

THE NEW YOU: Resurrection and Regeneration

The other day a New York Times article caught my eye. It was titled, “How to Feel Alive Again” and was based on an interview with Katherine May on her latest book, *Enchantment*. She describes how certain actions fill her “with wonder and awe – and ... [make] her feel alive again.”¹ The key, she says, is to find out what soothes you. It might be going on a walk or visiting an art museum, watching the shifting clouds, going to a place of worship, or staring at the moon.”²

Although Ms. May offers some practical suggestions that might soothe a person’s spirit on any given day and help him or her “to feel alive again,” Ms. May doesn’t go far enough. The greatest need of every person is not “to feel alive again,” but to be born again – to become spiritually alive for the very first time.

1. The new birth is a must.

In John chapter 3, Jesus said to one of the most religious leaders of his day, “You must be born again” (John 3:7), and “Unless one is born again he cannot seek the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Why must we be born again? Because all of us, apart from Christ – even the most religious people – are “dead in our trespasses and sins.” This is God’s diagnosis of our spiritual condition, and it is a dire one. “The Bible has a clear and devastating message about the state of our souls.”³ My intent in saying this is not to spoil your Easter celebration or rain on your resurrection parade. The reason Scripture emphasizes our dreadful state “is so that we will know what we need and shout for joy when God gives it to us.”⁴ So, stick with me!

Two times in Ephesians 2 we are told that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. Paul uses the past tense because he’s writing to believers. But in describing their former condition before coming to Christ, Paul says,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

- Ephesians 2:1-4

Paul is not talking about being physically dead or morally lifeless. We’re not dead in the sense that we can’t sin, because we do. We’re quite active in that regard. We’re

¹ Christina Caron, “How to Feel Alive Again,” *The New York Times*, 27 February 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 30 March 2023 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/27/well/mind/katherine-may-enchantment.html>.

² Ibid.

³ John Piper, *Finally Alive* (Ross-shire, Scotland, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2009, reprinted 2010, 2011, 2012), 46. Much of the sermon content is adapted from Piper’s book. Any direct quotes are footnoted. Otherwise, the content in general is borrowed from the book.

⁴ Ibid.

“walking” in disobedience, we’re “following” the ways of the world and the devil, we’re “carrying out” the desires of the body and the mind, satisfying our sinful cravings.

God, in Holy Scripture, sets forth multiple reasons why we “must be born again.” John Piper enumerates these in his book *Finally Alive*. I’m going to list the reasons in rapid-fire succession with the Scripture reference in parentheses. Why must we be born again? Because . . .

Apart from the new birth . . .

- a. ***We are dead in our trespasses and sins*** (Eph. 2:1-2). That is to say, we are unresponsive to God and Christ and his word.
- b. ***We are by nature children of wrath*** (Eph. 2:3). Our problem is not just what we *do*, but what we *are*. Earlier this week I was talking to a guy at the gym who confessed, “My biggest problem is me.” That’s true of all of us. It alienates us from God and incurs his holy anger. John Piper points out the significance of the phrase “children of wrath,” saying, “the wrath of God belongs to us the way a parent belongs to a child. Our nature is so rebellious and so selfish and so callous toward the majesty of God that his holy anger is a natural and right response to us.”
- c. ***We love darkness and hate the light*** (John 3:19-20). We’re not neutral when the light of God’s truth approaches. We resist it. And we are not neutral when the darkness of temptation envelopes us. We embrace it. We love what we should hate, and we hate what we should love.
- d. ***We are unable to submit to God or please God*** (Rom. 8:7-8). Without the Holy Spirit, our minds are so resistant to God’s authority that we will not, and therefore, cannot, submit to him. That is how dead and dark we are toward God until God causes us to be born again.
- e. ***We are unable to accept the gospel*** (Eph. 4:18; 1 Cor. 2:14). Paul says in Ephesians 4:18 that unregenerate people are “darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.” In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul says that the natural person (i.e., the unregenerate person by nature) “can’t receive [the] truths of God’s Spirit. It sounds foolish to them and they can’t understand it...” (NLT). The mind justifies the rebellion in their heart by seeing God’s truth as foolish. “This is real inability. But it is not a coerced inability.”⁵ The unregenerate person’s preference for sin is so strong that he cannot see the truth of God for what it is. This way of thinking “is a real and terrible bondage. But it is not an innocent bondage.”⁶ The unregenerate person *cannot* receive God’s truth because he *will not*.
- f. ***We are unable to come to Christ or embrace him as Lord*** (John 6:44, 65; 1 Cor. 12:3). In 1 Corinthians 12:3, Paul declares, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Say it and *mean* it,

⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁶ Ibid.

that is. An actor on stage or a hypocrite in church can say “Jesus is Lord,” but no one can say it and mean it apart from the Holy Spirit. That’s because a spiritually dead person cannot celebrate the Lordship of Jesus over his life without being born again.

- g. ***We are slaves to sin*** (Rom. 6:17).
- h. ***We are slaves to Satan*** (Eph. 2:1-2). John Piper points out, “This is one of the terrible things about spiritual deadness. Our deadness is not unresponsive to the devil. It is perfectly in tune with the devil. ... The unregenerate may scoff at the very idea of a devil. And of course, nothing is more in line with the father of lies than the denial that he exists.”⁷
- i. ***No good thing dwells in us*** (Rom. 7:18). Some may say, “Now, wait a second! I know many non-Christians who do a lot of good things.” Yes, that is true in a humanitarian sense. But our minds, bodies and souls have been created by God for his glory. When we use what God has made without relying on his grace for the purpose of showing his worth, we prostitute God’s creation by glorifying man rather than God.

That’s quite a list, isn’t it? It shows us how helpless and hopeless we are in our natural condition and why we must be born again. We cannot improve ourselves. Dead people can’t make themselves better. Dead people “need one thing before anything else can happen. They must be made alive. They must be born again.”⁸

This is where the Good News comes in! This is where God enters the picture! Moments ago, I said that two times in Ephesians 2 we are told that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. But we only looked at the first instance, in verse 1. The second statement appears in verses 4-5:

BUT GOD, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, *even when we were dead in our trespasses*, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved....

- Ephesians 2:4-5

Here we see not only the diagnosis of our spiritual condition but also the remedy:

Diagnosis: Dead in Sin

Remedy: Life with Christ

Scripture makes a direct connection between Jesus’ resurrection and our regeneration. Look at what Peter writes in chapter 1, verse 3, of his epistle:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be ***born again*** to a living hope through the ***resurrection*** of Jesus Christ from the dead.

- 1 Peter 1:3

⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁸ Ibid., 59.

See the connection between Jesus' resurrection and our regeneration (new birth)? Do you also see how Scripture emphasizes that this is *God's* doing? Therefore, the new birth is not only a *must*, but it is also a *miracle*!

2. The new birth is a miracle.

a. God regenerates.

Regeneration is a sovereign act of God in which he imparts new life to us. Just as we did not choose to be made physically alive and born, so we did not choose to be made spiritually alive and born again.⁹ This is God's doing, not ours.

How did God make this happen? Peter points out that the miracle of regeneration involves three works of God.

- (1) **God ransomed us by the blood of Jesus** (1 Peter 1:18-19). In verses 18-19, Peter writes, "For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God" (NLT). Jesus said that he "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The blood of Christ is infinitely valuable. Therefore, it can never lose its ransoming power. The life it obtains lasts forever.
- (2) **God raised Jesus from the dead** (1 Peter 1:3-5). Listen once again to 1 Peter 1:3, along with verses 4-5. This time I'll read from the NIV: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." "The new birth is something that happens in us when the Holy Spirit takes our dead hearts and unites us to Christ by faith so that his life becomes our life."¹⁰ This is the central point of today's sermon:

***God supernaturally gives us life
by connecting us to the resurrected Christ –
through faith.***

"The new life we get in the new birth is the life of the historical Jesus. Therefore, if he does not rise from the dead, there is no new life to have."¹¹ In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul plainly states, "If Christ has not

⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 699.

¹⁰ Piper, 83.

¹¹ Ibid.

been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless ... and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. ... Thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 14, 17-19, 57 NLT).

- (3) ***God called us into union with Christ*** (1 Peter 1:23-25). Peter writes, “you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you.” The new birth happens through the word of God. We know we have been born again when we believe God’s word and embrace Jesus for the treasure he is.

b. We respond.

Your involvement in the event of the new birth is to exercise faith – faith in the crucified and risen Son of God, Jesus Christ, as the Savior and Lord and Treasure of your life. ... Your act of believing and God’s act of begetting are simultaneous. He does the begetting and you do the believing in the same instant. And – this is very important – [God’s] doing is the decisive cause of your doing. His begetting is the decisive cause of your believing.¹²

If you have a hard time thinking of one thing causing another thing if they are simultaneous, think of fire and heat or fire and light. The instant there is fire, there is heat. The instant there is fire, there is light. But we would not say that the heat caused the fire, or the light caused the fire. We say that the fire caused the heat and light.¹³

That’s the way it works when we are born again. God regenerates and you respond at the same instant. God begets, you believe – and you become spiritually alive.

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What does this mean for us, practically speaking? It means four things:¹⁴

1. It means *we must believe in order to be saved*. That’s what Scripture says: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

¹² Ibid., 102.

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Adapted from Piper, 107.

2. It means that *left to ourselves we will not believe*. Dead people don't have the capacity to believe. They are incapable of changing their lifeless state.
3. It means that *God, who is rich in mercy and love and grace, is the decisive cause of your faith*.
4. According to 1 Peter 1:22, *the evidence of new birth is love* – love for God and neighbor, especially all who belong to God's family through faith in Jesus Christ. Ken Taylor captures the gist of Peter's point by paraphrasing verse 22 this way:

Now you can have real love for everyone because your souls have been cleansed from selfishness and hatred when you trusted Christ to save you; so see to it that you really do love each other warmly, with all your hearts.

- 1 Peter 1:22
The Living Bible

If you were not a believer when you came into church this morning, I pray that you will leave a new person – one who has been born again by the Spirit of God. I plead with you to obey God's word by believing on Jesus Christ. Receive him as the Lord and Savior and Treasure of your life.

If you are already a believer, rejoice that God has regenerated you by ransoming you with the precious blood of his only Son, by raising him from the dead, and by calling you into union with Christ.

Let others see the life of Christ in you. Love each other warmly with all your hearts. Let your light shine before others in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16). Tell people the good news about Jesus so that they too can be born again. – Not just *feel* alive but truly *be* alive – in Christ!