

TWO LIVES TO LIVE

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Anglican Bishop John Taylor Smith, former Chaplain General of the British Army, was preaching in a large cathedral on this text: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." In order to drive it home, he said: "My dear people, do not substitute anything for the new birth. You may be a member of a church, but church membership is not new birth, and "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

On the left sat the archdeacon in his stall. Pointing directly at him, he said, "You might even be an archdeacon like my friend in his stall and not be born again, and "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." You might even be a bishop like myself, and not be born again, and "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

A day or so later he received a letter from the archdeacon, in which he wrote: "My dear Bishop: You have found me out. I have found me out. I have been a clergyman for over thirty years, but I had never known anything of the joy that Christians speak of. I never could understand it. Mine has been hard, legal service. I did not know what was the matter with me, but when you pointed directly to me, and said, "You might even be an archdeacon and not be born again," I realized in a moment what the trouble was. I had never known anything of the new birth."

He went on to say that he was wretched and miserable, had been unable to sleep all night, and begged for a conference, if the bishop could spare the time to talk with him. "Of course, I could spare the time," said Bishop Smith, "and the next day we went over the Word of God, and, after some hours, we were both on our knees, the archdeacon taking his place before God as a poor, lost sinner, and telling the Lord Jesus he would trust Him as his Savior. From that time on everything has been different."

The Roman philosopher, Seneca, wrote to his friend Lucullus: "My wife has a moronic child, Harpasti, who suddenly became blind. What I am about to tell you will be difficult to believe, but it is true. We cannot make her understand that she has become blind and that no change in her environment will help her. She insists that her nurse take her to a house where it is not dark. It seems to me," continued the philosopher, "that what has happened to her is happening to all of us. Not one of us realizes that he is both miserable and vengeful."

We may as well face the hard truth that men do not become Christians by associating with church people, nor by religious contact, nor by religious education; they become Christians only by invasion of their nature by the Spirit of God in the new birth. And when they do become Christians in this manner they are immediately members of a new race, *"a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people... which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy."* (1 Peter 2:9-10)

The only way out of one life into another is by a death to one and a new birth into the other. Lose your own life that you may find Christ's life. The caterpillar can only enter into the butterfly's kingdom by dying to its caterpillar life, and emerging into the resurrection life of the butterfly; similarly, we also only enter into the kingdom of God by the way of a death out of the kingdom of self, and an emergence into the resurrection life of Christ.

The new birth is not optional—it's imperative.

Born once, die twice; born twice, die once.

You must be born again!

"In his great mercy [God] 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—kept in heaven for you." (1 Peter 1:3-4)

Peter plainly acknowledged that this transaction is the result of God's "great mercy." Always remember this: God is for you, not against you! The way of salvation was not His reluctant concession to our egregious need, but His eager arrangement to meet our need with great mercy.

The way of salvation involves a "new birth into a living hope" because new birth leads to new life, and a significant quality of that new life is its life-giving hope.

Furthermore, it is a "living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." His resurrection life breeds new life in us! What we celebrate on Easter Sunday (as well as every other Sunday of the year) — that Jesus Christ is no longer dead, but alive forevermore — breeds hope for all who choose to follow Him.

Jesus said, "*Don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.'*" (John 3:7)

Let me tell you why...

Nothing Less Would Do

First, because nothing less would do.

The first man, Adam, was created in the image of God and in relationship with God. Nevertheless, he succumbed to temptation to do what he knew was wrong and it impacted his life in ways he never imagined. He felt shame. His conscience was clouded. Desires began to rage. Pain increased. He was separated from God. He lost trust. He lost perspective. He felt alienated. He felt afraid.

Adam's choice created a permanent warp in his personality and character, which he passed along to all of his offspring. It became the new normal, the new human nature — twisted away from God our Creator, bent on self-realization instead of God-realization.

But we are not God, and we cannot redeem ourselves, any more than your right hand can wash itself.

An old Zen meditation asks, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

I answer, it is the sound of human self-redemption; it is meaningless nonsense; it is impossible.

This is why a "new birth" is absolutely necessary. Nothing else will do. Ignoring our dirt, or repressing our dirt will not do. Rearranging our dirt, or renaming our dirt will not do. And trying to offset our dirt by changing our ways and doing good deeds cannot eliminate our dirt or our debt to God.

We must be born again.

And why did Jesus say this to us?

No One Else Could Do It

Because Jesus knew that no one else but He could do it.

Acknowledging Jesus' unique qualifications, Apostle Paul described Him this way:
Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.

Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:6-11)

Jesus did not become God (as if he was to be rewarded for being so good); *God became Jesus*.

He lived a life without sin. Even after dogging His steps for nearly four years, scrutinizing His every word and deed for something of which to accuse Him, the Jewish religious leaders could only accuse Him and convict Him of blasphemy, because He said He was the Son of God.

He offered his sinless life as the more-than-sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world! The ancient ceremonial sacrifices of the blood of bulls and goats could never take away human sins. A man — the God-man — shed his (pure) blood for the redemption of mankind.

A thousand years before Jesus offered His loving sacrifice, the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, wrote:

There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.

We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care.

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins!

*But he was pierced for our rebellion,
crushed for our sins.*

*He was beaten so we could be whole.
He was whipped so we could be healed.*

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own.

Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all.
(Isaiah 53:2-6)

It was an exchange designed in Heaven — His blood instead of ours, taking away our sinfulness and imputing His righteousness. Jesus died once so that we could live, forever!

He provided the *ultimate* sacrifice. He did what no one else *could* do. Just as surely as there was an actual cross, an actual body, actual blood, an actual death, an actual tomb, an actual resurrection so there was an actual atonement, not merely the possibility of one.

He died. He was buried. Three days later, He arose!

The resurrection is the proof of our reconciliation with God. Christ's resurrection is the Amen of all of His promises. All sins have been forgiven for those who entrust their lives to the Savior.

Christianity is essentially a religion of resurrection. The concept of resurrection lies at its heart.

A Muslim and a Christian were discussing their religions and had agreed that both Mohammed and Christ were prophets. Where, then, lay the difference? The Christian illustrated it this way: "I came to a crossroads and I saw a dead man and a living man. Which one did I ask for directions?"

The response came quickly, "The living one, of course."

"Why, then," asked his friend, "do you send me to Mohammed who is dead, instead of Christ who is alive?"

This is a basic difference between Christ and every other religious leader. All the others came into the world, lived, and died—but none of them lived again. The resurrection of Christ was the one event that persuaded His disciples once for all that He was the Christ, God's Son.

Several theories have been proposed in attempts to dismiss the fact of the resurrection of Jesus.

Fainted

Islam proposes that He never actually died, but merely fainted on the cross and was later revived.

If it were even possible for Him to have survived His other wounds (they beat Him severely and pierced His hands and feet), the written record confirms that Jesus was indeed dead before He was removed from the cross.

Since bodies were not permitted to hang overnight, the Roman guards were instructed to break the legs of the crucified. This would prevent them from lifting their bodies enough to draw a breath, effectively suffocating them to death. But, finding Jesus dead already, they did not break His legs.

To confirm His premature death, a soldier thrust a spear through His side into His heart, and out came “blood and water.” This was biological evidence that He was dead already and His blood had separated. Fainted? No way.

Hidden

Another theory proposes that the disciples stole Jesus' body and simply *claimed* that He had risen from the dead. This is the earliest false theory of Jesus' resurrection. Matthew reported that the Jewish leaders created this story to account for the missing body.

How those fishermen and tax collectors could have overcome trained Roman guards and persuaded them not to report the crime is unknown. Even if that were possible, would His disciples have endured torture and death for what they knew to be a lie? Hardly likely.

Mistaken

A third theory suggests that the women went to the wrong tomb. This is not plausible. The women surely knew which tomb Jesus was buried in and would not have made this mistake. Even if they had, certainly *all* of the disciples would not have made the same mistake, for others rushed to the tomb to see for themselves.

Metaphor

Some say that the resurrection is only a metaphor for Jesus' continuing spiritual significance to His followers, like the notion that our loved ones “live on” in our memories of them.

This theory contradicts the New Testament writers' assertion that Jesus rose bodily, not just spiritually, from the dead. They believed in a bodily resurrection, not simply a spiritual resurrection. No such theory can explain the *empty* tomb.

Legend

Finally, some claim that Jesus' resurrection is simply a legend and that the disciples were so distraught over Jesus' death that they were hallucinating when they thought they saw Him alive from the dead. But the written record asserts that *over 500 people* saw Jesus alive after His burial at the same time. There is no precedent whatsoever for such mass hallucinations. It is inconceivable.

Jesus own prophetic words were: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this?”* (John 11:25-26) He said not “I teach,” not “I cause,” not “I predict,” but *“I am.”*

Charles Spurgeon concluded, "The resurrection is a fact better attested than any event recorded in any history, whether ancient or modern." And he was correct.

Suppose a visitor to our earth from another planet were to see a caterpillar on a rosebush, and a conversation could take place between them. It might go something like this: "How ugly you are and how gross, doing nothing but eat, eat, eat, all day long," says the visitor.

"True," replies the caterpillar, "but I won't always be like this. Someday I'll have beautiful wings, and fly from flower to flower."

"A likely story," says the visitor with a laugh.

A few days later, this stranger finds a hard, brown chrysalis on the rosebush and is surprised to hear the caterpillar's voice from within saying, "Now I'm worse off than before. You think I'm dead because I can neither move nor eat, but soon I shall have a resurrection and fly in the sun."

"Poor deluded worm," says the visitor, "you'd better accept the fact that your life is over."

But about three weeks later, the stranger, strolling in the rose garden, is surprised to hear the caterpillar's voice once again. Looking for the chrysalis, he sees one beautiful wing and then another emerging from its cracked shell. "You see," says the voice, "my resurrection has come." And spreading its wings, the butterfly flits away to enjoy its wonderful new life.

The question that remains, the question I must put before you now is this: *Do you believe this?* More than that, *Do you believe in Jesus, the Savior?*

But to all who did receive [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

Have you received Him (believed in His name)? Have you made Him the Master of your life? Your answer to this question will affect the rest of your life, and your life hereafter.