

SERMONS  
ON  
IMPORTANT SUBJECTS,

BY THE LATE REVEREND AND PIOUS

SAMUEL DAVIES, A.M.,

Sometime President of the College in New-Jersey.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE FIFTH EDITION.

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TO WHICH ARE NOW ADDED,

THREE OCCASIONAL SERMONS,

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MEMOIRS AND CHARACTER OF THE AUTHOR;

AND

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## SERMON XLVIII.

THE NATURE AND AUTHOR OF REGENERATION.

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JOHN III. 7.—*Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.*

THOSE doctrines are not always most absurd in themselves, nor strange to a well-informed mind, which are most wondered at in the world. Ignorance is apt to wonder, where knowledge discovers nothing amazing or unaccountable. To support our observations, proofs might be given; but it is to my present purpose to take notice only of one, one that excited from Nicodemus wonder, about 1700 years ago, and is still wondered at; nay, more, is ridiculed in an ignorant world: I mean the doctrine of Regeneration or the New Birth.

Nicodemus comes to Christ with a conviction of his high character as a Teacher from God, who attested his commission by the strong and popular evidence of miracles. From such a Teacher he expects sublime instructions; and from his own improvements in Jewish learning, he, no doubt, flatters himself he shall be able to comprehend them; but when, instead of gratifying his curiosity by telling him strange and great things of the kingdom of the Messiah, as a secular prince, and a mighty conqueror, as he and his countrymen expected, or discoursing like a Rabbi on the Jewish law; I say, when, instead of this, Jesus opens the conference by a solemn and authoritative declaration of the necessity of something under the name of another birth, how is Nicodemus surprised! This he cannot understand. This seems strange, new doctrine to him; and he has an objection ready against it, as an absurdity and an impossibility: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” This objection, which was altogether impertinent, and founded upon a gross mistaken notion of the doctrine, may serve as a specimen of all the objections that have been made against this doctrine ever since; they have all proceeded from ignorance, or from gross mistaken notions of an evident truth; and hence men have imagined, like this master of Israel, that they reasoned strongly against it, when in reality they were saying nothing at all to the purpose, and did

not so much as understand the case.

Our condescending Lord took a great deal of pains to give Nicodemus right notions of this doctrine. For this purpose he presents it before him in various views. He tells him, he did not mean a second natural birth, but a birth of water and of the spirit; a birth that renders a man spiritual, and consequently fit for that spiritual kingdom he was about to erect; and that the free and sovereign Spirit of God, the Author of this new birth, operated like *wind, which bloweth where it listeth*. Nicodemus still continues gazing at him, and wondering what he should mean. He is puzzled, after all, and asks, *How can these things be?* Jesus tells him the wonder did not lie in the doctrine, but in his ignorance of it, when he was a teacher of the law; *Art thou a master in Israel, and knowest not these things?*

The connection of my text is this: “That which is born of the flesh, is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit, is spirit; therefore, marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.” That is to say, “The doctrine you are so much surprised at, is not at all absurd, so as to make you wonder to hear it from my mouth. You cannot but know, that all mankind are born of the flesh; that is, propagated in away that communicates a depraved nature to them; and hence, they are flesh; that is, corrupt and carnal; and therefore wholly unfit to be admitted into my kingdom, which is pure and spiritual. But that which is born of the Spirit, is spirit; that is, spiritual and holy; and therefore fit for that spiritual and holy kingdom, which I am come to set up. Now, if this be the case, you have certainly no need to marvel at this doctrine: can it seem strange to you, that impure, unholy creatures must be changed, before they can be fit members of so holy a society? Can you marvel at this? No; you would have more reason to marvel at the contrary.

It is one part of my design today to inquire, whether the doctrine of the new birth be indeed such a strange, absurd, or impossible thing in itself, as to deserve that amazement, and indeed contempt, which it generally meets with in the world; or whether it be not rational, necessary, and worthy of universal acceptance? But before I enter upon this, it will be proper to inquire,

What the new birth is? And,

Who is the author of it?

And in what way does he generally produce it?

Remove your prejudices, my hearers, against this doctrine, sus-

pend your disbelief, and cease to wonder at or ridicule it, till these points be explained, lest you be found to speak evil of the things you know not.

1. Let us inquire, What it is to be born again?

To gain your attention to this inquiry, I need only put you in mind, that whatever be meant by the new birth, it is not an insignificant speculation, not the disputed peculiarity of a party, not the attainment of a few good men of the first class, but it is essential to every good man, and absolutely necessary to salvation. You cannot doubt of this, if you look upon Jesus Christ as a person of common veracity, and worthy of credit in his most solemn declarations; for he has declared, over and over again, with the utmost solemnity, that *Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of heaven*. John iii. 3, 5, and 7. Attend then, if you think your eternal salvation worthy of your attention.

The phrase, *to be born again*, like most other expressions used upon divine subjects, is metaphorical, and brings in natural things with which we are familiarly acquainted, to assist our conceptions of divine things, which might otherwise be above our comprehension. We all know what it is to be born again; and our knowledge of this may help us to understand what it is to be born again. As by our first birth we become men, or partake of human nature, so by our second birth, we become Christians, and are made partakers of a divine and spiritual nature. As our first birth introduces us into this world, and into human society, so our second birth introduces us into the church of Christ, and makes us true members of that holy society. As by our first birth we resemble our parents, at least in the principal lineaments of human nature, so by our second birth we are made partakers of the divine nature; that is, we are made to resemble the blessed God in holiness: or, as St. Paul expresses it, *we are renewed after his image in knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness*. Eph. iv. 24. Col. iii. 10. The effect is like its cause; the child like the parent. *That which is born of the flesh, is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit, is spirit*. \* In our first birth we are endowed with child-like and filial dispositions towards our human parents; and when we are born of God, we are inspired with a child-like and filial temper towards him, as our

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\* Flesh of flesh, and spirit of spirit. This is according to the established laws of generation, by which everything begets its like.

heavenly Father. By our natural birth we are placed in an imperfect, but growing state. We have all the powers of human nature, though none of them in perfection; but from that time they grow and improve, till they at length arrive to maturity. In like manner, in our second birth, all the principles of virtue and grace are implanted; but their growth and improvement is the work of the Christian life: and from that time they continue gradually growing, though with many interruptions, till at death they arrive at maturity and perfection. In our natural birth we pass through a very great change. The infant that had lain in darkness, breathless and almost insensible, and with little more than a vegetative life, enters into a new state, feels new sensations, craves a new kind of nourishment, and discovers new powers. In like manner, in the second birth, the sinner passes through a great change: a change as to his view of divine things: as to his temper, his practice, and his state; a change so great, that he may with propriety be denominated another man, or a new creature. As I shall adjust my discourse to the narrow limits of an hour, I must pass over, or but slightly touch upon all the particulars suggested by the metaphor in my text, except the last, which is the most comprehensive and instructive: namely, That the new birth implies a great change in the views, the temper, the practice, and the state of the sinner; and under this head, sundry of the other particulars may be reduced.

The various forms of expression, which the scripture uses to represent what is here called a second birth, all conspire to teach us, that it consists in a great change. It is represented as a resurrection, or a change from death to life: *You hath he quickened*, saith St. Paul, *who were dead in trespasses and sins*. Eph. ii. 1. It is represented as a new creation: *If any man be in Christ*, says the same inspired author, *he is a new creature: old things are passed away: and behold, all things are become new*. 2 Cor. v. 17. *Put on*, says he, *the new man, which, after God, is created in righteousness and true holiness*. Eph. iv. 24. These and like expressions signify a very great change, and such forms of speech are very commonly used in the same sense; which shows they are so far from being ridiculous, that they are agreeable to the common sense of mankind. When we see a man that we once knew, look, and speak, and act as he used to do, it is customary to say, "He is the old man still." But if we see a great alteration in his appearance, his temper, or behaviour, we are apt to say, "He is a new man;" or, "He is quite another creature." When we see a rugged bois-

terous man become meek and inoffensive, we are apt to say, “He is become a mere child.” These forms of speech are so significant and popular, that they have even passed into proverbs, and that in various countries and languages; and hence they are used in the scriptures as plain and familiar representations of this great truth. And hence we are bold to use them, in spite of that senseless ridicule and contempt, which some would cast upon them; but which rebounds upon themselves, for censuring modes of expression that are not only sacred, but agreeable to common sense.

Now, since it is evident the new birth signifies a great change; you are impatient, by this time, I hope, to know more particularly what it is. It is the change of a thoughtless, ignorant, hard-hearted, rebellious sinner, into a thoughtful, well-informed, tender-hearted, dutiful servant of God. It is the implantation of the seeds or principles of every grace and virtue in a heart that was entirely destitute of them, and full of sin. The sinner that was wont to have no practical affectionate regard for the great God, is now made to revere, admire, and love him as the greatest and best of Beings; to rejoice in him as his supreme happiness, and cheerfully to submit to him as his Ruler. Formerly his temper and conduct would better agree to the infidelity of an atheist than to the faith of a Christian: but now, he thinks, and speaks, and acts, as one that really believes there is a God; a God who inspects all his ways, and will call him to an account. The heart that was wont to disgust the holiness of the divine law, and murmur at the strictness of its precepts, now loves it; loves it for that very reason for which it was wont to hate it; namely, because it is so holy. This was the temper of the Psalmist: *Thy word is very pure; therefore* (that is, on that very account) *thy servant loveth it.* Ps. cxix. 140; and of St. Paul, *The law is holy, and commandment is holy*—and what follows? *I delight,* says he, *in the law of God, after the inner man. And I consent unto the law that it is good.* Rom. vii. 12. 16. 22. The haughty, stubborn, deceitful heart, is now made humble, pliable, simple, and honest, like that of a little child. Hence Christ says, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. But whosoever shall humble himself as a little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Matt, xviii. 3, 4. This was also the temper of David: “Lord, my heart is not haughty,—surely I have behaved myself as a child that is weaned of his mother; my soul is even as a weaned child. Ps. cxxxix. 1, 2. The heart that used to have no

delight in communion with God, but lived as without God in the world, now feels a filial desire to draw near to him, and address him with the humble boldness and freedom of a child. "*Because ye are sons,*" says St. Paul, "*God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father,*" Gal. iv. 6. That is, Father, Father: the repetition of so tender a name intimates the greatest endearment and affectionate freedom. The heart that had no realizing affecting views of a future state, now feels the energy of that doctrine, and looks upon heaven and hell as indeed the most important realities; the heart that was once earthly and sensual, eagerly set upon things below, as its vain pursuit, is now taught to aspire to heaven; in heaven is its treasure, and there it will be. The thoughts that were once scattered among a thousand trifles, are now frequently collected, and fixed upon the great concerns of religion. Now also the heart is remarkably altered towards the Lord Jesus: formerly it seemed sufficient to wear his name, to profess his religion, to believe him to be the Saviour of the world, to insert his name in a prayer now and then, and to give a formal attendance upon the institutions of his worship; but O! now he appears in a more important and interesting light. Now the sinner is deeply sensible that he is indeed the only Saviour, and he most eagerly embraces him under that endearing character, and intrusts his eternal all in his hands. Now he appears to him all lovely and glorious, and his heart is for ever captivated with his beauty. Now he prays, and longs, and languishes for him, and feels him to be all in all. O! now the very thought of being without Christ, kills him. Thus, "God, who first commanded light to shine out of darkness, hath shined into his heart, to give him the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ." 2 Cor. iv. 6. in that face where it shines with the fairest beams. Now also the man has very different views of himself: he sees himself to be a guilty, depraved, vile creature, all overrun with sin, and destitute of all goodness, but as it is wrought in him by divine grace; how different is this from the proud self-righteous estimate he was wont to form of himself! His views of sin are also quite different from what they used to be: he used to look upon it as a slight excusable evil, except when it broke out into some gross acts. But now he sees it to be unspeakably vile and base, in every instance and degree. An evil thought, a corrupt motion of desire, an indisposed heart towards God, appears to him a shocking evil, such as nothing but the infinite mercy of God can forgive, and even that mer-

cy, upon no other account but that of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He sees it does most justly deserve everlasting punishment; and he is often lost in wonder that the gospel should open a door of hope even for him, who has been so deeply guilty. It breaks his heart to think that he indulged so base a thing so long; and he can never be fully reconciled to himself, while he feels the remains of it within him. His repentance now takes a new turn. Formerly he was entirely under the influence of self-love, and therefore, when he had any concern for his sin, it entirely proceeded from the servile principle of fear; fear of the punishment, and not hatred of the crime. But now his soul is ennobled with more generous principles: now he can mourn over sin, as a base ungrateful evil, even when he has no thoughts of the punishment; now he can mourn over sin as against God, and not only as against a sin-punishing, but as against a sin-pardoning God. Now he mourns with generous sorrow over pardoned sin; and God's being so good as to forgive him, is so far from lessening the evil of sin in his view, that this very consideration peculiarly affects him. O! that he should be so base as to sin against a God who is so gracious as to forgive him after all! This thought breaks his heart; and God's forgiving him, is a reason why he can never forgive himself. The heart has also a new temper in the duties of religion; it can no more indulge in habitual coldness or luke-warmness in them, but exerts its powers to the utmost; and when it has a languishing interval, it cannot be easy in that condition, but tries to rouse itself again. Experience teaches that it is good to draw near to God; and the ordinances of the gospel are not tiresome formalities, as they were wont to be, but the means of life and refreshment; and they are its happiest hours which are spent in attending upon them. Now the gospel is not that dull, stale, neglected tale it once was, but the most joyful tidings that ever came from heaven. As a new-born babe, the regenerate soul desires the sincere milk of the word, that it may grow thereby, 1 Peter ii. 2, and it is esteemed more than necessary food. Now the careless, secure soul, that was always cautious of over-doing in religion, and flattering itself there is no need of being so much in earnest, is effectually roused, and strives in earnest to enter in at the strait gate, convinced both of the difficulty and necessity of entering. Now religion is no longer a matter by the by, but a serious business; and every thing that comes in competition with it must give way to it. The man is resolved to save his soul at all adventures; and this, he is now convinced, is no



easy work. To sum up the whole, for I can only give a few specimens of particulars, the regenerate soul is changed universally in every part. I do not mean the change is perfect in any part: alas! no; sin still lives, and sometimes makes violent struggles, though crucified. The old man dies hard, but I mean, the change does really extend to every part. The soul is in no respect the same it was wont to be, as to the concerns of religion. It has new views, new sensations, new joys, new sorrows, new inclinations and aversions, new hopes and fears; in short, as the apostle tells us, *all things are become new*, 2 Cor. v. 17, and according to his inspired prayer, *the whole man, soul, body, and spirit is sanctified*. 1 Thess. v. 23.

By way of confirmation, let me add a few characters of a regenerate man, which are expressly scriptural. *Every one that loveth is born of God*, saith St. John, 1 John iv. 7. That is, every new-born soul is possessed with a generous love to all mankind, which prompts it to observe the whole law in its conduct towards them, (*for love is the fulfilling of the whole law*) and restrains it from doing them any injury; (*for love worketh no evil to his neighbour*) Rom. xii. 10. This love extends not only to friends, but also to strangers, and even to enemies. It is a friendship to human nature in general; it spreads over the whole earth, and embraces the whole race of man. But as the righteous are the more excellent ones of the earth, it terminates upon them in a peculiar degree: and the reason is obvious; they are, in a peculiar sense, the saints' brethren, the children of the same heavenly Father; and they bear a resemblance to him: and if he loves the Original, he must also love the Copy. Thus, says St. John, "every one that loveth him that begat, loveth him also that is begotten of him." 1 John v. 1.

Another character of regeneration the same apostle gives you, 1 John v. 4, 5, and that is, victory over the world by faith. "Every one that is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." That is, whatever temptations may arise from the riches, honours, or pleasures of the world, or from the society of mankind, the man that is born of God has such believing views of eternal things, as constrains him to conflict with them, and overcome them. He has not such a mean, dastardly soul, as to yield to opposition. He is enabled by divine grace, to brave dangers, and encounter difficulties in so good a cause: he dares to be wise and happy, though all the world should turn against him. O what a change is this from his former temper!

Another distinguishing characteristic of the new birth, is, universal holiness of practice, or a conscientious observance of every known duty, and an honest, zealous resistance of every known sin. There is no known duty, however unfashionable, disagreeable, or dangerous, but what the true convert honestly endeavours to perform; and there is no known sin, however customary, pleasing, or gainful, but what he honestly resists, and from which he labours to abstain. This necessarily follows from what has been said; for when the principles of action are changed within, the course of action will be changed too. When the heart is made holy, it will infallibly produce habitual holiness of practice. A good tree must bring forth good fruit. This St. John asserts in the strongest manner, and in various forms. *We know*, says he, *that every one that doeth righteousness*; that is, that habitually practiseth righteousness, *is born of God*, 1 John ii. 29. *We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not*; that is, he sinneth not habitually, so as he may be denominated a sinner by way of distinction; *but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself*; that is, keepeth himself from the infection of sin; *and that wicked one toucheth him not*. 1 John v. 18. *Little children*, says he, *let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous—But he that committeth sin is of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin*, i.e. as I explained it before, he does not habitually sin in the general tenor of his practice, so as to make his sin his distinguishing character; *for his seed remaineth in him*; that is, the principles of grace, implanted in him in regeneration, are immortal, and will never suffer him to give himself up to sin, as formerly; *and he cannot sin because he is born of God*: his being born of God happily disables him for ever from abandoning himself to sin again.—*In this the children of God are manifest; and the children of the devil*: that is, this is the grand distinguishing characteristic existing between them, *Whosoever doeth not righteousness, is not of God*. John, iii. 7–10. You see then a holy practice is one of the most certain signs of regeneration; and, therefore, in vain do such pretend to it, or boast of high attainments in inward experimental religion, who are not holy in all manner of conversation, and do not live righteously, soberly, and godly in the world.

By this time, I hope, my brethren, you understand what it is to be born again. And now, upon a review of the subject, there are several things of importance, which I would submit to your consideration.

First, I leave you now to consider, whether baptism be the same thing with regeneration, or the new birth, in the scripture sense. I grant that baptism is a sacramental sign of regeneration, just as the Lord's Supper is a sacramental sign of the body and blood of Christ; and, therefore, baptism may be called regeneration, by the same figure which Christ uses when he says of the bread, *This is my body*. In this metonymical sense, this method of speaking has been used by many great and good men: and when they call baptism "regeneration", they only mean, that it is an outward sign of it, just as the sacramental bread, for the same reason, is called the body of Christ. Were it always used in this sense, it would hardly be worth while to take notice of it as an impropriety; though I must confess, I cannot find the same form of speech indisputably used concerning baptism in the Bible. But when men are taught that the whole of that regeneration, or new birth, which the scripture requires as absolutely necessary to salvation, means no more than just being baptized; and when they that have been baptized, begin to think that they have no more to do with the new birth, the error is too dangerous to be passed over in silence. I shall just lead you into a track of thought, by which you may easily make yourselves judges in this controversy. If baptism be regeneration in the scripture sense, then, whatever the scripture says concerning persons regenerated, born again, or created anew, will also hold true concerning persons baptized. This is so plain a principle, that it is hard to make it plainer; for if baptism be the same with regeneration, the new birth, or the new creation, then the same things may be said of it. Proceeding upon this obvious principle, let us make the trial in a few instances. It may be truly said of him that is born of God, in the scripture sense, that he does not habitually sin, &c. Now substitute baptized, instead of born of God, and consider how it will read, "Every one that is baptized sinneth not; but he that is baptized keepeth himself; and the evil one toucheth him not." Has this the appearance of truth? Do not all of you know so much of the conduct of many who have been baptized, as to see this is most notoriously false? for where can we find more audacious sinners upon earth, than many who have been baptized! Let us make another trial. *Whosoever is born of God*, in the scripture sense, *overcometh the world*. But will it hold true, that whosoever is baptized, *overcometh the world*? *If any man be in Christ*, in the Scripture sense, *he is a new creature; old things are passed away, and all things are become new*. But how will it sound if

you read, *If any man be baptized, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, and all things are become new?* Does baptism universally make such a change in the subject, as that it may, with any tolerable propriety, be called a new creation?—I might easily make the same experiment with many other passages of scripture; but these may suffice as a specimen. And now, must it not be as evident as any mathematical demonstration, that regeneration, or the new birth, in the scripture sense, is something else, something more divine, more intrinsical, more transformative of the whole man, than baptism? That man must labour to be deceived, who can work up himself to believe, after such a representation of the case, that if he has been baptized, he has all that regeneration which is necessary to his admission into the kingdom of heaven. I know no absurdity parallel to it, except the doctrine of transubstantiation, the characteristical absurdity of the church of Rome. Because Christ, in the distribution of the elements in the Eucharist, said of the bread, *This is my body*, putting the sign for the thing signified, therefore Papists conclude, the bread is substantially the very same with the body of Christ signified by it, though it still retains all the sensible properties of bread. Some Protestants have fallen into the same error as to the other sacrament of baptism, and that with less plausibility. I can find no scripture that says of baptism, “This is regeneration:” and yet they insist upon it that it is the very thing; and make the sign and the thing signified one and the same.

Let me borrow a very plain and popular, and yet substantial argument from Limborch. “The great design of Christ’s coming into the world was, to renew and regenerate men; this is a work worthy of his own immediate hand.” And yet we are told, *Jesus baptized not, but his disciples*. John iv. 2. A plain evidence that he made a distinction between baptism and regeneration, St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says, “I thank God that I have baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius.” 1 Cor. i. 14. But if baptism be regeneration, his meaning must be, I thank God that I regenerated none of you. But is this cause of thanksgiving? Could he give thanks to God that he had not regenerated any of them? *Christ*, says he, *sent me not to baptize*. But can we think Christ did not send the chief of the apostles to promote the great work of regeneration? He elsewhere calls himself their spiritual father, *for*, says he, *in Christ Jesus I have begotten you, through the gospel*. 1 Cor. iv. 15. But if baptism be the new birth, he could not have been their father, or begotten them, unless he had baptized them.

From which it is evident, that St. Paul made a great difference between baptism and regeneration.”

Therefore, let no man deceive you with vain words. Baptism is an ordinance of Jesus Christ, which you should think highly of; but do not put it out of its place, by substituting it for quite another thing. Believe me, this is not that kind of regeneration which you must be the subjects of, if you would enter into the kingdom of God.

Another thing which I would now leave to your consideration is, whether regeneration, or the new birth, in the sense I have explained it, be not a rational, noble thing? And whether so great a change in a man’s temper and conduct may not emphatically be called a new birth? When a man is born again, the ruins of his nature are repaired, and every noble and divine grace and virtue are implanted in his heart. His heart is made capable of generous sensations; his understanding has suitable views of the most interesting and sublime objects; and his temper and behaviour are rightly formed towards God and man. In short, the mean, depraved, earth-born creature, is made an infant-angel; nay, St. Peter tells you, *he is made partaker of the divine nature*. 2 Pet. i. 4. What a glorious and surprising change is this? Should you see a clod of earth rising from under your feet, and brightening into a sun, it would not be so glorious a transformation. This change gives a man the very temper of heaven, and prepares him for the enjoyments and employments of that sacred region.

Therefore, *marvel not that I say unto you, ye must be born again*. Do not gaze and wonder at me, as if I told you some strange, new, absurd thing, when I tell you, you must be regenerated in the manner I have explained, if ever you would enter into the kingdom of heaven. Consult your own reason and experience, and they will tell you, that as heaven is the region of perfect holiness, and as you are indisputably corrupted, depraved creatures, you must be so changed, as to be made holy; or, in other words, you must be born again, before you can enjoy the happiness of that holy place: or consult the Bible, which you must own to be true, or own yourselves to be the most gross hypocrites in professing the Christian religion; consult your Bible, I say, and you will find the absolute necessity of being born again asserted in the strongest terms. Need I remind you of the solemn asseveration of Christ in my context, “verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of heaven!” The same blessed lips have assured us, that, “except we be converted, and be-

come as little children, we cannot enter into his kingdom.” Matt. xviii. 2. St. Paul speaks in the same strain: *If any man be in Christ, as we all must be before we can be saved by him, he is a new creature, &c. We are his workmanship, says he, created in Christ Jesus to good works.* Eph. ii. 10. “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but the new creature.” All external forms of religion, whether Jewish or Christian, are of no avail, without this new creation. Gal. vi. 15. This is also more than intimated in that comprehensive promise of the Old Testament. Ezek. xxxvi. 25, 26. *A new heart will I give you; and a new spirit will I put within you, &c.* And are not these repeated declarations sufficient to convince you of the necessity of this great change! Will you any more marvel, when you are told, you must be born again! No; rather marvel to hear the contrary: it may make you wonder indeed, to be told, that an unholy sinner, without any change, is fit for the presence of a holy God; fit to relish the holy enjoyments of heaven: and capable of being happy in what is directly contrary to his nature. This would be strange, absurd doctrine indeed! and wherever you hear it, you may justly wonder at it, and despise such nonsense.

Now if this be true, that *except a man be born again he cannot enter into the kingdom of God*, then it will follow, that just as many persons in this assembly as have been born again, just so many are in a state of favour with God, and prepared for the happiness of heaven. And, on the other hand, just as many as are unregenerate, just so many lie dead in sin, under the wrath of God, and liable to everlasting misery. Let each of you particularly admit this conviction: “If I am not born again, I have not the least ground to hope for happiness in my present state.”

Upon this follows another inquiry, of the utmost importance; and that is, Whether you have ever experienced the blessed change of the new birth? Have your views, your dispositions, and your conduct been changed in the manner described? and can you lay claim to those distinguishing characters of a regenerate soul, which have been mentioned? Pause, and think seriously; recollect your past experiences; look into your own hearts; observe the tenor of your practice; and from the whole, endeavour to gather an honest answer to this grand question, “Have I ever been born again?”

If you can answer this in your favour, St. Peter will tell you the happy consequence; and I shall only desire you to read those most

comfortable verses, 1 Pet. i. 3–6: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again to a lively hope—to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God, through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time; wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season (if need be) ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.*

But if, on the other hand, you find you have never been born again, what is to be done? Must you lie still in that condition? or should you try to get out of it? I am sure my design in endeavouring to let you see your condition, is, that you may escape out of it and be happy; and if you are so kind to yourselves as to concur with me in this design, I hope, through divine grace, we shall succeed. This introduces the next inquiry, namely,

## II. Who is the Author of this divine change, called the new birth?

The change is so great, so noble, and divine, that from thence alone we may infer it can be produced only by divine power. And the nature of man, in its present state, is so corrupt and weak, that it is neither inclined nor able to produce it. It is also uniformly ascribed to God in the sacred writings. The regenerate soul is repeatedly said to be born of God; *born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.* John i. 13. *All things are become new,* says St. Paul, *and all things* (that is, all these new things) *are of God.* 2 Cor. v. 17, 18. *Every good gift, and every perfect gift,* says St. James, *is from above and cometh down from the Father of lights—who of his own will hath begotten us with the word of truth.* James i. 17, 18. The Spirit is repeatedly mentioned as the author of the new birth, in the chapter where my text lies. This may suffice for the truth of so plain a point.

Here then, sinners, you see to whom you must look for this blessing. You can no more regenerate yourselves, than you could beget yourselves at first. And this you must be deeply sensible of. But he that made you at first is able to new-make you, and to repair his own workmanship, which you have demolished. And it is he who has actually changed many a heart in our guilty world. Here the next inquiry comes in very seasonably, namely,

## III. In what way does this divine agent produce this change?

He is pleased to use such a variety, as to circumstances, that I

cannot take time to describe them. But as to the substance of the work, which is the same in all adults, he generally carries it on in the following manner. The first step is, to convince the sinner of his need of this change, by discovering to him his guilt and danger, and particularly the universal corruption of his nature. He is roused out of a state of stupid security by an affecting view of the holiness of God, of the purity of his law, of the terror of its penalty, of the great evil of sin, and of his own exposedness to the divine displeasure upon the account of it. Upon this he becomes sad and serious, uneasy in his mind, and anxious about his condition. He endeavours to reform his life; he prays, and uses the other means of grace with earnestness unknown before. And when he has gone on in this course for some time, he begins perhaps to flatter himself, that now he is in a safe condition. But alas! he does not yet know the worst of himself. Therefore the holy Spirit opens his eyes to see the inward universal corruption of his whole soul, and that a mere outward reformation is far from being a sufficient cure of a disease so inveterate. Hereupon the awakened sinner betakes himself to the use of the means of grace with redoubled vigour and earnestness, and strives to change the principles of action within. But alas! he finds his heart is a stubborn thing, and altogether unmanageable to him; and after repeated strivings to no purpose, he is effectually convinced of his own inability, and the absolute necessity of the exertion of divine power to make him truly good. Therefore he lies at the throne of grace, as a poor, anxious, helpless sinner, entirely at mercy, and unable to relieve himself. It would take up more time than I can allow, to describe the various exercises, the anxious fears, and eager pantings, the strong cries and tears of a soul in this condition. What I have hinted may put such of you in mind of them, as have never been the subjects of them. While the sinner lies in this desponding situation, it pleases God to pity him. Now the important hour is come, when the old man must be crucified; when the divine and immortal principles must be implanted in a heart full of sin; and when the dead sinner must begin to live a holy and divine life. The great God instantaneously changes the whole soul, and gives it a new, a heavenly turn. In short, now is wrought that important change, which I have already described, which is called the new birth, and denominates the man a new creature.

Here again you may furnish yourselves with materials for self-examination. If you have been born again, you have thus felt the



pangs of a new birth, and seen your guilty, sinful, and dangerous condition in a true light. And can you put your hand upon your heart, and say, “Here is the heart that has been the subject of this operation?”

Hence also may be gathered some proper directions for such as are in a state of nature how to attain the new birth.

Endeavor to be thoroughly acquainted with the corruption of your nature: it is from this that the necessity of a new birth proceeds.

Be fully convinced of the indispensable necessity of this change to your salvation.

Break off from, and forsake whatever tends to obstruct the new birth; as excessive worldly cares, bad company, and in short, all sin.

Seriously use all the means of grace; as, earnest prayer, attentive hearing of the word, &c.

Persevere in so doing, till your endeavours are crowned with success. And particularly, do not grow impatient of those anxieties and fears that will at first attend your pursuit.

These short hints may suffice by way of direction, if you are sincerely desirous of being directed. And what do you determine to do? Will you not resolve to seek after this important change, upon which your eternal All depends? O! let us part today fully determined upon this, that we will implore the power and mercy of God to create in us clean hearts, and renew within us right spirits.