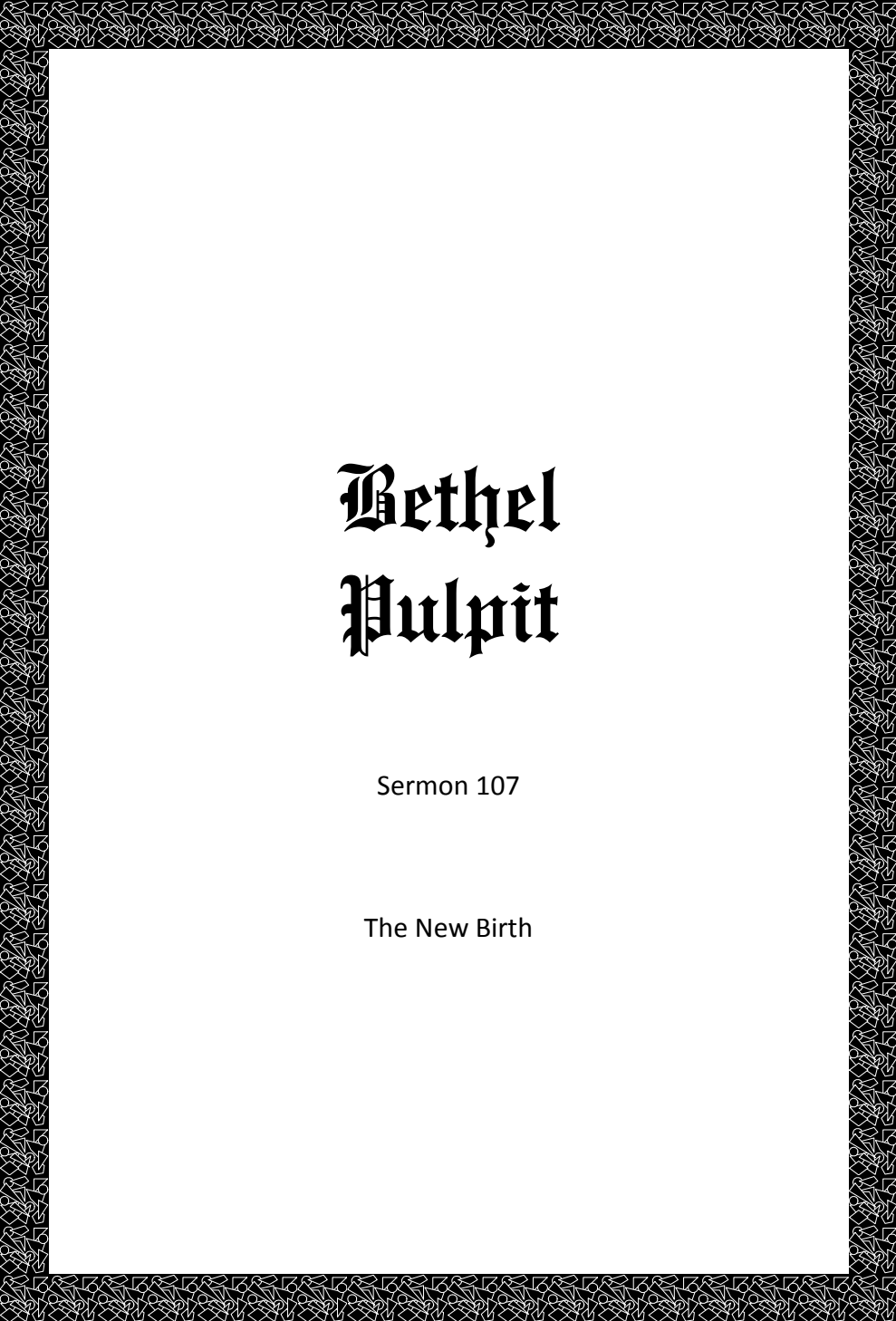




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 107

The New Birth

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 17th April, 1994**

Text: *"Ye must be born again" (John 3. 7).*

When the Lord Jesus was here upon earth, there were very few who treated Him kindly and respectfully. But Nicodemus did. Though he was such an eminent man, though he was a ruler of the people, he did. He spoke with such kindness. He called Him Rabbi, Master. He said, "We know that Thou art a Teacher come from God." He acknowledged the claim that the Lord Jesus was a teacher. "For no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him." He acknowledged that the Lord Jesus could perform miracles. He acknowledged that God was on His side. But the Lord demolished all his religion immediately with one word: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

I do not know whatever people would say today. They would say this was not very courteous, this was not very wise, this is not the way to deal with a person who comes so kindly. But the Lord Jesus did it in love because Nicodemus was "a vessel of mercy afore prepared to glory." He laid the axe right to the root of the tree and cut away all his fleshly religion with one stroke. You say, Is that love? Those of you who are out of the secret, those of you who are dead in sin, there could be no greater favour tonight than for the axe to be laid to the root of your tree and for all your fleshly, carnal religion to go. Nicodemus was well schooled and grounded in the belief that being a Jew in itself was sufficient. The Lord showed him first of all that whether he was a Jew or whether he was not a Jew, apart from a spiritual birth, a birth from heaven, he could not even see the kingdom of God, let alone possess it. Also there was the belief that salvation was for the Jews and only the Jews. No, says the Lord Jesus, it is for the whole world, not just Jews – Gentiles as well as Jews who are brought to experience this peculiar, heavenly birth and brought to believe on the eternal Son of God. "For God so loved the *world*, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth" – the certain effect of the new birth – "that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” And Nicodemus just could not understand it, any more than the woman of Samaria could understand the Lord Jesus in the next chapter. It was confusion to her and it was confusion to him. In each case they thought of it completely carnally, completely literally. Nicodemus said, “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” But the Lord Jesus came back to the same ground: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

Perhaps I should just spend a moment on that phrase, being “born of water and of the Spirit,” a phrase on which there has been so much controversy in the church of God right from the days of the apostles until now. Most certainly there is no reference to baptism here. What does it mean, then, by saying being “born of water and of the Spirit”? Well, it is a similar expression to that which the Lord uses when He speaks of being baptized “with the Holy Ghost and with fire.” It is a way of speaking. It is comparing a spiritual with a natural. Just as fire burns, so there must be that baptism, that baptism of the Spirit, that baptism of fire. Just as water cleanses, so there must be that new birth, that which the apostle calls “the washing of regeneration.” “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.”

Well then, beloved friends, this evening we are on vital things. There are some things, even in real religion, that are more important than others. Now this is something that is vital: the new birth. There can be no salvation, there can be no heaven, without it. We have here the necessity, the vital necessity of the new birth. “Ye *must* be born again.” Ye *must* be born again, or perish eternally. Ye *must* be born again, or sink into hell. Ye *must* be born again, or you can never know mercy, forgiveness. Ye *must* be born again, or there is no eternal life. Ye *must* be born again, or to heaven you can never come. The absolute, vital necessity of a spiritual birth, a heavenly birth. “Ye *must* be born again.” In heaven tonight, singing the Redeemer’s praises, there are thousands upon thousands, but every one of them was born again. There is no salvation without it. All those whom the Father has chosen, whom the Son has redeemed, the Holy

Ghost will regenerate, give them new life. Now that is the new birth. “Ye *must* be born again.” If we have never been born again, we have not yet begun in divine things. If we have not been born again, we know nothing at all spiritually. If we have not been born again, we are still dead in trespasses and sins.

“Ye must be born again.” The old preachers used to speak of the three R’s of vital religion (didn’t they?) – of course, alluding to the three R’s of education: reading, writing and arithmetic. But they used to speak of the three R’s of real religion: ruin through the Fall, redemption through Christ, regeneration, or the new birth, by the Holy Ghost.

“Ye *must* be born again.” There is no substitute for it. We live in a great day of substitutes. They do not have what you want, but they have something else. It is not exactly the real thing, but it will do just as well. We live in an age of substitutes. Beloved friends, there is no substitute for the new birth. If we live and die and never know anything of the new birth, then hell must be our just but dread abode.

“Ye must be born again.” At the time of the glorious revival of vital godliness in England over two hundred years ago, this was the text that in the hands of God turned England upside down. With power from on high Whitefield stood forth preaching to his ten thousands and twenty thousands, and again and again this was the text: “Ye *must* be born again.” Under the power of the Spirit there were many who were born again. But some of his friends asked him one day, “Why do you always preach from the same text? Why are you always preaching from, ‘Ye must be born again’?” That godly man thought for a moment and then answered like this: “Well, because ye *must*.” No salvation without the new birth.

“Ye must be born again.” The reason why we need to be born again is because by nature we are spiritually dead. We are not dead *to* sin; we are very much alive to sin and Satan and to the flesh and carnality. But we are dead *in* sin. We are dead to God. We are dead to all that is good. We are dead to any knowledge of salvation. We are dead to any knowledge of ourselves, our lost condition. We are helpless. O what a solemn sight was that Ezekiel had in chapter 37 when he went into the valley and it was full of bones, dead bones, and they were very dry, not a spark of life in them. “Can these bones live?” Only if there is a new birth. “Can these bones live?” “O Lord God, Thou knowest.”

O but what a description of us by nature, that spiritual death, so helpless, unconcerned about our lost condition, “children of wrath, even as others,” hastening on to a lost eternity, unable to help ourselves or save ourselves, unable to repent or believe. We need a sovereign, almighty hand to do everything for us. And that is just what God does in the new birth. It is God’s work from first to last. You never heard of anybody “borning” themselves, did you? It is God’s work, regenerating, imparting divine life. It is a sovereign work; it is a powerful work; it is an almighty work. The Holy Spirit, who is God, comes upon this sinner who is dead in trespasses and sins and says unto him, *Live*, and divine life is imparted, breathed into his soul, and he lives; he lives to God. That is the new birth.

We have this doctrine, this experience, right through Scripture. Sometimes it is called *regeneration*, which just means being born again. Sometimes it is spoken of as a *resurrection*, a spiritual resurrection. Just like the Lord Jesus raised Lazarus, so we must be raised from our death. Sometimes it is called *quicken*ing, quickening signifying giving life, quick being the old English word for alive. “And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.” It is the same divine, almighty power that raised the Lord Jesus from the dead the third day which must raise us from our spiritual death. It is a new birth; it is a quickening; it is a resurrection. And not only is the new birth a divine work, a powerful work, an almighty work, but it is a work of mercy; it is a work of grace. “But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us ... hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved).”

What an illustration that was, Ezekiel’s dry bones! Ezekiel had to prophesy to the bones and he had to prophesy to the winds. In other words, preach to the people and pray to the Holy Ghost. And as he preached and as he prayed, the power of the Holy Ghost breathed upon those dry bones and they lived; they rose up an exceeding great army. It is a secret work; it is a silent work, but it is known by its effects. “The wind bloweth where it listeth.” You cannot see the wind blowing. None of you have ever seen the wind, have you? But you can tell the wind is blowing because of its effect. You can feel it. It blows. You can see things being moved. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” That sovereign, almighty work of the

Holy Spirit breathing divine life where all was death before. And so there is a complete change. That life is completely changed.

Some of you may ask one or two questions. You may say, Well, the new birth and conversion, are they the same? Well, not exactly, though they have the same effect. Conversion is a turning completely round. A dead man cannot turn completely round. The new birth is the life that is given to him that enables him to turn completely round. Then, are the new birth and the call by grace the same? Well again, not exactly. The call by grace: there is the call, it is heard, it is obeyed. The new birth is the life that is given to hear and obey the call. The dead cannot hear or obey a call. The new birth must come first and before anything and everything in vital, experimental godliness. “Ye *must* be born again.” And I would just say this. It is very, very difficult to discern exactly when the new birth took place in yourself or in anyone else. We know feelings and happenings, that sermon, that word, that effect, that prayer. But the new birth comes before all these things. That must be first, the Lord giving divine life, and all these other things are just the effects of the new birth.

I would that the Lord this evening might impress upon our hearts the vital importance of being born again – no hope, no salvation, no heaven without it – that this is God’s work, His sovereign work from first to last. O may the Lord impress on your hearts the necessity of it, that without it you can never be saved, without it you can never come to heaven, without it you must perish.

“Ye *must* be born again.” Well then, the important question is, Am I born again?

“Am I quickened by His Spirit;
Live a life of faith of prayer?
Trusting wholly to His merit;
Casting on Him all my care?
Daily panting,
In His likeness to appear?”

The new birth. Am I born again? Then you say, But if this is so important, if this is so vital, how may I know whether I have been born again or whether I have never been born again? And that is the vital

question, because, “Ye must be born again.” Well, let me say this: this being born again is not just making some decision. It is not turning over a new leaf. It is the work of God’s Spirit in our soul. It is a work which can never be erased to all eternity because those who have it possess everlasting life. O but how may I know it? Now let us just think about this. Every one of us here in this chapel has been born. There was a time when we were born. The young ones, the old ones, there was a time where we were all born. But none of us can remember any of the circumstances of our natural birth, can we? Perhaps we have been told about it, when it was and what day and what time and things like that. But we cannot personally remember all the details of what was happening when we were born. But that does not mean we were not born. That does not mean we are not alive. The proof that each of us here was born is that we are alive. Now that is it. Satan may harass you on this point. You keep going back and trying to trace out the circumstances of your new birth, and you cannot sort it out exactly. The point is, “Am I quickened by His Spirit?” Have I been made alive with this divine life which only God can give? That is the great question.

“Ye must be born again.” And if born again, you possess life, eternal life, and if you possess eternal life then there will be the effect of it. When a baby is born, you hear a cry. It may not sound very pleasant; it may be harsh; it may be weak; it may be discordant, but to thousands what a joyful sound that has been, anxiously waiting and then to hear that little cry. It is a mark of life. If you and I have been born again of the Spirit, then when we were born there was that cry, that cry which had never been there before, that cry which had never previously been heard, a cry for help, a cry for mercy, a cry to be forgiven, a cry to be prepared for heaven. And “He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when He shall hear it, He will answer thee.” That little first cry proves that the child is alive; and that child is just as much a child, just as much a member of the family, as when the time comes when he can speak and when he can say, Father. That newborn babe cannot say, Father, but that newborn babe *has* a father and that newborn babe is a child, and it is those very same lips which emit that first, tiny cry which one day will say, Father. Some of you cannot say, Father, can you? You dare not say, Father, unless you say,

“My God, my Father, blissful name!
O may I call Thee mine?”

May I with sweet assurance claim
A portion so divine?"

O but one day those same lips that now cry will "say, 'My Father, God,' with an unwavering tongue." And that newborn babe of grace is just as much a child, just as much a member of the family. "If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ." "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us" – such unworthy, guilty sinners – "that *we* should be called the sons of God."

"Ye must be born again," and if born again you are a child. "Ye must be born again." That newborn babe does not do much but cry and feed and nestle in its mother's arms, does it? But there is the hungering and feeding, and hungering and feeding, and then the sleeping. Peter writes so beautifully of it. He says, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby." Why, there was not that appetite there before; there was not that hunger, that longing there before for the sincere milk of the Word. This sincere milk is the gospel as it speaks of the everlasting love of God to sinners and as it tells of free mercy; and it is full of so many precious promises and it points to Jesus the dear Lamb of God. This is the sincere milk of the Word. If you are a newborn babe in Christ, there will be a longing for it, a seeking after it, a crying for it. That is why that babe cries to be fed. It must be satisfied. Nothing else will do. "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby; if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious." These hungerings and longings, they all testify of the life of grace, the effect of the new birth in your heart.

"Ye must be born again." But leaving now the figure of the newborn babe, wherever the new birth takes place, there will always be the holy, tender fear of God put in your heart, right from that very first moment of the new birth. There may be other things you have, other things you do not have, but if you have been born again of the Holy Spirit of God, you will possess the holy, tender, filial fear of God, because "the fear of the Lord is the beginning," and if you and I do not possess it, we have not yet begun in divine things.

Years ago we heard this expression a lot: a man who feared God, a God-fearing man. We do not hear the expression so much today, but the Bible is full of it. O the precious promises to those who fear the Lord! In

the new birth this holy fear is put in your heart. It will make you humble. It will make your conscience tender. It will make you realise your sin and your unworthiness. It will separate you from the world. The fear of the Lord implanted in your heart in the new birth – now have you got it? It will bring you to confess your sin and to seek after the Lord Jesus. It will give you a personal religion: “me, Lord.” “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people.” It will make your religion real before a holy, heart-searching God, not so much before other people. It will save you from hypocrisy. It will give you a daily religion, an hourly religion; you will not leave your religion behind in chapel when you go home. It will give you a secret religion between yourself and God. The fear of the Lord – the certain effect of the new birth.

Do not misunderstand the fear of the Lord. It does not mean being frightened of God, though so often we do know what it is in the beginning to be frightened of God in a holy law. Really it means a sacred awe and reverence for Him and for His name. The old preachers used to speak of a filial fear, not a slavish fear, not that fear which a slave has of a cruel master, but the tender reverence that a child has for a father. But with the fear of God, love is always there. You may not be able to lay claim to it, but it is there. They often used to quote in my early days:

“Fear is a grace which ever dwells
With its fair partner, love;
Blending their beauties, both proclaim
Their source is from above.”

And the fear of God, this effect of the new birth, will make a clear, distinct change in your life. You will die to your past life, die to sin, die to the world, live to God. Like the little girl I have told you of so often. They asked, Why do you really think you possess the fear of God? Well, she said, once I used to clean up so beautifully where I thought everyone would see, but since I believe the Lord put His fear in my heart, I clean up just as beautifully where I know no-one will look. Like good Eli Page. He had a corn shop in his days before preaching. Someone came in to buy corn, and he went out the back to weigh out the corn, and Satan tempted him. He said, If you give that man short measure, he will never know; he trusts you. Suddenly, he said, the fear of God took hold, and never did a man get a better measure of corn than that man did that day. The fear of

God will be “an unctuous light to all that’s right, a bar to all that’s wrong.” Things yours flesh hates, you will be constrained to walk that way because of the fear of the Lord. Things your flesh loves, but, “So did not I because of the fear of God.” “Ye must be born again,” and if you have been born again you will possess the fear of God in your heart, and if you have no evidence of the fear of God in your heart, you have never been born again, whatever your religion.

“Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.” Now a second thing: where the new birth takes place, there will always be repentance, repentance toward God. And that repentance will bring you to feel your need as a sinner, your unworthiness, and to confess your sin and to seek mercy. And that repentance will bring you away from the world and separate you from your old life. Repentance is not just to weep. A man may weep and go on and on in his sin. But the little children’s hymn says,

“Repentance is to leave
The sins we loved before,
And show that we in earnest grieve
By doing them no more.”

Have you a sweet hope that you possess repentance, repentance toward God? If the new birth has taken place, you will be blessed with repentance. It is God’s gift. If you and I never know anything of repentance, then we are strangers to the new birth. Jesus said, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

“Ye *must* be born again.” And the third thing is faith, God-given faith, faith which sees the Lord Jesus, sees Him as the Son of God, views the wonders of His love, faith that sees the Lord Jesus suffering, agonising, bleeding, dying on the cross, making atonement for sin, crying with a loud voice, “It is finished,” dying and rising again, ascending into heaven, almighty to save, full of grace, ever interceding. And if the new birth takes place, you will be given faith in Him. Now faith in the essence is there right at the beginning, but usually it is more the fear of the Lord that begins to show itself at the beginning and repentance that shows itself at first. But faith is there, and though it may be later, faith will be revealed, and it will be this: as you see the Lord Jesus there will be a beauty, a suitability, an attraction in Him. Attraction in Christ is one of the best evidences of the

new birth. Well, do you, or do you not this evening see a sweet attraction in the dear Lamb of God, once crucified, now risen and exalted? Satan can quote Scripture; Satan can give you visions; Satan can give you an imaginary word; but Satan will never make the Lord Jesus attractive to you. O hold that fast, if the Saviour is attractive to you. And so you will be sweetly enabled to look to Him and trust in Him and rest on Him and pray to Him and plead for His great salvation.

Then prayer. It is bound up with the fear of God, and it is bound up with repentance, and it is bound up with faith. When a child is born, that child begins to breath. The cry, the hunger, they are all connected with that life; but the breathing – “prayer is the Christian’s vital breath.” God could have said many things concerning Saul of Tarsus as an evidence that he was born again, but He said one thing only. He said, “Behold, he prayeth.” He could have said, Why, Ananias, he has had the most wonderful experience a sinner has ever had. He saw a light from heaven. He was cut down. He was struck blind. No. Ananias, “He is a chosen vessel unto Me.” “Behold, he prayeth.” It is praying for the Lord Jesus to appear, for the Lord Jesus to save you, for the Lord Jesus to make Himself precious to you. O what think ye of Christ? Where the new birth takes place, there are those holy longings and breathings and desires after the Saviour. They will be granted; they will be satisfied. You will be raised up to a sweet hope. But little faith will get to heaven if it is real as well as strong faith, as well as the sweet assurance of faith.

Then you see, it will be this: the love, a little love springing up to the Lord Jesus, His people and His ways. I know that text can be abused, but it is in Scripture and it has been such an encouragement to the Lord’s little ones. The Holy Ghost gives this, *this*, as the evidence of the new birth: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.” Ruth the Moabitess did not have many wonderful things, but she had this: she clung and clave to the people of God, and so she gave a clear evidence of the new birth. “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.”

“Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.”