



Gold From Dark Mines



Providence and grace in the lives
of six famous Christians

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CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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Of Providence and Grace

All who are born into this world are citizens of the world by virtue of their very existence. However, that does not automatically make them citizens of heaven hereafter. Nicodemus, a member of the ruling council in Jerusalem in Jesus' day, was an open-minded man. He had heard what Jesus was teaching and doing and wanted to know whether his authority came from God or if he was a charlatan. Although the question he asked the Lord relates to authority, in his reply Jesus told Nicodemus how a citizen of the world becomes a citizen of heaven.

'Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.[" How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into



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his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. ... Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life".



John 3:1-8, 14-16



Birth and Rebirth

Jesus' words show quite clearly that just as there needs to be birth into this world, there needs to be rebirth into the kingdom of heaven. Christians are those who are born again. It is interesting to note that although the Lord stresses the necessity of rebirth he does not describe the process. And the New Testament makes it clear that the process is as varied as the people concerned. Saul (who became Paul) was born again when he met the Lord in a dramatic encounter as he travelled towards Damascus to hound believers there. The change





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in him was immediate (Acts 9:1-19). Some people in Berea heard Paul and Silas preaching. They listened carefully then searched through the Old Testament to discover if what they were hearing accorded with what was prophesied. Finding that it did, they continued to listen to the apostles preaching until eventually they were born again (Acts 17:10-12). The Ethiopian Eunuch was born again when a passage in Isaiah was explained to him (Acts 8:26-40). What these people had in common was that they came to a saving faith in Jesus – they were born again – but each had a different experience of rebirth.

One danger into which parts of the church have fallen at various times in its history is that they created formulae for becoming a Christian that were so tight that people often could not fit their experience into them. And the same is true today. Some groups have a formula for conversion that they treat as a pattern to which people must conform before being accepted into membership. They must have experience A, followed by experience B, followed by experience C. Anything else is too loose, and variation of order or form raises doubts about authenticity. But the Holy Spirit will not be constrained by our formulae. Jesus does not provide a checklist of sixteen points to be gone through in the correct order so that it can be signed, dated and



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stamped at the bottom as some kind of passport to heaven. He said, 'Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

What does the Bible say about the new birth? Paul wrote, 'We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth' (2 Thess. 2:13). The origin of a Christian's rebirth is in heaven 'before the beginning' when God chose him to be his own. Those whom God has chosen since before the beginning of time will hear his call, will answer it through the gift of faith that he gives them and will be reborn as children of God. Not only that, but their citizenship in heaven is secure thereafter.

'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Romans 8:35-39





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Six Examples from History

Many Christian biographies begin with accounts of rebirth then tell what happen thereafter. Little attention is sometimes paid to the years before conversion. The emphasis of this book is a little different. As God has chosen his people from before the beginning of time, his interest in them does not start at their conversion. David recognised that.

'You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.' No wonder he went on to say, *'How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!'*

Psalm 139:13-17

David knew that God's interest in him and involvement with him extended back to before he was born, and Christians know that God's interest in them stretches back to eternity, and certainly



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includes the years before they were reborn. They may seem like lost years, but the Lord not only redeems his people's souls, he redeems their experiences too. What is experienced and learned in the 'lost' years is put to use in the kingdom's work. Gold from Dark Mines focuses on the pre-conversion years of its six subjects and how they came to faith. It goes on to tell their life stories in brief before concluding each one by illustrating how God used the experiences they went through before conversion to his glory. It aims to show God's providential dealings with his chosen children before his work of grace took place in their hearts, and how in his good providence he redeemed their lost years by turning them into tools they could use to help in the great work of building his kingdom and preparing for the King of kings to come in glory.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, 'True seekers will hunt everywhere for Jesus, and will not be too proud to learn from beggars and little children. We take gold from dark mines and muddy streams ...' It is surely true that the darkest mine from which believers take spiritual gold is the dark mine of their own pre-conversion experience. How good God is to use the lost years.

