

# WHAT IS IT TO BE BORN AGAIN

## A SERMON

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By Mister JAMES WELLS

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“Marvel not that I said unto you, You must be born again.” John 3:7

IT is the duty of all men to believe in God, to believe in the Bible, and to act as rational creatures upon that belief; this is the duty of every man. But that faith, that belief in Christ, that is connected with eternal life, is quite another thing; that faith essential to evidence our interest in eternal mercy is quite another thing. It is common in our day to be told that it is every man's duty savingly to believe in Christ; and there are thousands who are persuaded into this, and they do believe with the faith of reformation, and they are morally and mentally converted, and they pass for Christians, when at the same time they know nothing of that faith embodied in the language of our text, “You must be born again;” and in the 5th verse, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” That doctrine of its being the duty of all men savingly to believe in Christ is a veil that must be rent from top to bottom; and that doctrine that puts the duty of the Creature into the place of the quickening power of the Spirit is a doctrine that must be thrust aside, and men must be undeceived, and they must be brought to know that if they have not the Spirit of Christ, let them have what reformation, or what religion, or doings they may, if they, have not the Spirit of Christ they are none of his. I will, therefore, with all the care, and earnestness, and solemnity which the present, as indeed all such occasions demand, describe, in the first place, precisely what *the experience of the soul is that is born of God*; that is, what it is, in the experience of it, to be born of God. Secondly, *the advantages of such a supernatural birth*. Thirdly, and lastly, if time permit, *the sweet harmony into which this work of the Spirit brings the soul with the blessed God*.

Now our text is clear; “You must be born again.” And before I enter upon the experience of it, I may just observe that the Savior says, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God and “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” You observe that the word water there does not mean water literally, but figuratively; that the word water there means the word of God. Hence the Savior says, “You are clean through the word I have spoken unto you;” and again, “He loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the word.” Therefore, to be born of water and of the Spirit means what the apostle Peter means when he said to those that he recognized, I wish you to take, before I enter upon the subject, particular notice of this, that the apostle Peter,

those persons whom he recognized as Christians, he speaks of them in this way; "being born again of an incorruptible seed by the word of God, that lives and abides forever." So that no apostle ever recognized a man to be a real Christian unless he were born of God. So then, to be born of water and of the Spirit means the word of God and the Spirit of God; not the Spirit of God contrary to the word of God; the Spirit of God can act without the word, but he never acts contrary to the word; and the word can never bring life without the Spirit; "It is the Spirit that quickens." Let me then, in all carefulness, enter into that precise experience that those are the subjects of that are born of God. And I do forewarn you that I cannot trifle with your souls; I cannot put people off with the form without the power, the name without the reality; so I forewarn you all that if you cannot in any measure follow me in what I am going to say, it is pretty clear that you are not born of God. And if you should find that to be the case, that you are an utter stranger to the things I am about to advance, then may the testimony that I shall humbly, but earnestly, bear sink down deep into your hearts, and may that work which never yet has been begun be this evening begun in your never-dying soul. First, then, it stands thus; it is described so minutely that he that runs may read; that "the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." Now observe here, first that the word of God divides asunder soul and spirit. Man by nature is in a spirit of ignorance, and by the word of God coming with power that man's soul is severed from that ignorance, and he comes to know sin in the sinfulness of it in a way he never did before; he comes to learn the terrible majesty of God's law in a way he never did before; he comes to know the solemnities of eternity in a way he never did before. And thus, where this being born again is, this regeneration, the word of God thus severs your soul from your natural spirit. Your natural spirit, or your spirit by nature, is a spirit of ignorance of God; but now you begin to see out of obscurity; you now begin to see what a damning thing sin is; you now begin to see it in all its damning power; you now begin to see how totally by sin you are destroyed. Again, the spirit of man by nature is a spirit not only of ignorance, but also of unbelief; none of us have by nature that saving faith which I hope now carefully to describe, Therefore, while in a state of nature do you so believe in Jesus Christ as to make him to your soul the pearl of great price? You do not. While living in a state of nature so believe in Jesus Christ as to make his atoning blood precious to you? You do not. While in a state of nature so believe in Jesus Christ as to make his name as ointment poured forth? You do not. While in a state of nature so believe in Jesus Christ as to endear the eternal God, and do you while in a state of nature so believe in Jesus Christ that you look with life and death earnestness to his precious blood to give you the victory, the victory over sin, over guilt, over death, and over hell; "they overcame by the blood of the Lamb"? Now, then, where the sword pierces to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit it brings the soul out of ignorance into knowledge, and brings the soul out of unbelief into that faith that endears the Savior. Again, the spirit of man by nature is a spirit of enmity against God's truth; hence that truth always was and always will be detested by the world. "Which," said the dear Savior to a truth hating generation, and let us beware lest we belong to the same generation, lest we also are despisers, and at last wonder and perish; "Which," said the dear Savior to a truth-hating generation, "of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted, and many of them slain." And what did these same persons do towards the Savior? And the Savior embodied all the ancient predictions of the Bible; the Savior came to confirm the promises made to the fathers; the Savior came full of grace and truth; but such was the native enmity of men against him that their language perpetually was "Crucify him;" until at last, they gained their end; but, remember, that they gained their end only limitedly; but the great God gained his end unlimitedly; for under all those clouds of slander, and

reproach, and suffering, which the Savior was; inclement as were the skies under which he was; rough as was the path, and mighty as were the armies against him, yet he was the conqueror; he accomplished the warfare, brought in everlasting mercy. Now, when the soul is born of God, then, it comes over out of this enmity into a love to Christ that perhaps no language can fully describe; into a love to God, and into a love to the gospel; and it will come into a love to something else, which I will just name. You that know what it is to be born of God know what it is when we speak of union of soul to the brethren. Now you that are not born of God, you, if you hear a man state how he was brought out of ignorance, you cannot understand it; if you hear a Christian state what his faith is, and how he at times rejoices in believing, you cannot understand it; and if you hear a believer speak of his love to Christ, and love to God in that order of everlasting mercy now revealed to him, you cannot understand it: you may hear the sound, but you cannot tell where it comes nor whither it goes. And you may make your remarks about it, and may despise their experience, and say, "They are a very odd, strange sort of people, for they speak of strange things." Is this the way you have treated it? If so, then the word of God describes you; that "the things of the Spirit are foolishness to the natural man; for the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit, neither can he know them, because they are foolishness unto him." Now, then, let me sum up each point as I go along. What knows each individual of this assembly of being brought into such a knowledge of sin as out of that knowledge to cry to God for mercy? What knows each individual of this assembly of being brought so to believe in Jesus Christ as to cleave to him with all your heart as your only hope for time and for eternity too. What knows each individual of this assembly of that love to Jesus Christ, of that love to his dear name, that you envy the woman sitting at his feet; and that when you read in the Scriptures of the love the saints had to him, you can understand it, being a partaker of the same love? That is one part, then, of the experience of the man born of God. But we are going deeper and deeper as we go on; not only does this work separate the soul and spirit, bring the soul out of ignorance into knowledge, and out of unbelief into faith, and out of enmity into love; but mark, "piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow." Now, if I may use a common phrase, it cuts the man to pieces, And you can see at once how utterly helpless a man is who is disjointed; he can neither run, nor walk, nor work; the man is a complete cripple; there he is down, he cannot get up again. I repeat it, make not light of what I am saying, he is cut down and crippled, and cannot rise again. Here it is; "Saul, why persecute you me?" There the two-edged sword of the eternal spirit cut him down; he fell to the ground literally, but he was cut down spiritually; there he remained. Could he walk? Could he rise and say, "In future I will walk in harmony with God's law, and make matters, right?" No, he could not walk at all. Did he say, "I will rise and work out a righteousness of my own?" There he lay, in that spiritually crippled, do not misunderstand me, there he lay in that spiritually-crippled slate, could not help himself; there he lay; and if all the angels in heaven had gone to him, and all the saints on earth had gone to him, nothing could set him right without God himself, Now, my hearer, what know you of this? What know you of being thus brought down to feel you are utterly helpless as to the demands of God's law? People tell us, mark this, or tell men in general, they should come and take the promises, and take God's salvation, and take God's, mercy. Ah, to take what God does not give is to make ourselves spiritual thieves. And what says the 17th of Jeremiah upon this? "As the partridge sits on eggs, and hatches them not, so he that gets riches," the promises of God, "and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end shall be a fool." And as the Lord lives, if you take the promises of God to yourself, take Christ of God to yourself, and take the peace of God to yourself, and if God himself does not give them to you, there will be a day when you and your profession must part; there will be a day when it will prove that your covering

is not the covering of God's Spirit; there will be a day when it will prove that it is not God that has arrayed you in your religion, you have arrayed yourself, the work is your own, and not God's. So, if you take the promises, unless they are given of God, you must part with them again, and that to your confusion. Ishmael took the promises, and considered the promises his for thirteen years, until God stepped in; when God stepped in, he cast Ishmael out, and gave the promises to him to whom they belonged. "The kingdom shall be given to them for whom it is prepared." Now this is a solemn matter; I must again linger, even if I am thought tedious. What do you know of these broken bones before God? What do you know of being thus cut down, and of being thus cut up, and of being thus brought to naught, brought to nothing?

Now mark, Ananias came to Saul; but who sent Ananias? The Lord sent Ananias. And when Ananias came, he had a sermon to preach to Saul, and the Lord attended the testimony of Ananias with power; so that what the apostle Paul, or Saul we will call him yet, what Saul then received was that which was positively given him of God; and if God give, who can take away? "Brother Saul, the God of our fathers has chosen you," eternal election lays hold of him, election has received him, he receives election by the power of God, and rejoiced that his name was written in heaven, "that you should know his will" (see the 1st chapter of Ephesians, you will there see what is meant by the will of God), "and see that Just One, and should hear the voice of his mouth." Here's a helpless man turned, by the word being brought home with power, into a mighty giant. He rises, and goes to college! He rises, and seeks the patronage of some fellow dying worm! He rises, and seeks to some human authority, or some organized body of men to patronize him! What! to ask man whether he had any right to preach in this world that Jesus Christ to whom the world belonged? No, he says, "I conferred not with flesh and blood." Why not? Because God had conferred with him, and he with God. And the reason why men seek to men is because they know not God; the reason that men lean upon the authority of men for their preaching is because they know nothing experimentally of the power of God. He conferred not with flesh and blood, but went immediately and preached the gospel; and he sums up the gospel in this way; "Preaching among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Here then is this bringing the soul out of ignorance into knowledge, out of unbelief into faith, out of enmity into love; here is being cut down, and cup up, and waiting till the Lord should give you the promise. Oh, said human wisdom, you disciples, why do you stay in Jerusalem like this? Why, if you stay till Jesus Christ come again, you will never go at all. Ah, say they, we have no power to go with yet; and if all the ecclesiastical and political governments on earth were to come and offer their patronage, we should despise the whole. The command of the great King of all is, "Tarry in Jerusalem until you be endued with power from on high." Now then, I say to you that have any concern at all about your state, if you take any promise and call it yours, without the power of God, unless the Lord give you that promise, it will be sure to turn from you, and you will be damned as a common sinner in Adam, as an intruder in Zion, as an offender in the Savior's kingdom, and as a thief and a robber, taking that which is not your own. But if you are concerned, what would I advise you to do? I would say, honor the sabbath; I would say, read the Bible, go and hear the word preached, walk in the ways of the Lord, wait for him, look for him; and the vision is for an appointed time, and though it tarry, yet at the end it will speak, and will not lie. Therefore do not say that your sins are forgiven, if you have not experienced the same; do not say that Jesus Christ is yours, until the Holy Spirit sheds abroad in your heart the love of God, and constrains you to say concerning Christ,

"Yes, you are precious to my soul,

My transport and my trust;  
Jewels to you are gaudy toys,  
And gold is sordid dust.”

“You must be born again;” you must be brought out into this state; you must be cut up and cut down; you must wait for the Lord, and you must receive the promises of God by the Holy Ghost, and in no other way. I make no hesitation in saying, that there is not a promise in all the Bible that is not given to character. God, in the first place, takes us without character; he then constitutes us believers in him, he constitutes us lovers of him, he constitutes us persons decided for him; making such people firm in their decision as an iron pillar, as a defended city, and as brazen walls. While he took you without character, or in spite of your bad character; he has now constituted you a believer in him, a lover of him, and one that stands out for him. Now the promises belong to you; but suppose they do; can you take them? No, not in the way that would satisfy your soul. There are thousands in our day quite content with a letter religion, because they have a moral belief in Christ, and so, as the promise is somewhat adapted, they conclude all is well. But here is my text, “You must be born again.” If this change be not undergone, if we are not the subjects of these experiences, our religion will not stand by us in that tremendous day. But I have not done yet, and it would not grieve me if I were to occupy all your time upon this momentous matter. Now, then, this experience of the regenerating work of God, in addition to the soul being thus cut up and cut down, it is said, “The word of God is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” Now, follow me carefully here. Saul, what do you think of doing? I think of putting an end to the religion of Jesus Christ. Conviction entered Saul’s mind, and saw that thought, and the word of God drove it away, and that thought could never afterwards find a lodgment in the heart of the apostle. Ah, the word entered, discovered my evil thought. I thought of trying to put an end to the religion of the Son of God, but the word has entered, driven that thought away, and now, so great is the change of thought in me, that I would rather anything should come to an end than that Jesus Christ’s religion should come to an end; I would rather anything should come to an end than that his kingdom should come to an end; I would rather anything should fail than his salvation should fail, or than his righteousness should be abolished. It drove the thought away, and the apostle, or rather Saul, we will still call him, was made willing for the thought to go. Oh, he says, I thought that thought was a good thought, but now that thought is driven away, and a better thought has taken its place. And so you, if the word enter your soul, and it sees you thinking, “Well, I will be religious someday, but I won’t begin too soon,” just as though you knew how long you had to live, or just as though you could possess yourself of the grace of God when you pleased. You look about, and say, “There will be many inconveniences in my being religious now.” But if the word of God enter your soul, and discover to you the wickedness of that thought, that that thought is a traitor to your soul, that that thought will lead you to ruin, away with this thought, and you will think to yourself, Well, there is nothing like praying at once, believing at once, looking to God at once, crying for mercy at once. In a word, all your old carnal thoughts will be driven away, and quite a new class of thoughts, and a new class of purposes, and a new class of sentiments, and a new class of feelings will take their place, and you will become what is properly described as a new creature: “If any man be in Christ Jesus he is a new creature; old things are passed away, and all things are become new.”

But I have not done yet. This work of regeneration brings you especially before God. This point I wish to be very careful upon; that this work of regeneration makes you think nothing of men; you

will care nothing for what men think of you; you will care nothing for what men say of you; you will look upon the slanderous expressions of men as a passing breath; you will look upon their praises as a passing breath. And now mark, in this process it said, "Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight; but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." It will bring you before God, and you will say, O my God, if you are my God, is it true, is it true that all things are naked and opened to the eyes of you, the Lord? Oh, then, you God of holiness, integrity, and righteousness, what a scene must my wicked heart be unto you! Lord, here I have a heart deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; its depths I cannot fathom; out of it, in spite of all I do, will proceed evil thoughts, and that continually. Oh, how deeply is the leprosy rooted! You will say, O God, if all things are naked and opened unto you, then in your sight I am, as your holy word declares, full of wounds and bruises, and putrefying sores. And you will loathe yourself in your own sight. You will lay your hand upon your mouth, and instead of boasting of your duties, instead of boasting of your prayers, instead of boasting of your piety, instead of boasting of your coming to Christ, and you will point sinners to Christ, and invite sinners to come to Christ, why, instead of this, you will loathe and abhor yourself in your own sight, and stand amazed that the all-seeing eye of God does not create in him such infinite loathing of you as to cut you down as a cumberer of the ground. You will thus loathe yourself in your own sight, and your feeling will be, If the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse me, it can cleanse anything; if the mercy of God can save me, it can save anything; if the grace of God should prove to be sufficient for me, it will be sufficient for anything. Will you complain that the minister goes too far? No. You will hear people say, "I hope you do not hear that high-doctrine man; I hope you do not hear that extravagant man." Your answer will be, "Sin is high; sin is mighty; my iniquities have gone over my head, and I want to hear a man that preaches that gospel that does not merely go over my head, but over my sins, and puts my sins down, and lifts me up." That extravagant man! "Ah," such a one will say, "sin is extravagant, for nothing will satisfy it but the eternal perdition of my soul; Satan is extravagant, and what's the use of bringing a little gospel to a great sinner?" Thus, you will become a real lover of the truth as it is in Jesus. Now, what know you of these four parts of Christian experience? First, that the soul is brought out as I have described; secondly, that you are cut up before God root and branch; thirdly, that your original thoughts and purposes are driven away; fourthly, that you are brought before God; and now your religion will stand neither in the wisdom nor in the sight of man, but in the presence of God; it is with God you will now have to do. Let me again repeat the words, "All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." Those of you that are strangers to this are not born of God; those of you that are strangers to this heart-searching, to this discriminating work, you are not born of God. You may be sincere in your religion; you may be an honorable citizen and everything that I should be one of the first to admire, and all these are only your duties as a rational creature; but as to religion you know nothing of it. Remember that our God conies with his mercy only into the desert, and before you are prepared for his mercy your soul must be turned into a desert, into a dry ground, into a thirsty land; and when the soul is turned as into a dry ground and a thirsty land, then, when you are thus solitary and as a wilderness, then in the Lord's own time waters shall break out, then will the feeble knees be confirmed, the weak hands be strengthened; then shall the fearful heart rejoice; then shall the deaf ear be unstopped; then shall the blind eye be opened; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and rejoice in the mercy he has found.

But let us have just have a word here upon the remedy. The apostle, after thus descriptively cutting us down and bringing us before God, points out the remedy: "Seeing, then, that we," who have no

other hope, we who have no other prospect, we that can find mercy nowhere else, “have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens” and how came Jesus Christ to enter into the heavens? By his own blood; and how did he enter into the heavens by his own blood? Why, by his own blood cleansing from all sin. No sin can enter heaven; our sin was laid upon Christ, and I say it with reverence that Jesus Christ dare not enter heaven with one sin with him; he dares not carry one sin to heaven. Therefore, it is with him antitypically as it was with the priest literally; the sacrificial altar in the temple stood out of doors, and at that altar the priest had ceremonially to get rid of sin, and then to enter into the holy of holies, and come out and bless the people. As the priest took no sin in with him, he brought none out with him. So Jesus Christ first got rid of our sins; he suffered without the gate that he might sanctify the people with his own blood; he has now entered into the holy of holies by his own blood without sin; therefore when he comes again he will come without sin unto the final salvation of all that are thus born again and that believe in him. “Seeing, then, that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” Why, if he could bear our sins, surely, he will not object to bear our persons: if he could die for our sins, with how much more delight does he not live for our eternal welfare. “You must be born again.”

I shall mention in this part two or three more scriptures, two more at least. In the 102nd Psalm you have a corresponding description of the experience of the soul that is born of God. “He will regard” I wonder how many out of the thousands here this evening can answer and say, “That is me, that is me,” “He will regard the prayer of the destitute.” But are you destitute? are you conscious of your destitution, apart from God’s grace, of anything that is good? He will not hear the prayer of the man that is not poor, that is not spiritually destitute. “He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer. This shall be written for the generation to come; and the people which shall be created shall praise the Lord.” Now mark, they are there set forth as destitute, and that God hears and answers their prayer. You will observe that the experiences I have described just brings you to that destitution. And such persons in the same Psalm are represented as prisoners; they cannot pray, but only groan. “He has looked down from the height of his sanctuary, from heaven did the Lord behold the earth; to hear the groaning of the prisoner.” Am I speaking, then, which I know I am, to some who do know what this groaning is, shut up in the prison of sin, in the prison of doubts and fears, in the prison of almost despair, in the prison-house of darkness of soul, and you groan and sigh, but at the same time believe that by the blood of the everlasting covenant the Lord could bring you up out of this prison, and so he will. Know you what this groaning is? Ah, if you do, then in his own time he will open the prison-house, make glad your heart, expand your soul, enlarge your mind, lighten your eyes, remove your burden, give you peace, and you shall declare his name in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem. One more scripture upon this, 43rd of Isaiah, there is a contrast there between our state by nature and what we are by grace. Now listen to me, all of you. Did you ever read the following scripture, and look at it closely as it pertained to yourself: namely, “The beasts of the field shall honor me, the dragons and the owls.” Who are these beasts of the field? You, while you are in a state of nature: all your pursuits are earthly, your affections are earthly, your hopes are all sensual; beasts of the field. Yet “they shall honor me.” How? That we will presently show. “The dragons.” What are dragons? Tyrants; and some of you have in times past perhaps been persecutors; some of you husbands, perhaps, persecuting your wives because they fear God and love his truth; and some of you wives, perhaps, persecuting your husbands (and when a woman turns persecutor she is a thorough tormentor), because they love the

truth of God. Beasts of the field and dragons. "And the owls." Who are the owls? Now as everything earthly characterizes the beast, tyranny characterizes the dragon, so a hatred to light and a love to darkness characterizes the owl. The owl has just-visual power enough to hate the light; like some of you, if you hear a little gospel, or see a little gospel light, away you go, it is too much for your free-will and duty-faith eyes; you cannot bear the blaze of free grace, you cannot bear the full blaze of "I will, and they shall," you cannot sing the song,

"Nor aids he needs, nor duties ask,  
Of us poor feeble worms;  
What everlasting love decrees,  
Almighty power performs."

Nowhere is the beast, the dragon, and the owl; yet "they shall honor me; because I give waters in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my people, my chosen." Now mark, "this people," these beasts, these dragons, these owls, have I "formed for myself," they shall "show forth my praise." Go to Peter's vision; see in Peter's vision how he beheld all manner of four-footed beasts, wild beasts, creeping things, and fowls of the air; then go to the 7th of Revelation, and see the same persons conformed to a Savior's image, clothed with white robes, palms in their hands, standing on the vantage ground of eternal glory. See the contrast, what you are without the grace of God, and how, by the grace of God, you cease to be a beast, and become a man. Why, there are many of our wise men, with all their wisdom they actually know not wherein lies the true dignity of human nature; and if some of you had never heard it before, or have never understood it, you shall learn it this evening at the New Surrey Tabernacle. The true dignity of human nature, sir, lies in that image of God, first, in which we were created; that image we have lost, and therefore lost our dignity, and are conformed to the beasts, the dragons, and the owls; but wherein lies the true dignity of human nature now? In conformity to the image of Jesus Christ. Let me put on Jesus Christ; let him be my wisdom, my righteousness, my sanctification, and redemption; being conformed to his image I become a man. "You, my flock, are men;" all the rest are beasts, dragons, and owls; but my flock are men conformed to the likeness of the man Christ Jesus the Lord. There, sir, is the true dignity of man; it lies in conformity to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many more scriptures I might have brought.

Now I had intended, though I suspect time will not enable me, to read out *some of the advantages of being thus born of God*. The 37th of Ezekiel, where the dry bones are raised up, the same subject of which we have spoken, brings in advantage after advantage, upon which I had intended to say something, but time does not permit, any further than just thus to refer to them.