

# Have you been born of the Spirit?

Galatians 4:21-31

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In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a wonderful English preacher by the name of George Whitfield. He was a lovely soul with an extraordinary gift of evangelism and a thundering voice that could be heard as clear as a bell, nearly a kilometer away. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean over a dozen times to preach in what were then the British colonies and is now the United States. According to some accounts, he preached over 18,000 sermons in fairs, festivals, village greens, but mostly in open fields, where he brought literally hundreds of thousands of souls to Christ. His own conversion had been such a dramatic event that his favorite text on both sides of the Atlantic was: *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3). All told, Whitfield preached over three thousand sermons on the need for this new birth. So often did he preach on it, in fact, that one time, one of his friends finally asked him: Why? Why Mr. Whitfield? Why do you so often preach that “Ye must be born again?” To which Whitfield instantly replied: “Because dear sir ... Ye must be born again!”

This idea of new birth did not begin with George Whitfield. In John 3:5-6 Jesus said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

Jesus spoke these words to a man named Nicodemus. You must be born again. You must start all over again. It doesn't matter where you are from or who your parents are. What good you have done or what bad you have done. All of us have been born badly into sin. Because of this, new birth is a supernatural birth. It is nothing that we can accomplish on our own. Scripture tells us that we all are dead in our sin (Eph. 2:1). All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). For the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). The new birth from beginning to end is a work of God. Galatians 3:13 tells us that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. Jesus, the God-man, lived a perfect, sinless life. John 6:44 tells us that God draws us to Himself. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus is the Author and Perfecter of our faith. We all desperately need spiritual rebirth, but it is only through Jesus Christ that it is possible.

In the book of Galatians the Apostle Paul is writing to the churches in Galatia. They were all churches that He and his fellow missionaries had started. Soon after they had left Galatia, Jewish false teachers infiltrated the churches and began to distort the Gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:7). The false teachers were still acknowledging Christ, but they were teaching that Christ alone was not enough. The false teachers were teaching that to truly be a Christian one also had to follow all the laws and rituals of Judaism. That even included circumcision. Paul argued that since we are all sinful there is nothing that we can do to ever be good enough to earn salvation. Our only hope to be made right with God is through faith in Christ. We must be born again.

In Galatians 4:21-31 Paul does not say, "You must be born again," but that is the intent of the message. Paul, continuing to present his case for a faith-based gospel, resorts to using the study methods of the religious Jews. In Judaism of Paul's day, it was believed that the most advanced way to interpret scripture was through allegory. Now, when not stated clearly in scripture, allegory is often a technique that leads to heresy. However, in this case, led by the Holy Spirit, Paul used a story from Genesis 16 to present his understanding of the gospel through allegory.

In Genesis 16 we find a story about Abram and Sarai. God had promised that they would have more descendants than the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore, but Sarai was barren and now older. God had promised, but it had not happened. Because of this, Sarai suggested to Abram that he take her servant girl, Hagar, and have a child with her. Since Hagar was Sarai's servant girl, then in some way Sarai would have a descendant. Abram followed Sarai's advice and had relations with Hagar. Hagar did become pregnant and gave birth to a son, named Ismael.

Eventually, God did keep His promise to Abram and Sarai. Sarai, miraculously, had a son at the age of 90. His name was Isaac, and it would be through his descendants that the Jews would come and eventually Jesus Christ himself.

We find in Hebrews 11:11-12 these words:

*"By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."*

Paul then takes this story to illustrate his point. Paul reminds the Galatians of two covenants. The first is found in Genesis 15, where God makes a unilateral agreement with Abram. It is unconditional. God takes full responsibility for the completion of the covenant with the phrase, "I will." The entire covenant is sure because it depends solely on the faithfulness of God. Abraham believed the Lord and it was counted to Him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). The receiving of this covenant was an expression of fully trusting God.

The second covenant, which was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, was illustrated by the Ten Commandments and the Law of God. God promised His presence and His blessing as long as the Jews could obey His laws. The first covenant was summed up with the words, "I will." This second covenant was represented by the words, "Thou shalt." It depended on the faithfulness of the Jews. Sadly, over and over again in

scripture we see it broken. This second, bilateral covenant, was based on obeying the law and being righteous in one's own power. The fulfillment of this covenant was an expression of fully trusting in one's own good works. This conditional covenant has shown itself to be utterly impossible for all mankind. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

Paul likened these two covenants to the two births in Genesis 16 and to the contrasting teachings that the Galatians had received. Being spiritually "born again" is like Isaac's birth and not like that of Ismael's. It depends on the promise of God. It is supernatural. It results in a son, an heir. It results in a true son of Abram, and thus a son of God.

Ismael's birth to Hagar was not by faith, but by trusting in one's own methods to bear a child. It was based on unbelief. It was natural and resulted in a slave child. Through trusting in one's self a person will never be a true son of Abram, and thus never a son of God.

The true son of Abram will not be bound to the legalism of Mt. Sinai and the legalism of the Jerusalem of Paul's day. Instead, through faith, he will be a citizen of the eternal New Jerusalem in heaven (Rev. 21:2; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 3:12). He will not trust in his own good works to earn salvation, but instead, knowing that all mankind is held captive under the curse of sin, he will trust in Jesus Christ as the complete source of salvation. *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. . . so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles (godless), so that we might receive the Promised Spirit (of Christ) through faith"* (Gal 3:13).

Paul was giving to the Galatians a way to evaluate their salvation:

- If you have been born again through trusting in the promise of God, then you are a son of God. If you are trusting in your own good works, then you are not.
- If you, one who was spiritually dead, have now supernaturally been given faith in Jesus Christ, then you are a son of God. If you are relying on your natural power and your natural intelligence to gain salvation, then you are not a son of God.
- If you have trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation, then you are a son of God. You can never be put away. The Spirit of Christ now lives in you. You are fully secure and resting in his unconditional, eternal promise. All of your needs will be met in Christ Jesus. If you are still living in bondage to the law and depending on who you are and what you have done to earn salvation, then you are still a slave. As a slave, there is no inheritance and you will be cast out.

*"God sent forth His son, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father'"* (Gal. 4:4).

Have you been born of the Spirit? Today, believe in Jesus Christ, fully trusting Him for salvation.