

Born Again: A Beginning or a Destination?

One of the great tragedies in modern attempts to see people converted to Christianity is a narrow focus on *how* to be born again. It is a subject that the Bible spends little time on, and for good reason. Until people know the sinfulness of their hearts, and the lostness of their souls, majoring on how to be saved is counterproductive.

This is like going around the country, teaching people how to plan the perfect wedding. Do you know what would happen? It would change nothing for the multitudes who get married and then proceed to break every rule of success. Many couples will commit to a good wedding, yet miss foundational commitment that engages the couple in working out rules of successful marriage and family.

For parallel reasons, we also need a shift in focus from a “getting saved” formula, to one that plumbs the depth of human need, and so prepares one to deny himself, and take up the cross to follow Jesus Christ on the narrow way that leads to life. Again, what point is it to enter the Christian life, only to bring reproach to Christ and fellow Christians, refusing the yoke of obedience to the Christ who is Lord and master?

To explore what must happen in the “new birth,” we will observe two laws that define the lives of all people, without the grace of Jesus Christ. These two laws are described in Romans, Chapter 7, as a desperate struggle to do well, yet miserably failing to accomplish our good intent.

A third law, with the actual power of deliverance is described in the beginning of Romans, Chapter 8.

The first of these laws appears in verse 23 of Chapter 7, as the phrase, *the law of my mind*. If you back up one verse, you find what this law of the mind is like. *I delight in the law of God after the inward man*. Some will surely say, “Not me. I’m no Christian. I’m not convinced there even is a God.” However, this law does pertain to everyone. Romans 2:15, 16 addresses unbelievers as having the law of God written in their hearts, and that their conscience bears witness to the truth. It happens all the time. Unbelievers appreciate the kindness of the neighbor who brings in their mail, waters the flowers, and reports any suspicious activity while they are away on vacation. This law of the mind also causes them to trust emergency room staff in a strange city when their planned vacation has taken a tragic turn. In fact, it is this law of the mind that still keeps many, many people from being murderers, adulterers, thieves, or rapists. And even among those who sin more grievously, you will still find some admirable traits. This law of the mind serves as a control factor on the side of decency.

However, there is a negative side to this “goodness” of the conscience. It is the notion that this level of goodness should satisfy the justice of God. It goes so far as to question the justice of God for not going along with this man-centered analysis of good. It is a mistake to conclude, as many do, that the degree of goodness displayed makes us good people. It does not.

There is another law present in my members warring against the good intent and the actual good that is accomplished by the law of the mind. It is called *the law of sin* (Romans 7:23), and it resides in every human body. It has its own opinions, will, and emotions with an exceedingly high threshold of demanding what it wants. Its focus is on immediate pleasure and on shortcuts out of challenging situations. In so doing, it promotes interests absolutely contrary and even deadly to our good. It permeates the mind with wrong, builds the desire for evil, and breaks through the defenses of a mind wanting to do good.

What we would perceive as people who have it all together, such as the good neighbor, or the emergency room staffers, are caught up in the same struggles you face. It is really quite simple. Sin breaks through the facade of goodness and respectability, leaving us struggling, frustrated, and defeated. We find ourselves powerless over this, because the law of sin ultimately dominates and defines who we truly are. (We are not the good person we meant to be.) It reaches the ultimate complication because of the dominant, contaminating nature of evil. The otherwise perfectly good hamburger from your favorite fast-food place is no match for the trace of salmonella. The same holds true for the sin of the “good” person. *He that keeps the whole law, yet offends in one point, is guilty of all.* Paul says it well in raising the question: *Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?* The law of sin is not unlike the terrifying prospect of an otherwise respectable man being chained to a decaying body.

In summary then, we have the mind to do well (I witness this repeatedly even among criminals), but are brought to defeat and despair by a sinful nature beyond our power to control.

There is only one sufficient answer, only one course of victory. Thousands of people in the world demonstrate this principle every day. They board jetliners they don’t own. They couldn’t push them a single inch, much less lift them off the ground by flapping their arms. All they need is a boarding pass that entitles them to a seat. They sit back and trust the airlines to fly them from Detroit to Amsterdam, or from New York to Los Angeles, mocking gravity all the way. Every successful flight meets the following conditions: aircraft designed to the laws of aerodynamics, safe flight patterns, mechanical soundness, and sufficient quality and quantity of fuel. Cutting corners is lethal. Why expect shortcuts for either a good marriage or Christian living?

The one sufficient answer to the power of the flesh, is found in Romans 8:2. *The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.* It is the sufficiency and the enabling power of life in Jesus Christ, who shed His blood and suffered death on the cross for the remission of sins. We who were dead in trespasses and sin may now live for Him who arose from the dead. This holds a standard to which other religions and a compromised version of "being saved" cannot attain.

To substitute a shallow "accepting Christ" for genuine repentance from sin, restitution for wrongdoing, and unreserved faith and loyalty to Jesus Christ, mocks the God who owns the spiritual "airlines" and books passage to victory in Jesus. The scandals that frequently haunt the ranks of the "saved," block the testimony of the church in society, and discourage some who might otherwise be sincere seekers after God.

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace (Romans 8:6).

~Lester Troyer