

**YOU
MUST
BE
BORN
AGAIN**

JONATHAN MASTER



P U B L I S H I N G

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Where relevant, Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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Introduction

THE ESSENTIAL CHANGE

Sometimes we have to trade in the old for the new. Perhaps you've had a car that was unreliable, and you knew it might fall apart the minute you hit a bumpy road. Or maybe you have a threadbare T-shirt that no longer fits. Or, more seriously, perhaps you have a longstanding habit that you know is harming you or others. You don't think that it could possibly go away. It's crippling and discouraging. Is there any hope of restoration?

What about your life as a whole? Is it possible to start over? Can people really change? If you're not happy with how things are going, can you begin again? Can the deepest part of you—what the Bible calls the *heart*—really become new?

Jesus answers this question with a resounding yes! Not only *can* your heart be changed, but it *must* be changed. All humanity is in deep trouble, and we have to undergo a radical transformation in order to

be saved. That change must begin on the inside. And only God can bring it about.

This essential change has a few different names. It is known as the *new birth* or as being *born again*, *brought alive*, or *regenerated*. These words and phrases express the same big idea: a radical transformation, promised in the Bible, in which God the Holy Spirit takes a spiritually dead and corrupt heart, brings it to life, and, ultimately, glorifies it in heaven.

In the eighteenth century, before the founding of the United States, a great revival in North America transformed many lives. Writing a hundred years later, one historian observed, “The most important practical idea which then received increased prominence and power . . . was the idea of the ‘new birth.’”¹ Imagine that! The doctrine of the new birth was the most important practical idea of the day, and, as the Holy Spirit brought people to new life, society changed along with them.

But what about today? Is the new birth still relevant? I’m afraid that the doctrine has been ignored in many circles. Some churches present a parody of it, in which people are pressured to manufacture some deep emotional experience, but this is often less than the real thing. The church needs clear instruction on something that was central to the teaching of Christ, that is central to Christianity, and that describes a

life-changing reality. Today, teaching on the new birth is more than relevant—it is vital.

That is what this little book is about. For there is no middle ground in Jesus's teaching. When you listen to him, he speaks in a stark, even blunt, way. Jesus Christ says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Just a few verses later, he repeats the same thing, this time as a command: "*You must be born again*" (v. 7).

Do you want to see the kingdom of God? Maybe you're a Christian in the sense that the Bible describes: you have been truly born again. Maybe you think of yourself as a Christian, but you've never experienced a deep heart change that transformed your life. Or maybe you're not a Christian at all. Maybe you're looking for answers, looking for a way to change the things you don't like about yourself, but you think you'll find those answers somewhere other than Jesus Christ. No matter which of these describes you, this book is for you. Understanding the new birth is for you.

God has promised that radical transformation is possible. In just a few short chapters, we're going to see why we desperately need it—and how it completely changes our lives both in this age and in the age to come.

1

PROBLEM

Many people believe that what we need most is positive reinforcement. We need to be assured that we are essentially good and affirmed in our choices. You may have been told that you are fine just as you are—that you need not a new life but greater acceptance of the life you lead now. But Jesus says the opposite. He says that if we are to see the kingdom of heaven, we must undergo a radical change.

“You must be born again.”

This teaching is startling, especially since it comes from a teacher who is known for his love. To find out why Jesus would say such a thing, we need to reckon with some basic truths about ourselves as human beings. Although these truths explain a great deal about our lives, we have to be honest: reading this chapter may feel like hearing a dreaded medical diagnosis. We would rather not listen to bad news. But Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call

the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). It is only after heeding the diagnosis that we can receive the cure.

This diagnosis also explains Jesus’s teaching on the new birth, or being *born again*. The only reason why Jesus insists on a solution as mysterious and life-changing as a new birth is because he understands the breadth and the depth of our sin. To come to him for healing, we need to know something of our own sickness. Thus, we ought to listen carefully, no matter how troubling the bad news may be.

The good news, as we will see, is that Jesus does not simply declare that the new birth is necessary—he also explains how it is possible. If you already know that you are sick, if you know how it feels to be in the grip of some seemingly inescapable addiction, if Jesus’s words about the need to be born again immediately resonate with you, be encouraged. This problem has a God-sent solution.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

To understand what Scripture teaches about human beings, we must start at the beginning. In the second chapter of the Bible, we read that “the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). God *formed* the first man; God *breathed into* his nostrils;

only then did man come to life. This tells us that we are creatures. We do not create ourselves. We do not form ourselves. Human life is given by God.

Similarly, the Bible teaches that we do not sustain our own lives. The apostle Paul tells a group of curious philosophers in Athens, “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring’” (Acts 17:28). Just as we did not create ourselves, we do not keep ourselves alive. To put this in philosophical terms, we are *contingent beings*. We depend on God for our very existence.

This is not all we learn from the account of creation. We also see that God’s creation of human beings is the culmination of his work. Of all that God made, Scripture describes only humanity as being created “in [God’s] own image” (Gen. 1:27). This is profound, and it is one of the reasons why the Bible says that every human being has value and that human life must be protected (see Gen. 9:6). This is also why it is so incongruous to praise God while cursing people, “who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9). Every human life matters, since every human being is made in the image of God.

Because we are contingent on God for our existence and our being, he alone deserves our allegiance. If he teaches us something about ourselves, we should listen. And because we are made in his image,

we are designed for a relationship with him, gloriously designed to point to God. All this should lead us to obey God's commands and glorify him through our lives.

Yet we do not. Why?

THE DEPTH OF SIN

Because we are made in God's image, what we do matters. Our actions have consequences, and our choices affect both ourselves and others.

The Bible teaches that Adam, created to be the representative of all humanity, disobeyed God's command. He and his wife, Eve, ate the fruit that God had forbidden, but in doing so, they showed their disbelief in God's Word and their pride in thinking they knew better than him. All of this is recorded for us in Genesis 3. When Adam sinned, his sin affected everyone: "Sin came into the world through one man" (Rom. 5:12). This means that sin, which may be defined as a lack of conformity to the character of God, now affected everyone.

This is obvious if you stop to consider it. No matter where you go, no matter whether you spend your time among the rich or the poor, you will find that sin is universal. Yes, it may manifest itself differently in different places; there may be aggravating factors that make it uniquely destructive to a society, a

culture, or one's physical health; it may feel more or less tolerable for you; but sin is nonetheless pervasive. Pride, selfishness, theft, deception, disloyalty, sexual rebellion, and many other sins can be found in every person and every place.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne, a nineteenth-century Scottish preacher, famously said, "The seed of every sin known to man is in my heart." We may not commit every sin, and we may move from enslavement to one sin to enthrallment with another, but our sin has corrupted us fully.¹

Adam's sin changed everything for all of humanity. Cain, Adam's firstborn, was a murderer. Those who followed Cain were even worse. Within a few chapters of recorded history, "the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). This problem did not just affect the ancient people of an age gone by. The apostle Paul paints a devastating portrait of humanity then and now:

"None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become
worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."

“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”
“The venom of asps is under their lips.”
“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”
(Rom. 3:10–18)

The Bible tells us that because of Adam’s sin, “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jer. 17:9). This is a sobering verse, since Scripture uses the term *heart* in a way that is much more comprehensive than we do today. Most of the time, when we speak about our hearts, we are referring simply to our emotions. The Bible’s idea of the heart, however, encompasses our thoughts as well as our feelings (see Ps. 139:23). The Bible also refers to the heart as the source of our desires (see Pss. 20:4; 21:2). Throughout Scripture, the heart is described as the place where we think and reflect, where we gain knowledge, where we seek understanding. It is the source of our thinking and our decisions, and it has been utterly corrupted.