

NEW LIFE in CHRIST

WHAT REALLY HAPPENS
WHEN YOU'RE BORN AGAIN AND
WHY IT MATTERS

STEVEN J. LAWSON



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This book is dedicated to

Richard and Bobbie Grogan

Your loyal and trusted friendship has been a constant source
of encouragement to me for the past twenty-five years.

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Foreword

Sometimes a brief conversation can change the whole course of your life. It may begin casually with a nod or a smile to someone you sit down beside, and two years later (or even earlier) you are working for them—or are even married to them—or perhaps you simply receive new light on your situation that changes your whole perspective on things.

For the rest of your life, you look back on that conversation and realize it was a game changer. Even if it began in the same way a thousand conversations did, with a few polite words, by its end you know that your life may never be the same again.

Dr. Steven Lawson's book *New Life in Christ* could prove to be just such a conversation partner in your life. I hope it will.

Sometimes reading a book can feel like having a conversation with its author. You, the reader, are listening to what the author is saying—and you are responding, talking back to him or her, even if it is silently. You may be saying, “That’s interesting,” or “Really, tell me more,” or even “I don’t see that; explain it to me.”

You may well find yourself having a conversation just like that as you read these pages. But what you are about to discover is that, intriguingly, this book contains not one but two conversations!

The first is a conversation Steve Lawson wants to have with you. He is eager to talk to you—and, in fact, he has plenty to say, so expect him to do most of the talking (and if you have ever heard him speak you will probably be able to hear his voice as you read). In *New Life in Christ*, Steve has a very direct conversational style. He is talking to *you*—so much so that perhaps you will find yourself talking back to him, at least inwardly!

But then, after a few pages, this first conversation is mainly about another conversation—one of the most important in all human history, and one that gives us perhaps the best-known words in the New Testament.

This conversation is between Jesus and Nicodemus, a contemporary of Jesus and a man of great distinction in Jerusalem. He was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish Ruling Council, the Sanhedrin, and—according to Jesus Himself—the great theologian of his day in Israel. Interestingly, it was Nicodemus who sought out Jesus, not the other way around. But we never learn exactly why. And soon he found that Jesus was seeking him. Fascinating!

So, you are about to overhear a historic conversation. And in the background Steve Lawson, like a knowledgeable commentator at some major event, will help you to understand what is going on and will discuss the different “moves” the two men make in the chess-like conversation they have with each other.

It is time to make yourself comfortable, turn the page, and read the first chapter. And in your mind’s eye, see Nicodemus making his way under the darkening night sky, his robes blowing

around him as the evening wind begins to freshen, and arriving at the house where Jesus is. The two men are about to meet. How long their conversation stretched out we don't know. What we do know is that Nicodemus never forgot it. Nor will you.

But now, like a TV continuity announcer, I have filled my three-minute slot; the real dialogue will soon begin. For further conversation, I am glad to leave you in the reliable hands of your expert commentator Steve Lawson. You are in for a significant hour or two in his company!

Sinclair B. Ferguson
Chancellor's Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary
Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

one

Born Again

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 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

On a dark Colorado night, beneath towering, majestic mountains, a young teenage boy walked between the pine trees to be alone with God. He had just heard a message from the Bible recounting when Jesus turned water into wine. This divine miracle that occurred two thousand years ago revealed how an embarrassed family ran out of wine at their wedding feast. When Jesus's mother appealed to Him to intervene, He told the assistants to fill six empty water pots with water.

When the pots were brought to Jesus, He did what only He can do. Jesus transformed the dirty, stagnant water into pure,

sparkling wine. When the wine was presented to the headwaiter, he was shocked. Every other wedding party, he explained, serves the best wine first. Then, after the people have drunk freely, they bring out the poorer wine. But this wedding did the inexplicable. It saved the best for last.

The speaker said, "This is what Jesus must do in your life. He must take your dirty, dingy, stagnant life, polluted by sin, and transform it into the purest and best a person could ever experience."

He added, "This miracle by Jesus is a picture of the new birth that must take place in your life. This is what Jesus must do within you. You must be born again."

At the conclusion of the message, the speaker had asked each person not to talk to anyone but to go out into the cool summer night and search their heart. He asked, "Where are you with God? Has He ever changed you from the inside out? If this has never happened to you, ask God to cause you to be born again. Commit your life to Jesus Christ."

A Heart-Searching Time

Walking out into the quietness of the night, the teenage boy grappled with these gospel truths. He looked into his heart, thinking, *Where am I with God? How can I have this new start with God?* He desired to have this new heart the speaker spoke of. He looked up into the sky above and put his trust in Jesus Christ.

In that moment, a miracle occurred within him. The soiled water became sparkling wine. His life was changed. He was born again.

This transformation was a miracle of grace. It was a work performed by God so His glory would be put on display. I know

this account is true. I know that teenage boy was changed. I know his dirty heart was transformed into the best it could be.

I know, because I was that teenage boy.

The Miracle of the New Birth

What comes into your mind when you hear the phrase “born again”? What is the new birth? What is the nature of being born again? And why is such a new start in life so necessary?

These are important questions that require our careful answers. Few truths need clear teaching more than the new birth. Because of muddled teaching, few doctrines are less understood by believers—and even much less understood by unbelievers. Yet no truth is more important in order to understand what God does when someone enters His kingdom. Rather than just a slight shift in the heart, rebirth is a complete spiritual overhaul of the soul. Instead of a mere addition to someone’s life, rebirth means a person possesses an entirely new life.

The new birth is not like repainting an old house, going over an old layer of paint. Rather, it completely tears down the house and builds an entirely new structure on the same site. Such a person becomes a whole new creation. The old life is taken down and a new life is built in its place.

Being born again means that God implants divine life within our spiritually dead heart. It is the life-giving act of God, whereby He causes us to be birthed into His family. It means that by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, we are dramatically transformed in the core of our being. When we are born anew, we are made alive to God. In the new birth, God gives us new life that only He can give.

Grasping the New Birth

In order to better grasp what the new birth is, I want us to begin by considering the first passage in the Bible that actually records the words “born of God.” It is found in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 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)

In these verses, we are first introduced to the analogy of being born of God. However, this is not the earliest mention in Scripture of this spiritual reality. Throughout the Old Testament the new birth is represented by other metaphors such as a heart circumcision (Deut. 30:6), a heart transplant (Ezek. 36:25–27), and a spiritual resurrection (Ezek. 37:1–10). Nevertheless, John 1:13 is the first mention of the new birth. Many other passages in the New Testament also use this metaphor of birth (John 3:3, 5–6; 1 John 3:9; 5:1, 4–5, 18).

All Things New

In this opening section, the apostle John mentions this divine work of grace that gives new spiritual life. This describes what takes place when anyone enters into the kingdom of God. This new birth enables a person to become a believer in Jesus as Lord and Savior. It gives a new beginning with God, the new start that everyone needs. This divine intervention is the radical and complete transformation of a person’s life that is performed by God.

The new birth gives the life of God—*divine* life, *eternal* life, *supernatural* life—to a previously empty, lifeless soul. Where once there was only a hollow existence, divine life was created in the soul—*real* life, *new* life, *abundant* life. For the first time, a person begins to live as God intended him or her to live. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). This new birth gives personal knowledge of God by creating spiritual life within the heart. The accompanying changes include a new desire for God and a passion for His word. Simply put, being born of God is divine life within the soul.

Remarkably, there are two sides of this one entrance into the kingdom of God. On one side is the person’s activity. The other side involves God’s activity. In John 1:12, John describes the step of faith required to become a child of God. The apostle John begins with the human responsibility to believe in Christ. In verse 13, he then tells us it is God who causes individuals to be born again. Both aspects are necessary. We must understand what part each plays in order to have a proper understanding of these essential truths.

From the Human Side

The apostle John begins verse 12 with the word *but*. This marks a sharp contrast with what preceded in the immediate context. Earlier, John noted that Jesus Christ “was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him” (1:10). Jesus was the Creator of the world, *but* the world He made did not recognize Him when He appeared. The splendor of His eternal deity was veiled by the sinless human nature and flesh that He took on. He did not enter this world with the

pomp and majesty of a ruling sovereign. Instead, He came in the form of a lowly servant. He was truly God, yet His royalty was concealed in a human body. He set aside the radiant display of His glory for the rags of humble humanity. Consequently, the unbelieving eyes of humankind did not recognize Him for who He truly was.

John further explains, “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (v. 11). How strange that the very world Jesus created did not receive Him. This is because the spiritual eyes of the people were blinded by their own sin. They could not recognize Him as their Creator and Savior. Neither could they ascertain that He was their long-awaited Messiah. For the most part, His sovereign claims fell upon spiritually deaf ears.

Receiving Jesus Christ

However, there was a remnant who did believe in Jesus Christ. John explains that “as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God” (v. 12). Those who “received” Him welcomed Him into their lives as a host would warmly receive a guest. This glad reception meant the beginning of a close, intimate relationship with Him. Christ comes to live in the ones who believe in Him. This divinely bestowed right as “children” includes addressing God as Father and becoming a joint heir with Christ, sharing in the vast estate bequeathed by the Father to His Son. This right entitles those who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior to His vast inheritance. This privilege includes receiving God’s abundant provision for daily needs and His continual protection. It also means one day in the future abiding in the Father’s house in heaven above.

Believing in His Name

John further identifies those who receive Jesus Christ as “those who believe in His name” (v. 12). In other words, receiving Christ is the same as believing in Him. To “believe” in Jesus means more than merely knowing some intellectual facts about Him or simply acknowledging who He is and what He came to do. To believe in Him includes far more than feeling emotions about Jesus, being deeply convicted of your sin, and even being persuaded of your desperate need for Him. Believing in Jesus means more than recognizing He is the only One who can deliver you from your sin problem.

To believe in Jesus Christ is a decisive act of the will by which a person commits his or her life to Him. Believing in Jesus means entrusting our life to Him in humble submission. It involves surrendering our life to Him as our Lord and submitting to His supreme authority. It necessitates denying ourselves and following Him. Anyone who becomes a child of God does so by believing in Jesus Christ.

Why Did You Believe?

But an important question needs to be raised. *Why* do some believe in Jesus Christ while others do not? Why do some receive Him into their life but others refuse Him? Why do some have a relationship with Him yet others do not know Him? Is it because those who believe are smarter? Is it because they are better people? Were they more spiritual?

The answers to these questions are found in the next verse, as John records, “[They] were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (1:13). Having

considered the human responsibility to receive Jesus, the apostle John next describes the divine work in the new birth. God must cause a person to be born again, which, in turn, produces saving faith. It is the new birth that enables us to receive Jesus Christ into our life. The decisive factor in anyone coming to faith in Christ, John explains, is that they are “born . . . of God” (v. 13). This refers not to our physical birth but to our spiritual birth.

This new birth is like the creation of the new heaven and new earth, when all things will be made new. Though we still retain elements of our old life, our whole being is changed instantaneously and dramatically into a brand-new, God-glorifying life.

New Life from God

Being born of God means that new life is created by Him within a human heart. This is the conceiving of the life of God Himself within a spiritually dead soul. Before the new birth, Paul writes, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). That is, each unbeliever is a living corpse, devoid of any spiritual life. We are walking dead in this world. But when we are reborn, God breathes new life into the empty vacuum of our human soul. This divine act raises us from the grave of sin to eternal life.

The new birth brings an entirely new quality of life that only God can give. It is entirely unlike anything this world can give—an out-of-this-world life that comes down from God above. Regeneration sparks a supernatural life unlike anything we previously experienced. When we are born again, the previously defiled soul is cleansed from the stains of sin. Our old heart of stone, once hardened toward God, is removed. In its place, a

new heart of flesh is implanted within our inner person. This gives our heart a spiritual pulse that is alive to God.

The Holy Spirit assumes His royal residence within our innermost being. Our heart comes alive to God, and it immediately responds to Him. The Spirit causes us to start to walk in the path of righteousness. This rebirth produces a radical change of life. The old things have passed away, and our souls have been washed clean. Our new heart is made free from the dominating power of sin, and we have a new desire to pursue the things of God.

Negatives and Positive

The apostle John explains more specifically how this new birth occurs. He uses three negative denials followed by one positive assertion to make his point. He first states how the second birth does *not* occur, then affirms how it *does* come to pass. By addressing this from both the negative and the positive, he leaves no room for misunderstandings. It may be difficult to accept this exclusive means to enter the kingdom of heaven, but that message is crystal clear.

By stating this from both sides of the truth, John explains in simple terms how the new birth comes to pass. Regeneration is not a cooperative effort between two parties or a joint project involving two equals. Instead, the new birth is exclusively a divine work of God in the human heart.

Not by Our Family Heritage

John's first negative denial explains that those who enter the kingdom of God "were born, not of blood" (1:13). No one is

birthed into the family of God because of their family heritage. We are not made right with God simply because we are born into a Christian family or with Jewish blood. Our family lineage does not create new life within us. Our physical descent does not automatically act as a catalyst for our spiritual birth.

We may be born into a Christian family but that does not make us a member of God's family. God has many children but no grandchildren. Our parent may have been an elder or deacon in the church in which we grew up. Our grandparent may have been a missionary to a remote part of the earth. Our great-grandparent may have been a pastor. We may be a seventh-generation descendant of a famous figure in church history. But this religious pedigree cannot birth anyone into God's family.

Not by Our Personal Efforts

Further, John stipulates that the new birth is not "of the will of the flesh" (v. 13). This means that being born again is not the result of any moral efforts. It does not come from going to church, knowing Scripture, or even reciting a prayer. In other words, the new birth is not produced by the good works that a person has performed. No involvement in any religious routine or church attendance can gain someone entrance into the kingdom of God.

By way of analogy, there was nothing any of us could do to cause our physical birth. We did not have any moral ability to cause it. What could we possibly have done to cause our birth? The answer, of course, is nothing. In like manner, there is nothing anyone can do to produce their spiritual birth into the family of God. There is no contribution we could possibly

make to cause our own spiritual conception. We are utterly powerless to create eternal life within ourselves.

Not by Our Personal Choice

Moreover, John is emphatic that the new birth was not caused by “the will of man” (v. 13). This denies that any personal choice a person would make could result in him or her being born again. The exercise of the will by an unconverted person to believe in Jesus Christ is entirely impossible. After all, what can a dead person do? The answer is absolutely nothing. None of us has the capacity to choose to be born. Neither do we have the ability to choose to be born again.

When anyone believes in Jesus Christ, it is with saving faith that did not originate with them. Dead people cannot believe. God must first originate new life within each dead heart. He must create saving faith. Only then are we enabled to respond to the gospel. It is God who must turn our unbelieving heart toward Christ. We, the dead, must recognize our complete inability to save ourselves and cry out to God for salvation. Even the repentance by which a person turns away from sin is the gift of God. The exercise of the will is never the cause of the new birth but the result of it. Every aspect of conversion is traced directly back to God in the new birth.

But by God's Working

The apostle John then advances beyond the three negative denials to one positive assertion. He concludes that being born from above is “of God” (v. 13). This is to say, the new birth takes place entirely by God’s working in our soul. Regeneration is

exclusively the saving activity of God. What a person cannot do, God must do—and does do. In the new birth, He creates new life where none previously existed. God must cause a spiritual conception within the barren womb of our heart. He then must induce labor and bring about the delivery of new life.

From this divine perspective, it is clear that the ultimate reason anyone believes in Jesus Christ is because we are born again. The new birth gives new eyes to see the truth of the gospel. It gives new ears to hear what God is saying in His word. It gives a new heart to love God with a new affection. It gives new feet to come to Christ by faith. It gives new hands to embrace Him.

A Brand-New You

This is the greatest miracle God ever performs. Every other display of divine power is a distant second to His causing the new birth. We who are born again are never the same again. We are a new creation by the undeserved grace of God. The new birth begins the divine work of remaking each person into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

In the chapters that follow, we will examine the personal encounter that one man had with Jesus Christ, recorded in John 3. He was a noted individual who lived two thousand years ago, during the time of the Lord's public ministry. We will examine the nighttime rendezvous between this highly revered religious leader, Nicodemus, and the one he approached, Jesus Christ. As we investigate this meeting, we will discover more clearly what God does in our life when He causes us to be born again. To rightly appreciate His saving power, we must know more about this miracle of the new birth.

Before you turn the page, I must ask you: Have you experienced this new birth? If so, this book will clarify what God has already done in your life. If you have not been born again, please continue reading, because the following pages will explain more carefully what God must do in your life. In reality, you must become a miracle of grace.