

## CAN THE LORD SAVE “OLD” PEOPLE?

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In going through the four Gospels, I find that only once did Jesus say we “must” experience something, and then it turns out to be something we can’t “do.” He told Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). And in only one other place in the NT are we told we “must” do something, and that is Hebrews 11:6 where we are told, “He that cometh to God must believe that He is . . .” And when the jailer asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” they answered, “Believe . . .” (Acts 16:30). Were they teaching the heresy of “only-believism”?

First, let’s face reality: John 3:16 does not list all the things we must “do” in order to “have everlasting life.” It plainly says, “Believe.” So, was Jesus teaching “only-believism”?

Secondly, when Hebrews 11:6 says we “must believe” it is stating the one and only thing Scripture tells us we “must” do. “The Scripture cannot be broken” (Jn. 10:35). We can’t force the Bible to teach salvation by faith AND by works; it teaches salvation “by grace through faith,” “faith WHICH works” (Eph. 2:8, 9; Gal. 5:6).

Thirdly, when Jesus says we “must be born again,” He is not talking about a program of works. Can’t be; nobody can “born” himself (forgive me!)—or give birth to himself. We must BE born, passive voice of the verb. And who does the conceiving and “giving birth”? Jesus says in verse 8, as you can’t

tell where the wind comes from or goes, “so is everyone that is born of the Spirit.”

It is He who conceives in you the new life and gives birth to the new heart; you welcome the new birth, you LET it happen, you stop the abortion practice you’ve been doing all your life prior. Call it cooperation if you wish, but please don’t think of it as being 50% your own Saviour. You cooperate by letting Him do His blessed will in you. And when all is done at last, to Him alone will you give all the glory.

Now comes an astounding new scientific discovery, reports a *N. Y. Times* article, that offers us a Good News window on John 3:4, Nicodemus’s question, “How can a person be born when he is old?” A team of American and Swedish scientists report they have found positive evidence “for the first time” that old people grow new brain cells, “overturning years of conventional wisdom.” “The new growth was discovered in the hippocampus, the center of learning and memory in the brain . . . it’s called neurogenesis. . . . Cells were in fact dividing and producing new mature neurons as well. . . . This process continues until death. . . . Things we thought were ending are not ending,” says Dr. Fred Gage, of Salk Institute.

When does one start getting “old”? When you’re 7 or 8, because already deep neurological paths have formed, creating selfish, loveless thought and emotion patterns and addictions that continue through life unless a new life develops that Jesus calls being “born again.” Now comes the scientific underpinning that helps us believe what the Bible

has said all along—you can repent at any time you are willing to choose to respond to the Holy Spirit. He never gives up on you!

Biggest problem that humans have: learning how to love when you don't know how to love, when the delicate mental and emotional processes have been stunted or cauterized in childhood and youth, and you think "It's no use! I can't change!" The solution is simple: "Look," "behold what manner of love (*agape*) the Father has bestowed upon us" (1 Jn. 3:1). In so doing you begin to "comprehend . . . the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of the *agape* of Christ" (Eph. 3:14-19). That simple choice to "look" and to "comprehend" starts the new cells growing, and things you thought "were ending" are just beginning. You are learning *agape* revealed in Christ. You begin to "comprehend" the seven steps He took in coming down still lower until He reached where you were (apart from His grace) in hell itself—"even unto the death of the cross" (see Phil. 2:5-8). You see *agape* portrayed more vividly than you saw the Titanic on the screen. And then "the *agape* of God is shed abroad in [your] heart by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5). Great Good News!

Our English Bibles translate what Jesus said in John 3:7 as "You must be born again." To me that word "MUST" has come across as a demand that I MUST DO something, and unless I DO it, I won't even be able to "see" the kingdom of God, let alone "enter" it. The problem is that I don't know how to DO the something that I MUST do. Evangelists have told me, three things: (1) Study, (2) Pray, (3) Witness. But how can I know that I have studied,

prayed, witnessed, enough? Am I to think of Jesus as demanding that I DO something I don't know how to DO? And if I can't do it, He pulls a trigger?

It means literally, "it is needful for you to be born again." He didn't say, "You must take the initiative to DO something in order to be born again!" What He said was, "The Holy Spirit must do something to create in you a new heart." Then He goes on in vs. 8 to explain this work of the Holy Spirit—that it is He who takes the initiative in your new birth, not you!

The entire discourse as recorded in John 3 emphasizes a radically different idea than Christian legalism stresses ("do this, do that," Laodicean lukewarmness): God has [past tense, aorist] taken the initiative in your salvation, not vice versa; He is the Good Shepherd seeking His lost sheep, not vice versa (Lk. 19:10); He is the Savior seeking fellowship with sinners, not vice versa (Lk. 15:2); as you did not "born" yourself (your parents did that!), so you cannot DO your own "clean heart" thing (Ps. 51:10); you don't get to heaven by climbing up a ladder to get there, you "look," "behold," a Savior climbing down a ladder all the way to hell to find you (Rom. 10:7-10; Phil. 2:5-8); bitten by a snake, you see Him "made" to be a snake on a pole, "made to be sin for [you] who knew no sin, that you might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21); you see the Father's heart wrenched with agony as He "gives" (not lends!) His Son for eternity so that you might not "perish" (vs. 16).

And now, what finally, do you DO? You believe, not the slander of "easy-believism," but the heart-melting "amen" of Abraham when he was justified

by faith. Your richest gain you now count but loss, and pour contempt on all your pride. Were the whole realm of nature yours, that would be a tribute far too small; such love demands your heart, your life, your all. And lo, and behold,—you are born again!

Should one be worried about whether he is “born again”? The answer is No. But should one be seriously concerned about whether he is truly converted? The answer is Yes. Right up to the moment when the Sanhedrim condemned Jesus to death, the apostle Peter was dead sure he was well converted. When Jesus told him Thursday night that he was not, he became upset, and loudly protested his being thoroughly “born again.” In his conscious understanding, he sincerely believed he was already “converted,” but when a mere lass (probably an attractive one) challenged his identity with Christ, his unconscious motivations took over and he denied Christ with vile cursing and swearing (Mt. 26:74). Peter did not know himself! One can be very highly educated and know a lot of things—yet not know that.

And who is “Peter”? Anyone who belongs to the seventh church of world history, “the church of the Laodiceans” (Rev. 3:14-21; well, more particularly, anyone who is part of “the angel of the church,” its leadership). Jesus tells us frankly that “Peter” is indeed our patron “saint”: “You say, “I am rich, have become wealthy [by some assumed historical enrichment!]. and have need of nothing,”—and do not know that you are [the one of all the seven, Greek, *ho*] wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and

naked,” strutting around on the stage of the universe and of the world—“naked.”

Poor Peter made a fool of himself, thinking he was “rich” in his born-again experience and knowledge. He even argued with the all-knowing Lord, contradicting Him as if to say, “Lord, You don’t know me! Give me a chance, and I’ll prove to You that I am the most devoted follower You have! I’ve been (a) baptized, (b) ordained to the ministry, (c) have cast out devils in Your name, (d) finished my 3 1/2 years Seminary training with cum laude under You as Teacher, (d) have my doctoral diploma, (e) I really understand Your gospel and I teach it powerfully. Lord, do You think I need to go back to the spiritual kindergarten and start over and get ‘born again’ again?!! You’re wrong, Lord!” Sadly, the Lord had to tell him honestly, “When you are converted, strengthen your brethren” (Lk. 22:32).

Why should we be “concerned” about our true conversion? Not because of craven fear lest we won’t make it into the kingdom, but for a more important reason: lest in our unconscious selfishness we bring shame on Him in these closing hours of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The best Laodicean in the world can well pray that prayer, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13). Edward R. Sill probably had an even better idea in his heart-wrenching poem: “O Lord, be merciful to me, a fool!”

Is it hard work to be “born again”? We know that we need to be changed from the inside out. Years of being what we are have made us set in our ways, we feel. Our problems are a part of us, through and

through, whether it's lust, appetite, jealousy, or whatever vice has a hold on us. How can we become really different than what we just are?

We can change the color of our hair but how can we change the color of our eyes? If we were born to be short how can we become tall? For a selfish person to become unselfish seems as impossible. And most poignantly, for a lustful, sexually impure person (a rapist? an abuser?) to become pure in heart seems totally impossible—so say our courts of law.

And now here comes Jesus telling us that “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). To many people it sounds like a death-knell. “I am what I am, and there's no way I can be different! If only blue-eyed people can enter heaven, I'm sunk for I have brown eyes!”

Sit down and read the whole of John 3. Nicodemus asked precisely the same questions. You'll be surprised how much better is Jesus' Good News of the new birth than what we have thought it is:

(1) Because of what Jesus accomplished on His cross, the Holy Spirit has become everyone's new “parents.” When He impregnated the Virgin Mary to bring Jesus to birth, He impregnated everyone with a divine seed of a new life to be formed within. The new birth is not you “born-ing” yourself anew (excuse me; we need a new verb); “the wind bloweth where it listeth,” says Jesus; “so is everyone that is born of the [Holy] Spirit.” He is constantly casting seeds into human hearts, for Christ is “the light that lighteth every man that

cometh into the world” (1:9). The “seed” is the Light of Good News in Christ.

(2) Now, don't practice abortion on the new life that the Holy Spirit is constantly begetting within you. Stop resisting Him. If you choose darkness, you set yourself up for judgment.

Someone in distress writes: “I understand justification, and I believe the Bible. I have prayed many times for God to convert me, to let me be born again, but I am still the same sinful ‘me’ I have always been. Why doesn't He answer my prayers?”

Believe that He has answered and He does answer your prayers; believe that He loves you “in Christ;” repent of doubting His faithfulness to you. This is why the Bible says, “Be ye reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). Kneel down beside the distraught father in Mark 9:14-24 (he is crying tears) and pray with him, “Lord I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.” You can never perish as you pray that prayer, says someone very wise.

Also, remember that your Savior Jesus Christ was tempted as much as you are tempted to doubt that the Father heard His prayers. Yes! On His cross He cried out in despair, “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mt. 26:46; read His entire prayer in Psalm 22).

Maybe also remember that it's not your job to judge yourself, for it's true that the closer we come to Christ, the more unworthy we feel ourselves to be. This is because the more clearly we see and comprehend His righteousness, the more unrighteous we appear to be.

So, what follows? The more of the “new birth” we are experiencing, the more we will WANT to be “born again,” the more hungry we will be for “the bread of life,” the more we will want to pray, crying, “Father . . . !” and the more we will feel naked and long to be covered with Christ’s robe of righteousness. The closer we come to Jesus, the more we will delight in His holy law and want to obey Him. Sound backwards? But it’s true!

You still want some visible evidence that you have been born again? Let’s overcome the idolatry of ancient Israel: we are to worship the unseen God. We walk by faith, not by sight. Learning to believe is your only difficult problem. “Fight the good fight of faith.”

Can the Lord Jesus “save” old people? That is, change their lifelong patterns of thinking, heal the darkness of their hearts that they have known all their extended lives? Can He truly reconcile an old person’s alienated heart that he (or she, of course) can truly become “one” with Himself? In old age, some people (maybe all!) get “set in their ways.” If in younger years, someone managed to go through early life without ever having had the pure, true, heart-warming, “everlasting gospel” of Christ’s righteousness presented to him, could that person’s heart be really changed, “converted” in the true sense of the word when he’s old? In other words, to make the question plain, can Christ’s righteousness be IMPARTED to an old person, not merely legally IMPUTED in a book-keeping kind of judicial transaction in which the old person will come up in

the resurrection even though he is now so “set in his ways” he can’t really change them?

Nicodemus asked that question with a tinge of unbelief, “How can a man be born when he is old?” (John 3:4). In other words, how can life-long habits be changed? Jesus didn’t directly answer that aspect of his question, but we know that Nicodemus did experience a change of his “ruler’s” heart. The answer to our question must be YES! or we are all doomed.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David prayed, “Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth. . . . When I am old and greyheaded, O God, forsake me not” (Ps. 71:9, 18). The Savior of the world would not permit such a prayer to find publication inside His Bible if the answer were not a resounding YES—you will not be “cast off” as hopeless or “forsaken” because you’re old!

Sarah, up to the age of 90, lived in the darkness of a heart-alienation from God. She blamed Him for making it impossible for her to get pregnant so as to fulfill His promise to her husband Abraham (Gen. 16:2; her name Sarai meant “cantankerous”). Her problem was her own unbelief of heart, not God’s unwillingness to enable her to get pregnant. When finally she could make the simple inspired choice, “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!” (Mark 9:24), she ceased to “perish” (John 3:16) and was truly, deeply “born again.” Then she “received strength to conceive . . . when she was past age, because she [at last] judged Him faithful who had promised” (Heb. 11:11).

We know that her dear husband of her youth, Abraham, shared her heart-unbelief; after all, they were married, “one flesh.” So he too in the “old age” of 100 was at last fully reconciled to God, and became what he wasn’t able in his youth to be, “the father of the faithful,” the “father of us all,” “the father of many nations” (Rom. 4:16, 18).

If somewhere in the world there is an old person who gets this daily tid-bit of Good News, please be encouraged!

A person who is old can take comfort in praying David’s twin prayers, “Cast me not off, . . . forsake me not” “when I am old” (Ps. 71:9, 18). The Lord will hear and answer. But do let him/her walk softly. An old person needs the Lord’s constant sustaining grace, a constant experience of heart conversion, as much as does a teenager. Old people have often undone the good they wrought in earlier years. For example:

Noah disgraced himself (Gen. 9:21); Abraham stumbled and staggered in old age before finally overcoming (20:2; ch. 22); Isaac not only lost his physical vision but blindly doted unwisely on Esau, shortchanging Jacob (ch. 27); Moses struck the rock twice and forfeited his chance to enter the Promised Land (Deut. 4:25, 26); Samuel failed to discipline his priest-sons (1 Sam. 2:12); David, who prayed the prayer of Psalm 71, had to watch his family come apart and fight a civil war; Solomon made a fool of himself when he became old. Some say it’s impossible for any old person to finish his race with honor.

But there are bright spots in history. Job overcame and honored the Lord to the end; Jeremiah was honored in old age with “fellowship with Christ in His sufferings” to the point that he became qualified to write the saddest book in the Bible—his Lamentations;—he died in old age in bitter rejection by his closest friends; Isaiah departs in high honor; Elizabeth comes through with flying colors—she knew no jealousy of the virgin Mary; the apostle Paul goes to the block in old age with an unsullied record; John is honored to write at last, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20); even Peter demonstrates a deeply genuine conversion, right up to his last end. Thank God for encouragements!

Can the Lord have a people who will overcome at last and hold faithful right through to the close of probation and the coming of the Lord Jesus? Jesus is a Savior who “is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him” (Heb. 8:25). “Uttermost” can mean, “to one’s last breath.” That’s Good News!

We all know that we wouldn’t have 4 or 5 thousand teen suicides a year if the kids could understand (and believe) God’s New Covenant promises (take a look—Genesis 12:2, 3, John 3:16, etc.). But now, what about old people and the New Covenant?

The New Covenant is the story of a woman (Sarah) for whom life began at 90 and an old man (Abraham) for whom life began at 100. And yes, let’s tell the truth: it was the hardest thing in the world for the two of them to believe that God’s New Covenant promise of baby boy Isaac could be fulfilled to them at that age. Doubtless the first

intimation of the promise came to the two of them in their teens, but the longer they waited, the more “impossible” it all became. Abraham was sorely tempted to become the “father of all them who [do not] believe” (cf. Rom. 4:11).

When Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and My burden is light,” He did not mean that it’s easy for old people to believe His promises that seem impossible. The only difficult part of following Jesus is to learn how to dis-believe doubt and to believe how good His Good News is. Once we pass that hurdle, from then on we “walk at liberty,” except of course that we wake up every morning anew an unbeliever by nature and have to be converted all over again. “I die daily,” says Paul, and Jesus says, “deny [yourself]” and “take up [your] cross daily, and follow Me” (1 Cor. 15:31; Luke 9:23). The “self” we are called to deny daily is our precious legacy of unbelief we were born with. It’s more comfortable for us to “put on” doubt each new morning than our old pair of slippers.

Hold your tongue before berating the unbelief of our youth; “glory hallelujah” whenever some octogenarian can follow precisely in Sarah’s footsteps at 90 when she made the momentous decision of her life to “judge Him faithful who had promised” (Heb. 11:11). At 90! Yes, she learned to do what she should have known when she was say 18; it took a long time to get there, but thank God she did get there! Now it’s your turn. You’re not alone in your “good fight of faith.” Let all “old people” form a worldwide club of Ex-unbelievers, a club of overcoming Sarah-ites and Abraham-ites.

Such a group might even be able to help some tempted youth. Thank God!