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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 18

The Marks of the New Birth

"So is every one that is born of the Spirit." John 3:8.

1. How is every one that is "born of the Spirit," -- that is, born again, -- born of God? What is meant by the being born again, the being born of God, or being born of the Spirit? What is implied in the being a son or a child of God, or having the Spirit of adoption? That these privileges, by the free mercy of God, are ordinarily annexed to baptism (which is thence termed by our Lord in a preceding verse, the being "born of water and of the Spirit") we know; but we would know what these privileges are: What is the new birth?

2. Perhaps it is not needful to give a definition of this, seeing the Scripture gives none. But as the question is of the deepest concern to every child of man; since, "except a man be born again," born of the Spirit, "he cannot see the kingdom of God;" I propose to lay down the marks of it in the plainest manner, just as I find them laid down in Scripture.

1. The First of these, and the foundation of all the rest, is faith. So St. Paul, "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:26.) So St. John, "To them gave he power" (exousian, right or privilege, it might rather be translated) "to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name; which were born," when they believed, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh," not by natural generation, "nor of the will of man," like those children adopted by men, in whom no inward change is thereby wrought, "but of God." (John 1:12,13.) And again in his General Epistle, "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." (1 John 5:1.)

2. But it is not a barely notional or speculative faith that is here spoken of by the Apostles. It is not a bare assent to this proposition, Jesus is the Christ; nor indeed to all the propositions contained in our creed, or in the Old and New Testament. It is not merely an assent to any or all these credible things, as credible. To say this, were to say (which who could hear) that the devils were born of God; for they have this faith. They, trembling, believe, both that Jesus is the Christ, and that all Scripture, having been given by inspiration of God, is true as God is true. It is not only an assent to divine truth, upon the testimony of God, or upon the evidence of miracles; for they also heard the words of his mouth, and knew him to be a faithful and true witness. They could not but receive the testimony he gave, both of himself, and of the Father which sent him. They saw likewise the mighty works which he did, and thence believed that he "came forth from God." Yet, notwithstanding this faith, they are still "reserved in chains of darkness unto the judgment of the great day."

3. For all this is no more than a dead faith. The true, living, Christian faith, which whosoever hath, is born of God, is not only an assent, an act of the understanding; but a disposition, which God hath wrought in his heart; "a sure trust and confidence in God, that, through the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God." This implies, that a man first renounce himself; that, in order to be "found in Christ," to be accepted through him, he totally rejects all "confidence in the flesh;" that, "having nothing to pay," having no trust in his own works or righteousness of any kind, he comes to God as a lost, miserable, self-destroyed, self-condemned, undone, helpless sinner; as one whose mouth is utterly stopped, and who is altogether "guilty before God." Such a sense of sin, (commonly called despair, by those who speak evil of the things they know not,) together with a full conviction, such as no words can express, that of Christ only cometh our salvation, and an earnest desire of that salvation, must precede a living faith, a trust in Him, who "for us paid our ransom by his

death, and fulfilled the law of his life." This faith then, whereby we are born of God, is "not only a belief of all the articles of our faith, but also a true confidence of the mercy of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

4. An immediate and constant fruit of this faith whereby we are born of God, a fruit which can in no wise be separated from it, no, not for an hour, is power over sin; -- power over outward sin of every kind; over every evil word and work; for wheresoever the blood of Christ is thus applied, it "purgeth the conscience from dead works;" -- and over inward sin; for it purifieth the heart from every unholy desire and temper. This fruit of faith St. Paul has largely described, in the sixth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans. "How shall we," saith he, "who" by faith "are dead to sin, live any longer therein" "Our old man is crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin." -- "Likewise, reckon ye yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign" even "in your mortal body," "but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead." "For sin shall not have dominion over you. -- God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, -- but being made free," -- the plain meaning is, God be thanked that though ye were, in time past, the servants of sin, yet now -- "being free from sin, ye are become the servants of righteousness."

5. The same invaluable privilege of the sons of God is as strongly asserted by St. John; particularly with regard to the former branch of it, namely, power over outward sin. After he had been crying out, as one astonished at the depth of the riches of the goodness of God, -- "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God! Beloved, now are we the sons of God: And it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know, that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is;" (1 John 3:1, &c.) -- he soon adds, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: And he cannot sin, because he is born of God." (1 John 3:9.) But some men will say, "True: Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin habitually." Habitually! Whence is that I read it not. It is not written in the Book. God plainly saith, "He doth not commit sin;" and thou addest, habitually! Who art thou that mendest the oracles of God -- that "addest to the words of this book" Beware, I beseech thee, lest God "add to thee all the plagues that are written therein!" especially when the comment thou addest is such as quite swallows up the text: So that by this meqodeia planhs, artful method of deceiving, the precious promise is utterly lost; by this kubeia anqrpvvn, tricking and shuffling of men, the word of God is made of none effect. O beware, thou that thus takest from the words of this book, that, taking away the whole meaning and spirit from them, leavest only what may indeed be termed a dead letter, lest God take away thy part out of the book of life!

6. Suffer we the Apostle to interpret his own words, by the whole tenor of his discourse. In the fifth verse of this chapter, he had said, "Ye know that he," Christ, "was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin." What is the inference he draws from this "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not. Whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him." (1 John 3:6.) To his enforcement of this important doctrine, he premises an highly necessary caution: "Little children, let no man deceive you;" (1 John 3:7;) for many will endeavor so to do; to persuade you that you may be unrighteous, that you may commit sin, and yet be children of God! "He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning." Then follows, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: And he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this," adds the Apostle, "the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil." By this plain mark (the committing or not committing sin) are they

distinguished from each other. To the same effect are those words in his fifth chapter, "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not." (1 John 3:18.)

7. Another fruit of this living faith is peace. For, "being justified by faith," having all our sins blotted out, "we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom. 5:1.) This indeed our Lord himself, the night before his death, solemnly bequeathed to all his followers: "Peace," saith he, "I leave with you;" (you who "believe in God," and "believe also in me;") "my peace I give unto you:" "Not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27.) And again, "These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace." (John 16:33.) This is that "peace of God which passeth all understanding," that serenity of soul which it hath not entered into the heart of a natural man to conceive, and which it is not possible for even the spiritual man to utter. And it is a peace which all the powers of earth and hell are unable to take from him. Waves and storms beat upon it, but they shake it not; for it is founded upon a rock. It keepeth the hearts and minds of the children of God, at all times and in all places. Whether they are in ease or in pain, in sickness or health, in abundance or want, they are happy in God. In every state they have learned to be content, yea, to give thanks unto God through Christ Jesus; being well assured that "whatsoever is, is best," because it is His will concerning them: So that in all the vicissitudes of life their "heart standeth fast, believing in the Lord."

II. 1. A Second scriptural mark of those who are born of God, is hope. Thus St. Peter, speaking to all the children of God who were then scattered abroad, saith, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope." (1 Peter 1:3.) Elpida zvsan, a lively or living hope, saith the Apostle; because there is also a dead hope, as well as a dead faith; a hope which is not from God, but from the enemy of God and man; -- as evidently appears by its fruits; for, as it is the offspring of pride, so it is the parent of every evil word and work; whereas, every man that hath in him this living hope, is "holy as He that calleth him is holy:" Every man that can truly say to his brethren in Christ, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and we shall see him as he is," "purifieth himself, even as He is pure."

2. This hope implies, First, the testimony of our own spirit or conscience, that we walk "in simplicity and godly sincerity;" Secondly, the testimony of the Spirit of God, "bearing witness with," or to, "our spirit, that we are the children of God," "and if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ."

3. Let us well observe what is here taught us by God himself, touching this glorious privilege of his children. Who is it that is here said to bear witness Not our spirit only, but another; even the Spirit of God: He it is who "beareth witness with our spirit." What is it he beareth witness of "That we are the children of God," "and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ;" (Rom. 8:16, 17;) "if so be that we suffer with him," if we deny ourselves, if we take up our cross daily, if we cheerfully endure persecution or reproach for his sake, "that we may also be glorified together." And in whom doth the Spirit of God bear this witness In all who are the children of God. By this very argument does the Apostle prove, in the preceding verses, that they are so: "As many," saith he, "as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of Adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father!" It follows, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." (8:14-16.)

4. The variation of the phrase in the fifteenth verse is worthy our observation: "Ye have received the

Spirit of Adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father!" Ye, as many as are the sons of God, have, in virtue of your sonship, received that selfsame Spirit of Adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father: We, the Apostles, Prophets, Teachers, (for so the word may not improperly be understood,) we, through whom you have believed, the "ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." As we and you have one Lord, so we have one Spirit: As we have one faith, so we have one hope also. We and you are sealed with one "Spirit of promise," the earnest of your and of our inheritance: The same Spirit bearing witness with your and with our spirit, "that we are the children of God." (Rom. 8:14-16).

5. And thus is the Scripture fulfilled, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." For it is easy to believe, that though sorrow may precede this witness of God's Spirit with our spirit; (indeed must, in some degree, while we groan under fear, and a sense of the wrath of God abiding on us;) yet, as soon as any man feelth it in himself, his "sorrow is turned into joy." Whatsoever his pain may have been before; yet, as soon as that "hour is come, he remembereth the anguish no more, for joy" that he is born of God. It may be, many of you have now sorrow, because you are "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel;" because you are conscious to yourselves that you have not this Spirit; that you are "without hope and without God in the world." But when the Comforter is come, "then your heart shall rejoice;" yea, "your joy shall be full," and "that joy no man taketh from you." (John 16:22.) "We joy in God," will ye say, "through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement;" "by whom we have access into this grace," this state of grace, of favour, or reconciliation with God, "wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." (Rom. 5:2.) "Ye," saith St. Peter, whom God hath "begotten again unto a lively hope, are kept by the power of God unto salvation: Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations; that the trial of your faith may be found unto praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ: In whom, though now ye see him not, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." (1 Peter 1:5, &c.) Unspeakable indeed! It is not for the tongue of man to describe this joy in the Holy Ghost. It is "the hidden manna, which no man knoweth, save he that receiveth it." But this we know, it not only remains, but overflows, in the depth of affliction. "Are the consolations of God small" with his children, when all earthly comforts fail Not so. But when sufferings most abound, the consolations of his Spirit do much more abound; insomuch that the sons of God "laugh at destruction when it cometh;" at want, pain, hell, and the grave; as knowing Him who "hath the keys of death and hell," and will shortly "cast them into the bottomless pit;" as hearing even now the great voice out of heaven, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away." (Rev. 21:3, 4.)

III. 1. A Third scriptural mark of those who are born of God, and the greatest of all, is love; even "the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto them." (Rom. 5:5.) "Because they are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son in their hearts, crying, Abba, Father!" (Gal. 4:6.) By this Spirit, continually looking up to God as their reconciled and loving Father, they cry to him for their daily bread, for all things needful, whether for their souls or bodies. They continually pour out their hearts before him, knowing "they have the petitions which they ask of him." (1 John 5:15.) Their delight is in him. He is the joy of their heart; their "shield," and their "exceeding great reward." The desire of their soul is toward him; it is their "meat and drink to do his will;" and they are "satisfied as with marrow and fatness, while their mouth praiseth him with joyful lips." (Psalm 63:5.)

2. And, in this sense also, "every one who loveth him that begat, loveth him that is begotten of him."

(1 John 5:1.) His spirit rejoiceth in God his Saviour. He "loveth the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." He is so "joined unto the Lord," as to be one spirit. His soul hangeth upon Him, and chooseth Him as altogether lovely, "the chiefest among ten thousand." He knoweth, he feeleth what that means, "My Beloved is mine, and I am his." (Song 2:16.) "Thou art fairer than the children of men; full of grace are thy lips, because God hath anointed thee for ever!" (Psalm 45:2.)

3. The necessary fruit of this love of God is the love of our neighbour; of every soul which God hath made; not excepting our enemies; not excepting those who are now "despitefully using and persecuting us;" -- a love whereby we love every man as ourselves; as we love our own souls. Nay, our Lord has expressed it still more strongly, teaching us to "love one another even as He hath loved us." Accordingly, the commandment written in the hearts of all those that love God, is no other than this, "As I have loved you, so love ye one another." Now, "herein perceive we the love of God, in that he laid down his life for us." (1 John 3:16.) "We ought," then, as the Apostle justly infers, "to lay down our lives for the brethren." If we feel ourselves ready to do this, then do we truly love our neighbour. Then "we know that we have passed from death unto life, because we" thus "love the brethren." (1 John 3:14.) "Hereby know we" that we are born of God, that we "dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his" loving "Spirit." (1 John 4:13.) For "love is of God; and every one that" thus "loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." (1 John 4:7.)

4. But some may possibly ask, "Does not the Apostle say, "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments"" (1 John 5:3.) Yea, and this is the love of our neighbour also, in the same sense as it is the love of God. But what would you infer from hence that the keeping the outward commandments is all that is implied in loving God with all your heart, with all your mind, and soul, and strength, and in loving your neighbour as yourself that the love of God is not an affection of the soul, but merely an outward service and that the love of our neighbour is not a disposition of heart, but barely a course of outward works To mention so wild an interpretation of the Apostle's words, is sufficiently to confute it. The plain indisputable meaning of that text is, -- this is the sign or proof of the love of God, of our keeping the first and great commandment, to keep the rest of his commandments. For true love, if it be once shed abroad in our heart, will constrain us so to do; since, whosoever loves God with all his heart, cannot but serve him with all his strength.

5. A Second fruit then of the love of God (so far as it can be distinguished from it) is universal obedience to him we love, and conformity to his will; obedience to all the commands of God, internal and external; obedience of the heart and of the life; in every temper, and in all manner of conversation. And one of the tempers most obviously implied herein, is, the being "zealous of good works;" the hungering and thirsting to do good, in every possible kind, unto all men; the rejoicing to "spend and be spent for them," for every child of man; not looking for any recompence in this world, but only in the resurrection of the just.

IV. 1. Thus have I plainly laid down those marks of the new birth which I find laid down in Scripture. Thus doth God himself answer that weighty question, What is it to be born of God Such, if the appeal be made to the oracles of God, is "every one that is born of the Spirit." This it is, in the judgment of the Spirit of God, to be a son or a child of God: It is, so to believe in God, through Christ, as "not to commit sin," and to enjoy at all times, and in all places, that "peace of God which passeth all understanding." It is, so to hope in God through the Son of his love, as to have not only the "testimony of a good conscience," but also the Spirit of God "bearing witness with your spirits, that ye are the children of God;" whence cannot but spring the rejoicing in Him, through whom ye "have received the

atonement." It is, so to love God, who hath thus loved you, as you never did love any creature: So that ye are constrained to love all men as yourselves; with a love not only ever burning in your hearts, but flaming out in all your actions and conversations, and making your whole life one "labour of love," one continued obedience to those commands, "Be ye merciful, as God is merciful;" "Be ye holy, as I the Lord am holy:" "Be ye perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

2. Who then are ye that are thus born of God Ye "know the things which are given to you of God." Ye well know that ye are the children of God, and "can assure your hearts before him." And every one of you who has observed these words cannot but feel, and know of a truth, whether at this hour, (answer to God, and not to man!) you are thus a child of God or no. The question is not, what you was made in baptism; (do not evade;) but, What are you now Is the Spirit of adoption now in your heart To your own heart let the appeal be made. I ask not, whether you was born of water and of the Spirit; but are you now the temple of the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in you I allow you was "circumcised with the circumcision of Christ;" (as St. Paul emphatically terms baptism;) but does the Spirit of Christ and of glory now rest upon you Else "your circumcision is become uncircumcision."

3 . Say not then in your heart, "I was once baptized, therefore I am now a child of God." Alas, that consequence will by no means hold. How many are the baptized gluttons and drunkards, the baptized liars and common swearers, the baptized railers and evil-speakers, the baptized whoremongers, thieves, extortioners What think you Are these now the children of God Verily, I say unto you, whosoever you are, unto whom any one of the preceding characters belongs, "Ye are of your father the devil, and the works of your father ye do." Unto you I call, in the name of Him whom you crucify afresh, and in his words to your circumcised predecessors, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell"

4. How, indeed, except ye be born again! For ye are now dead in trespasses and sins. To say, then, that ye cannot be born again, that there is no new birth but in baptism, is to seal you all under damnation, to consign you to hell, without help, without hope. And perhaps some may think this just and right. In their zeal for the Lord of hosts, they may say, "Yea, cut off the sinners, the Amalekites! Let these Gibeonites be utterly destroyed! They deserve no less." No; nor I, nor you. Mine and your desert, as well as theirs, is hell; and it is mere mercy, free, undeserved mercy, that we are not now in unquenchable fire. You will say, "But we are washed;" we were born again "of water and of the Spirit." So were they: This, therefore, hinders not at all, but that ye may now be even as they. Know ye not, that "what is highly esteemed of men is an abomination in the sight of God" Come forth, ye "saints of the world," ye that are honoured of men, and see who will cast the first stone at them, at these wretches not fit to live upon the earth, these common harlots, adulterers, murderers. Only learn ye first what that meaneth, "He that hateth his brother is a murderer." (1 John 3:15.) "He that looketh on a woman, to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." (Matt. 5:28.) "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4.)

5. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye" also "must be born again." "Except ye" also "be born again, ye cannot see the kingdom of God." Lean no more on the staff of that broken reed, that ye were born again in baptism. Who denies that ye were then made children of God, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven But, notwithstanding this, ye are now children of the devil. Therefore ye must be born again. And let not Satan put it into your heart to cavil at a word, when the thing is clear. Ye have heard what are the marks of the children of God: All ye who have them not on your souls, baptized or unbaptized,

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