. Yet he said they were once "dead in their trespasses and sins." It is sin that opens the door to spiritual death (see Rom. 5:12). Being spiritually dead means having a sinful nature in your spirit. Notice Paul said that they were "*by nature* children of wrath."

In addition, being spiritually dead means possessing, in some sense, Satan's very nature in your spirit. Paul said that those who are spiritually dead have the spirit of the "prince of the power of the air" working *in* them. The "prince of the power of the air" is no doubt the devil (see Eph. 6:12), and his spirit is working in all of those who are unsaved.

Jesus, speaking to unregenerate Jews, said,

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

From a spiritual standpoint, those who are not born again not only have Satan's nature residing in their spirits, but Satan is their spiritual father as well. They naturally act like the devil. They are murderers and liars.

Not all unsaved people have committed murder, but they are motivated by the same hatred as murderers, and they would murder if they could get away with it. The legalization of abortion in many countries proves that fact. Unsaved people will murder even their own unborn babies.

This is why a person must experience a spiritual rebirth. When one does, that sinful, satanic nature is removed from his spirit and is replaced with God's holy nature. God's Holy Spirit comes to reside in his spirit. He is no longer "spiritually dead" but is made "spiritually alive." His spirit is no longer dead but alive unto God. Instead of being a spiritual child of Satan, he becomes a spiritual child of God.

Reformation is No Substitute for Regeneration

Because unsaved people are spiritually dead, they can never be saved by self-reformation, regardless of how hard they try. Unsaved people need a new nature, not just

new outward actions. You can take a pig, wash it up nice and clean, spray some perfume on it, and tie a pink ribbon around its neck, but all you will have is a cleaned-up pig! His nature will still be the same. And it won't be long before he smells foul and is lying in mud again.

The same is true concerning religious people who have never been born again. They may be cleaned up on the outside a little bit, but inside they are as dirty as ever. Jesus said to some very religious people of His day,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead man's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matt. 23:25-28).

Jesus' words are an apt description of all those who are religious but who have never experienced the new birth of the Holy Spirit. The new birth cleans up people on the inside and not just on the outside.

What Happens to the Soul When the Spirit is Reborn?

When a person's spirit is reborn, his soul initially remains essentially unaffected (other than the fact that he has made a decision in his mind to follow Jesus). God, however, expects us to do something with our souls once we become one of His children. Our souls (minds) should be renewed with God's Word so that we think as God wants us to think. It is through the renewing of our minds that a continued outward transformation is wrought in our lives, causing us to become progressively more like Jesus:

And do not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2, emphasis added).

James also wrote of the same process in the life of the believer:

In humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls (Jas. 1:21b).

Notice that James was writing to Christians—people who already had their spirits reborn. But they needed to have their souls saved, and it would only happen as they humbly received the "word implanted." This is why new believers must be taught God's Word.

The Residue of the Old Nature

After their new birth, Christians soon discover that they are two-natured people, experiencing what Paul calls the war between "the Spirit and the flesh":

For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please (Gal. 5:17).

The residue of the old sinful nature that remains Paul refers to as "the flesh." These two natures within us produce different desires, which, if yielded to, produce different actions

and lifestyles. Notice the contrast Paul makes between the “deeds of the flesh” and “the fruit of the Spirit”:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (Gal. 5:19-23).

Obviously it is possible for Christians to yield to the flesh; otherwise Paul would not have warned them that if they make a practice of following the flesh, they will not inherit God’s kingdom. In his letter to the Romans, Paul also wrote of the two natures of every Christian and warned of the same consequence of yielding to the flesh:

And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness....So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Rom. 8:10, 12-14, emphasis added).

This is clearly a warning to Christians. Living (that would indicate a regular practice) according to the flesh results in death. Paul must have been warning about spiritual death, because everyone eventually dies physically, even Christians who are “putting to death the deeds of the body.”

A Christian might *temporarily* fall into one of the sins that Paul listed; but, when a believer does sin, he will feel convicted and hopefully repent. Anyone who confesses his sin and asks God’s forgiveness will, of course, be cleansed (see 1 John 1:9).

When a Christian sins, it doesn’t mean he has broken his *relationship* with God—it means he has broken his *fellowship*. He is still God’s child, but he is now God’s disobedient child. If the believer doesn’t confess his sin, he places himself in a position to be disciplined by the Lord.

The War

If you’ve found yourself desiring to do things that you know are wrong, then you’ve experienced the “desire of the flesh.” No doubt you’ve also discovered that when you are tempted by the flesh to do wrong, something on the inside of you resists that temptation. That is “the desire of the Spirit.” And if you know the feeling of conviction that comes on the inside of you when you yield to temptation, then you recognize the voice of your spirit, which we call our “conscience.”

God knew full well that our fleshly desires would tempt us to do wrong. That is not an excuse, however, for us to justify yielding to the desires of the flesh. God still expects us to act in obedience and holiness and to overcome the nature of the flesh:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

There is no magical formula for overcoming the flesh. Paul simply said that we should “walk by the Spirit,” and we “will not carry out the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). No Christian has any advantage over any other Christian in this area. To walk after the Spirit is

simply a decision we each must make, and our devotion to the Lord can be measured by the degree to which we do not yield to the desires of the flesh.

Paul similarly wrote:

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:24).

Notice Paul says that those who belong to Christ *have* (past tense) *crucified the flesh*. That happened when we repented and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. We crucified the sinful nature, deciding to obey God and resist sin. So now it is not a matter of crucifying the flesh, but of keeping the flesh crucified.

It isn't always easy to keep the flesh crucified, but it is possible. If we will act upon the leadings of the inward person rather than yield to the impulses of the flesh, then we will manifest the life of Christ and walk in holiness before Him.

The Nature of our Recreated Spirits

There is one word that best describes the nature of our recreated spirits, and that word is *Christ*. Through the Holy Spirit, who has the identical nature as Jesus, we actually have the nature of Jesus living inside us. Paul wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Because we have His ability and nature in us, we have the wonderful potential to live like Christ. We don't really need *more* love, patience, or self-control—we have the most loving, patient, self-controlled Person living in us! All we need to do is allow Him to live through us.

We all have one major adversary, however, who fights against the nature of Jesus, hindering it from manifesting itself through us; and that is our flesh. No wonder Paul said we must *crucify* our flesh. It is our responsibility to do something with our flesh, and it's a waste of time to ask God to do anything about it. Paul, too, had troubles with his fleshly nature, but he took responsibility and overcame it:

I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27).

You, too, will have to make your body a slave of your spirit if you want to walk holy before the Lord. You can do it!