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CHAPTER

1

To All Who Received Him

We begin with an explosive text, teaching as it does about a mysterious, invisible birth—a mystic birth. Here is how it reads:

He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:11-13)

Such a text cannot be properly handled without getting into areas that some may consider radical. It cannot be handled without considering the fact that there are many people in the world who are God's *creation* but not God's *children*.

It cannot be handled without an admission that we do truly believe in the Fatherhood of God and

the brotherhood of man. (Stay with me and see what the Word of God says about these concepts!)

It cannot be handled without considering the refusal of many “believing Christians” to accept the terms of true discipleship—the willingness to turn our backs on everything worldly for Jesus’ sake.

It cannot be handled without discussing the fact that receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord must be an aggressive act of the total personality and not a passive “acceptance” that makes a door-to-door salesman of the Savior.

And it certainly cannot be handled without a warning that evangelical Christianity is on a dead-end street if it is going to continue to accept religious activity as a legitimate proof of spirituality.

In this text God informs us about certain people being born. That is significant. God has stepped out of His way to talk about certain persons being born, and we know that He never does anything without purpose. Everything He does is alive, meaningful and brilliantly significant. Why should the great God Almighty, who rounded the earth in the hollow of His hand, who set the sun shining in the heavens and flung the stars to the farthest corner of the night—why should this God take important lines in the Bible record to talk about people being born?

Much to consider

There is much for us to consider here, for we generally think of human birth as a very ordinary thing. There are so many babies born in this world

every day that it is nothing great—except to the parents and a few close relatives or friends! But the only way to get into this world is to be born. Tales about sliding down a sunbeam or coming in on the wings of a stork do not work. All of us have been born at least once.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was one of the most realistic teachers who ever lived, and here the Scriptures speak about people being “born . . . of the flesh,” and as a result of “human decision” and “a husband’s will”—the socially accepted rite of marriage and the biological urge that is behind every birth. That is the level of life on which we are born.

No, there is nothing especially remarkable in someone’s being born, and yet here is God, prompting an apostle to talk about it. He has it recorded by divine inspiration in His Book, preserved at great cost of blood and tears and toil and prayers for nearly 2,000 years. He gives it to us through translators in familiar English. It is a message that certain people are born, and the reason that it is significant and not ordinary is that these appear of a mystic birth, having nothing whatever to do with the physical birth about which we know.

John says plainly that it is a birth on another level; it is not on the blood level. He says that it is a birth that does not have anything to do with blood or bones or tissue. It is a birth that does not have behind it the urge of the flesh or the social arrangement that we call marriage.

An act of God

This invisible birth of which John speaks is an act of God. John is talking about something beyond the physical birth that we know. The senses can touch the physical birth. When we were born into this world, those around us could see and feel and hold and weigh us. They could wash and clothe and feed us. But this invisible, mysterious birth of which John speaks has nothing to do with the flesh. It is of heaven. This birth is of the Spirit—a birth of another kind, a mystic birth.

Some people are very perturbed when a preacher uses the word *mystic*. They want to chase him out immediately and replace him with a man who is just as much afraid of the word as they are. I am not afraid of the word *mystic* because the whole Bible is a mystical book, a book of mystery, a book of wonder. I have discovered that you cannot trace any simple phenomenon back very far without coming up against mystery and darkness. It is much more so on the spiritual level.

These of whom the apostle speaks had a mystical birth—a birth of the Spirit altogether contrary to any kind of birth that anyone knew in the physical sense. If Jesus our Lord had talked merely about people being born physically into the world, He would never have been heard, and His teachings would not have been preserved in print. Physical birth is too common—everyone is born. But these people experienced a birth not of the body but of the heart. They were born not into time but into eternity. They were born not of earth but of heaven.

They had an inward birth, a spiritual birth, a mysterious birth, a mystical birth!

A particular grant of God

This invisible birth is also a particular grant of God. I know there is a sense in which the sovereign God is over all. I like to think that there is not a child born anywhere in the world whom God does not own as His creation. One of our philosophers has said that there are no illegitimate children—only illegitimate parents. In this sense, even those who are born without benefit of clergy or the formalities of a wedding are nevertheless owned by God Almighty as His creation. But that is down on the level of nature, and it is not what our Lord was talking about when He told Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again” (John 3:7).

This other birth—this mysterious, spiritual birth—was by a particular grant. It was altogether other than, different from and superior to the first kind of birth. This new birth is one that gives an unusual right: the right to be born into God’s household and thus become a child of the Father.

Now, when I spoke earlier about believing in the Fatherhood of God, I was referring to the fact that God is the Father of all who believe. He is the Father from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. But God is not the Father of the sinner. I do not foolishly stretch His Fatherhood to cover all mankind, for God is not the Father of murderers and the immoral. God is the Father of those who believe. I shall not let the

liberal and the modernist back me up against a wall and make me deny the Fatherhood of God.

Furthermore, I believe in the brotherhood of man. God has made of one blood all people who dwell on the face of the earth. All who are born into the world are born of the same blood. Our skin may be different. Some will have blond hair and some black, some curly and some straight. We may differ from each other greatly in appearance, but there is nevertheless a vast human brotherhood—all of us descended from that man Adam whose mortal sin brought death and all its fruits into the world.

The brotherhood within the brotherhood

But there is another brotherhood within that brotherhood. It is the brotherhood of the saints of God, for the fact that there is a broad human brotherhood does not mean that all men are saved. They are not. Not until they are saved—born again—do they enter into the brotherhood of the redeemed.

This is where the liberal and the modernist make their mistake. They insist that because mankind is a brotherhood, we are all the children of one Father, and therefore we are all saved. That is nonsense; it is unscriptural and it is not true!

I disagree with the liberal who wants to reduce everyone to a single level—Christian and non-Christian, religious and irreligious, saved and lost, believer and doubter. I believe there is a brotherhood of man that comes by the first birth and another brotherhood that comes through the second birth. By the grace of God, I want to dwell in that sa-

cred, mystic brotherhood of the ransomed and the redeemed, that fellowship of the saints gathered around the broken body and the shed blood of the Savior!

So it is a mysterious birth, and it gives us a particular privilege. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God" (John 1:12). It is a gift. God gives us the privilege—the legal right—to become children of God. This is what is meant by a person's being born into the kingdom of God. The Bible actually says that God has *given us the privilege of being born*, and this is not just poetry. Sometimes we use a poetic phrase and a person has to edit it down and squeeze the water out of it as well as the air and get it down to a germ of truth to find out what it means. But this is not poetry—this is theology! "He gave [them] the right to become children of God."

This birth is newsworthy

In the light of so amazing a statement, we can understand why these people of the new birth merited the news item, why they got the byline, why God Almighty put it in His Book that certain people were born in a special way and not just after the flesh. These were the privileged; they had a right given to them that did not belong to others—the right to be the children of God. So it is plain that a person who is a creation of God becomes a child of God only when he or she is born by a special privilege or grant of God Almighty.

It should be of interest to us that this is a right and a privilege that even the angels do not have. Actually, there is a time coming when Christian believers will no longer feel like saluting before any broad-winged angel in heaven. The Scriptures tell us that God has made Jesus for a little time lower than the angels in order that He might taste death for every man. But originally, Jesus was not lower than angels. In fact, God said of Jesus, "And let all the angels of God worship him" (Hebrews 1:6).

The promise to us is this: what Jesus is, we will be. Not in a sense of deity, certainly, but in all the rights and privileges. In standing we will be equal to Jesus and like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. In that day, if there is any saluting and bowing to be done, the angels will do it, for the children of the Most High God have the high grant of being like Jesus.

Why do we not actually believe that? We do not half believe it! If we did, we would begin to act like it, in preparation for the great day. I cannot understand why we do not begin to act like children of God if we believe that we have a special higher right to be children of God. We have a right to be sick inside when we see children of heaven acting like the sons of earth, acting like children of the world and the flesh, living like Adam and yet saying they believe in a new birth by God's Spirit.

How to have the privilege

Now, how did these people get that privilege? They *believed*, and they *received*. I am going to pass over the *believe* part of it because we have "believed"

ourselves into a blind alley in many cases. Many who go around “believing” never really get very much. But these born-again ones, these born of the mystic birth, believed, in that they were not cynics or doubters or pessimists. They took an optimistic, humble, trusting attitude toward Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They received Him, and “as many as received him . . . gave he power . . .” (John 1:12).

Note that this word *receive* is not passive. Passive is when I receive the action; active is when I perform the act. We have come to the religion of passivity in our day. Toward God everyone is passive. So we “receive” Christ; we make it a passive thing!

But the Bible knows absolutely nothing about passive reception, for the word *receive* is not passive but active. We make the word *receive* into “accept.” Everyone goes around asking, “Will you accept Jesus? Will you accept Him?” This makes a brush salesman out of Jesus Christ, as though He meekly stands waiting to know whether we will patronize Him or not. Although we desperately need what He proffers, we are sovereignly deciding whether we will receive Him or not.

Let me repeat, passive reception is unknown in the Bible. There is no hint of it within the confines of sacred Writ. I for one am tired of being told what to believe by people who parrot everybody else. You could put some of the ministers on perches and they would say, “Polly wants a cracker! Good morning!” all in the same tone of voice. If anyone challenges their line in their books and magazines

and songs, they look over their religious noses and declare the person is either radical or touched with modernism.

We have been taught that passive acceptance is the equivalent of faith when it is not. In the Greek, this word *receive* is active, not passive. You can go to any of the modern translations and you will find that they get across the idea of “take” and “took.” “As many as took him,” says one fine translation, “to them gave he the power to become the sons of God.”

An aggressive act of the total personality

It is *taking* instead of *accepting*. Whether you are layperson or minister, missionary or student, note this well. Receiving Christ savingly is an act of the total personality. It is an act of the mind and of the will and of the affections. It is thus not only an act of the total personality, it is an *aggressive* act of the total personality.

When you bring that thought over into this text, the Holy Spirit is saying of the children of God: “As many as aggressively took Him with their total personality . . .” There is no inference that they could sit and quietly accept. Every part of their being became a hand reaching forth for Jesus Christ. They took Jesus as Savior and Lord with all of their will and affections and feelings and intellect. That is why it says in the Greek: “As many as actively took Him . . .”

Evangelical Christianity is gasping for breath. We happen to have entered a period when it is a popu-

lar thing to sing about tears and prayers and believing. You can get a religious phrase kicked around almost anywhere—even right in the middle of a worldly program dedicated to the flesh and the devil. Old Mammon, with two silver dollars for eyes, sits at the top of it, lying about the quality of the products, shamelessly praising actors who ought to be put to work laying bricks. In the middle of it, someone trained in a studio to sound religious will say with an unctuous voice, “Now, our hymn for the week!” So they break in, and the band goes twinkle, twankle, twinkle, twankle, and they sing something that the devil must blush to hear. They call that religion, and I will concede that religion it is. It is not Christianity, and it is not the Holy Spirit. It is not New Testament and it is not redemption. It is simply making capital out of religion.

I still believe, however, that if someone should come along who could make himself heard to thousands instead of to a few hundred, someone with as much oil as intellect and as much power as penetration, we could yet save evangelical Christianity from the dead-end street where it finds itself. I warn you: do not for one second let the crowds, the bustle of religious activity, the surge of religious thinking fool you into supposing that there is a vast amount of spirituality. It is not so.

That is why the meaning of the word *received* is so important here. “As many as received him”—actively and aggressively took Him. This means a determined exercise of the will. It means to not deny any condition that the Lord lays down. That is

something quite different from what we are hearing. They did not come to the Lord and try to make terms, but they came to the Lord and actively took Him on His terms.

We must meet any condition He lays down

This is the child of God, the believer in Christ who will meet any condition the Lord lays down, even to the forsaking of relatives and friends.

“You are getting radical,” you protest. Maybe so, but did you ever read the words of Jesus, “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26)? Jesus is asking us to place our love for Him, our Savior, before that of wife, husband, children. And if we do not, He will not have us. That is the sum of the teaching of Jesus on this subject.

“It is cruel—terribly cruel,” you object. The living God demands our love and our loyalty, and we call that demand cruel? Actually, hell is so hot that God is still doing all that He can to arouse us and stir us into action. Lot could have been justified had he forsaken that ungodly family of his and gone out alone from Sodom.

Let us get it straight. Jesus Christ does not just offer us salvation as though it is a decoration or a bouquet or some addition to our garb. He says plainly: “Throw off your old rags, strip to the skin! Let me dress you in the fine clean robes of My righteousness—all Mine. Then, if it means loss of money, lose

it! If it means loss of job, lose it! If it means persecution, take it! If it brings the stiff winds of opposition, bow your head into the wind and take it—for My sake!”

To receive Jesus Christ as Lord is not a passive, soft thing—not a predigested kind of religion. It is strong meat! It is such strong meat that God is calling us in this hour to yield everything to Him. Some want to cling to their sinful pleasures. In our churches in this deadly, degenerate hour, we are guilty of making it just as easy as possible for double-minded people.

“Just believe on Jesus and accept Him, and then you can be as you were before. You can do what you did before, as long as you don’t get drunk and run after women. Everything else is all right. Amen!” This is the kind of marginal Christianity that is being passed along in too many circles. As a result, we have a religion that is not much better than paganism. I think I would rather follow Zoroaster and kneel twice a day to the rising and setting sun than to be a half-baked Christian who insists on “believing” for salvation and then does as he pleases, violating the lordship of the Savior.

The popular way is wrong

It may be a popular idea in our day to give people something to make them happy and to tell them they can get eternal life and never lose it just by “accepting Jesus,” after which they can do as they please. You can have big conferences built on that—even Bible colleges and great groups of

busy Christians. But it is an error. The Bible says that as many as *received* Him—took Him aggressively with their whole personalities—to them He gave the right to become children of God.

Shakespeare had Hamlet say, “Denmark—all of Denmark is contracted in one great brow of woe.” I would like to change that and say, “All of the human personality needs to be contracted in one great, aggressive grasping for Jesus that says, ‘Here, Lord, You are mine, even if it costs me blood and death. You are mine, even if it costs me the loss of friendships. You are mine, even if it means the loss of job or position or standing!’ ”

I think of the late Louis Henry Zeimer of Toledo, for many years prior to his death pastor of the large Toledo Gospel Tabernacle. Before his conversion, he was the minister of a denominational church. He often told of reading a copy of *Alliance Life* for the first time and how he came face to face with the possibility that he could be saved—and know it. Simply, he gave his heart to the Lord and was converted.

Then he began to preach to his people about the wonder of the new birth and revival came. He was called to account by the leaders of his denomination, so he got up and read to them from Luther’s writings and showed them that he was preaching what Luther had taught about faith and justification. They cleared him of heresy, but they asked him to resign.

“That was a promotion!” Ziemer later declared. He accepted the pulpit of a small Christian and Mis-

sionary Alliance church (in those days Alliance churches were usually behind a horse stable or over a barber shop), but his preaching and his ministry soon made it the great Toledo Gospel Tabernacle that has sent scores of missionaries—even three of his own sons and daughters—around the world. This man knew what it was to receive and live for Jesus aggressively with his total personality. He gave up everything—pulpit, parsonage, pension. It all went for Christ's sake.

It is time to be men—and women

Why should believing Christians want everything pre-cooked, pre-digested, sliced and salted and expect that God must come and hold the food to their baby lips while they pound the table and splash? And we think that is Christianity! It is not. Such a degenerate, illegitimate breed have no right to be called Christians.

Those who insist that the Lord God humor them, letting them continue on as they are and still say in the end, "Come, faithful servants," are fools. Someone needs to tell them so now!