Being Born Again

If we study Holy Scripture carefully, we can see that God's plan was not limited to creating beings higher than the angels; He intended to create a being that would bear His image and likeness. According to Genesis 1:26-27, God said: "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.*" This same perspective is underlined in Romans 8:29: "*For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son…*"

So the Son of God came to earth to give man the opportunity to be reborn spiritually, so that he could return to the life he was first created for. He also came to restore the inner peace and the rest of soul that mankind lost when it fell into sin.

According to the divine standards of the Kingdom of Heaven, as the Scriptures describe them, there is a plan to transform human character so that it is brought into harmony with the character of that Kingdom's citizens. This process of transformation begins with the spiritual rebirth of the sinner and goes on until he reaches the spiritual stature of the Kingdom's citizens.

We have a soul and a spirit; we have been given the ability to think, to reason, to believe, to make decisions, to admire, to love and to make choices. This is because of God's plan, according to which man was designed to be like Him. God created us and gave us these abilities so that we would use them, and it is our responsibility to use them and to work together with Him to reach the stature of His Son.

God's plan is not limited to a cheap restoration that consists only of the forgiveness of sins. It provides for the restoration of God's image in us and for bringing us up to the stature of His Son, as Ephesians 4:11-13 says: "And he gave some… prophets… pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints… till we all come… unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

To give us the opportunity to learn to live as the citizens of this Kingdom live, God has to begin the process and give us spiritual birth anew, as Scripture says in John 3:3, where the Lord Jesus declares: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Spiritual rebirth, then, is a vital threshold in the life of every believer. It marks the start of a new existence in which we gain citizenship in the Kingdom of God and set out on a road of drawing near to His Son and being conformed to His example.

This is explained in 2 Corinthians 5:17-18, where we are told that through Christ a man becomes a new creature, a deep transformation that has its origin in God.

Scripture makes it clear that spiritual rebirth is a divine work. This new birth comes from God Himself, as John 1:11 says: "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… which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

I have noticed that among Christians there is confusion about the criteria God has set for spiritual rebirth and for maturing in the faith. The confusion comes from wrongly merging two distinct stages. The first is entering the Kingdom of God, the beginning of the spiritual journey, which we could compare to starting school, to walking into kindergarten. The second is the completion of that spiritual journey, the equivalent of graduating from high school at the end of twelfth grade.

So many people think they have to reach an advanced level of spiritual development, the level of twelfth grade, before they can even begin their journey, that is, before they can walk into kindergarten. They assume they must meet certain conditions and have certain qualities before God will let them into His Kingdom.

As I have said on other occasions, the criteria God has set are completely objective and leave no room for subjective interpretation. This means God does not act in a tailor-made way for each individual; He follows a principle that applies universally. As an illustration, we can think of plant seeds and the universal law of germination that governs them.

Whatever the seed may be, wheat, barley, rice or anything else, there are specific conditions it needs in order to germinate, and these do not change according to where on the globe it is planted. It does not happen, for example, that Peter has a grain of wheat and prays, and God steps in specially so that this particular seed sprouts in some miraculous way that is unique to him or to anyone else.

If God did that, nobody would understand any more how a grain of wheat germinates, because each of the millions of people would have a different experience according to their wishes, and God would answer their prayers by making the seed sprout in each person's pocket. But that is not how things are.

The truth is that the germination of seeds follows objective, universal laws. The process is purely objective. You water the seed, you leave it there for a while, and whether you sleep or stay awake, work in the yard or busy yourself with other things, when you come back to it you will see that it has sprouted. And that holds in America just as it does in Romania, in Japan and anywhere else. It is the same with the process of being born again. There is a universal way this spiritual rebirth works.

A Christian who does not understand the process of the new birth may often wonder whether God was really involved in his spiritual rebirth. But there is an objective standard God has set, much like the criteria of a driving test or any other exam. The process runs objectively, and all we have to do is meet those criteria.

There is no case in which God refuses spiritual rebirth to a person who meets all the conditions. So the process of the new birth is the same for everyone. We need to understand what conditions God has set, and if we have met them, we should stop doubting whether or not we have been spiritually reborn.

Let us open God's Word at John 3:3 and read and examine the conditions for this birth anew, or birth from above. Verse 3 is the one that concerns us: *"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Nicodemus asks: *"How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?"* Jesus answers: *"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."*

Verse 5 sheds further light on this spiritual rebirth: *"Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter."* It is not only a matter of seeing the Kingdom of God but of entering it. We must be born of water and of the Spirit.

What does **water** mean here? I have noticed that in some evangelical circles, such as the Adventist Church, the emphasis falls on baptism in water, physical water being considered necessary to this process of being born again, whether it is the water of a river, a baptismal tank or some other place where baptism is practised.

They believe that this spiritual rebirth takes place through water baptism, the physical water being the "water" the Lord Jesus speaks of. And then I noticed, from studying their own writings and not just from what I had heard, that they see spiritual birth as an ongoing process. You are always being reborn; the process of rebirth does not stop until the end of your life.

It is as if you begin with baptism in water and then keep on being born again. Imagine if the birth of a child lasted for years!

In our spiritual life this "water" the Lord Jesus spoke of has to appear. But what kind of water? Let us think about that. What water is Scripture talking about?

To clear this up, let us read from the Gospel of John, chapter 4, so that we understand that the water the Lord Jesus speaks of in John 3 is the Word of God, and then we can move on. Chapter 4, verse 7: There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water. *"Give me to drink,"* Jesus said to her, for His disciples had gone into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to Him, *"How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans."* Jesus answered and said to her, *"If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water."* Amen.

We must be born of living water in order to have life. The Lord Jesus is the One who gives us this living water. Let us quote verses 13 and 14: *"Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."* Amen. It becomes a well of water springing up into everlasting life. What kind of water is this? It is the living water the Lord Jesus gives.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. I will go on to read from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 8, to understand this living water better. It is important to recognise that the mention of water in John 3 is no accident.

The word *"water"* is used to stir our thinking, not to mislead us, just as God sometimes challenges us to look for deeper meanings. Let us read chapter 8, verse 1 and then verse 5: *"And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God."* Elsewhere we are told that the purpose of our sending is to preach and proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom.

In verse 5 we are given the picture of the sower: *"A sower went out to sow his seed."* This seed is the water, and it is essential to us, because it is from it that we must be born again. To plant something you need the right seed; for example, you need wheat seed to grow wheat. If we don't have it, there is no talk of a harvest. Suppose we have a field but no seed; we have to get the seed in order to sow it in the ground. If we don't sow the seed, we can't expect to harvest wheat, however favourable the conditions are.

"A sower went out to sow his seed." Verse 11 explains the parable: *"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God."* So, going back to John, the **"water"** mentioned in chapter 3 stands for the Word of God, which is the Seed needed for our spiritual birth. Without this Seed there can be no true birth. The first step is to receive the seed, that is, the Word of God, into our hearts. In Luke 8 we are told that the seed that falls on good ground represents an honest and good heart that brings forth fruit with patience.

The first condition, then, is to hear the Word. It is a prerequisite for entering the Kingdom of God. If you have heard the pure Word, this condition is met. It is important that we do not receive a genetically modified or spoiled seed, because then the birth cannot take place.

In John 1 we are told that we are *"born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God."* To all who received the Word, *"the Word was made flesh,"* was given the right to become children of God. The right was granted to them. Once again: it is an objective matter, not a subjective one. In effect, there is an objective formula behind this process. You received the Word; you were granted the right.

That is why the apostle Paul warns us that some corrupt the Word of God. The aim of that corruption is to stop spiritual birth from happening.

Do you meet this requirement or not? Let us examine ourselves. Did we receive the whole Word, or did we receive a spoiled or genetically modified seed?

When you were involved with the Jehovah's Witnesses, you received a modified seed, didn't you? The seed had been altered. "We follow the teachings that come from Brooklyn [the Watchtower headquarters], which tell us to do things a certain way." If we have met the condition of hearing the pure Word, then the first step has been taken. I have received the Word: can I examine myself or not?

We can examine ourselves:

We read the Word, then we examine ourselves. We have to check whether we are in agreement with the Word. What do we learn from this check? Did we receive it into our hearts with joy? Did we receive the word: render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's? The word: resist not him that does you evil?

What does it mean to receive the word with joy? It means to accept it. Some people accept it under compulsion; they are obliged to accept it because otherwise they could suffer consequences, such as prison. Take not shoplifting, for example: if we steal, we risk being locked up. There is a difference between the man who doesn't steal from a shop for fear of prison and the man who truly wants to live in righteousness. The difference is significant.

In Matthew 13 the Lord Jesus proclaimed the word of the Kingdom of God, the gospel of the Kingdom. Let me give you an illustration to make the idea clearer. Imagine that one of the brothers here, or I myself, had lived in extreme poverty in a poor country like Romania, and then one of us went to Germany, settled there, learned the laws of the country and came back to Romania. He tells us: *"Let me tell you what Germany is like and help you get there too."* He shares with us the word about Germany's laws. He tells us, for example, that in Germany people don't drive over the speed limit and don't work off the books. Do we like this news or not?

Some seem to be eagerly waiting for these words. They have long wanted to live in an orderly country where there is no stealing and no lying. They receive the news with joy. But what about the others? Some suffer enormously and cannot bear these standards. Some people simply do not love what is right. They hide, they lie and they cheat.

What should we do? Love God's law or hate it? Rejoice in it? Are there thieves in the Kingdom of God? No, there are not. Some are glad there is no anger there, while others are sad that they can't act on their own lusts. Do you understand?

To receive with joy means to truly accept the new way of life from the heart; otherwise we deceive ourselves. It cannot be forced. We can examine ourselves: have we truly received the Lord Jesus' word about not resisting evil and about righteousness?

The question is not whether we have fulfilled it but whether we have received it. The conditions for being born again are not that we fulfil the law, because if we try to fulfil it, we set up another standard. How much would we have to fulfil to be accepted? What percentage? But what does Scripture tell us? *"Not of works, lest any man should boast."* That is how salvation is, and that is how the new birth is.

Still, we will see that there are a few more steps to take. This comprehensive set of criteria includes other objective conditions as well; one of the essential ones is receiving the Word.

Denying yourself – step 2 *"If any man will come after me,"* says the Lord Jesus, *"let him deny himself."* If we want to return to God and become His children, we must meet this condition. Have I met this requirement or not? When I received *"the Word"* with joy, did I

deny myself or not? What does denying yourself mean?

It means giving up your own opinions and ideas about the world and about life and adopting God's. Have I managed to do that or not?

We have to do it. Is self-denial included in this set of criteria? It is not enough just to sow the seed in my heart; life has to begin, and there are certain things I must carry out.

I repeat once more: one of the most important things is to receive the whole, pure Word of God. This is where many people fail. Take Catholicism, for example. Did they receive a good seed or a spoiled one? If you look at the teachings of Catholicism, you will see that some of the Lord's teachings are ignored, distorted or left out, and there are teachings that have nothing to do with the Word of God. One example is the idea of purgatory, which is an invention of Catholicism.

What does this notion of purgatory claim? What is supposed to happen there? We live in sin, we die as sinners, and then after death God sends us to purgatory. So there is an intermediate place before reaching Paradise, where our unpurified being is perfected and our sins are wiped away. There we suffer and are punished for the deeds we did in the world we lived in. But is that what Scripture teaches us? What kind of seed is this? It is spoiled.

And if we turn to Orthodoxy, is the seed genetically modified or not? Here too we find a modified seed. Let us ask ourselves: can there be a new birth in that setting?

It is out of the question. People who claim that there are those born of God in Orthodoxy too are distorting the Word of God. How can you have brothers who did not receive the whole seed? How can a person be born without the seed? Is the seed necessary or not? The Lord Jesus says: *"Ye must be born of water and of the Spirit."*

If the water, that is, the Word, isn't there, how can you be born of the Spirit alone? Some believe they are born only of the Spirit, without the word, without the seed. Is that possible?

For example, suppose I have soil and add water, but I have no wheat seed. Will there be a harvest? And without water the wheat won't grow either. Is that true or not? There is a Transylvanian saying: if it rains in May, you'll have cornbread; if it doesn't rain in May, you won't! Because that is when the corn is sown, and there is a set window in which it has to germinate. If it doesn't rain in that window, the planted seed is lost.

And what if the birds come and take the seed from the field? Have you noticed how the birds come and pick the seed off the field? If they take it, then even if it rains, there will be nothing to harvest.

The seed is very important. That is God's part. He sows the seed in our hearts.

The book of Hebrews tells us that God makes a new covenant with us and puts His laws in our hearts; He plants them there, and He writes them in our minds. When He makes the new covenant, He plants them on the basis that we receive them and deny ourselves.

Because the "Model" we are to be transformed into is perfect and goes beyond human understanding, it becomes essential that we take on this attitude of renouncing ourselves. That means abandoning our own opinions and plans and following with devotion and loyalty the guidance of the One who is perfect. In doing so, we acknowledge that His wisdom is perfect and that His plans are higher than any human reasoning.

Self-denial is the starting point of the new life we have been called to; it is the first condition the Lord Jesus requires of those who want to begin this new life.

The Lord Jesus gave us a perfect example of "self-denial" before the Father's will, a basic principle in God's "workshop," and He asks us to follow the same road in the process of being made perfect. In this way the Lord Jesus showed that rest and inner peace are possible only when our own desires and opinions are set aside.

The Lord Jesus, our model, showed us through His own example that a new beginning is impossible without self-denial, and He asks us to follow His example and give up ourselves, just as He Himself did.

As the verse in Luke 9:23 teaches us: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me," giving up oneself, after hearing the Word and receiving it, is the first step towards becoming like Christ. Self-denial is essential; it works like a key that opens the way to complete transformation in Christ, allowing us to take on all His values and principles, which are perfect.

"Self-denial" is a central pillar in God's plan of salvation and is essential for our being transformed into the image of Christ. Following the Lord Jesus' example of "self-denial" is a challenge, but it is also an essential step for the new birth, and we need it for our spiritual growth and for being conformed to the character of Christ.

Unless we live in self-denial before God's instructions, which are perfect, unless we give up our own opinions, the process of the new birth cannot take place.

It is a set of criteria for entering the Kingdom of God. We have to understand this from the start. Not of works. Works are not what counts here. No one can come to God with his own works to get God to receive him into His kingdom.

As I said earlier, there is only one set of criteria for bringing about the new birth. Besides the two steps, receiving the Word and denying ourselves, what else has to happen in this process of birth?

Let us go further – step 3.

Let us turn to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, and read verses 1 and 2: *"There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway."* Amen. Cornelius was devout, gave alms and prayed to God. Those are three things

he did, and the fourth: **he feared God.**

In verse 34 the apostle Peter shows us another condition we must meet for the new birth: *"Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation..."*

Here I could add, though it isn't written in the text, that whoever gives alms, whoever is devout and whoever prays to God is accepted by God. But that is not so. Cornelius did certain things, but it was not on the basis of those things that God accepted him. *"In every nation **he that feareth him**, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."* Amen.

We do not come to God with our works. Cornelius didn't come with his works; he didn't sway God with his prayers. He feared God. He had the fear of the Lord. What does that mean? Let us think about it.

Let's compare it to a child starting first grade. Some children can already read, while others can't. In my case, I didn't know my letters when I started school. But being able to read is not a condition for being admitted to first grade. The condition is age: if you have turned six or seven, you are admitted because it is time to begin your formal education.

In the same way, the condition for entering into a relationship with God is not how much you know or do, but your openness to receive Him.

The apostle Paul, for example, knew the Torah and the Old Testament very well. But that knowledge didn't help him to be accepted into the Kingdom of God; on the contrary, it helped him persecute the disciples. To be accepted into the Kingdom of God, Paul had to go through an examination like any other man. There isn't a different set of criteria for him or for anyone else.

Let us think about the apostle Paul and see what happened to him. In chapter 9, verse 3, we read about the encounter of Saul (who later became Paul) with the Lord. On the road to Damascus a light from heaven shone round about him, and he fell to the earth and heard a voice saying to him, *"Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"* Saul asked, *"Who art thou, Lord?"* and the Lord answered, *"I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."*

At this moment Saul denies himself; he acknowledges the Lord, calling Him *"Lord,"* which means *"Master,"* and this marks the beginning of his new life, of his transformation and of his being accepted into the Kingdom of God. When John met the Lord Jesus on the island of Patmos, it was a remarkable encounter. John had been with the Lord Jesus on earth for three years and had a very close relationship with Him; he is even described as the disciple whom the Lord Jesus loved, who leaned on His breast. When he met the Lord Jesus on Patmos, John fell to the ground, overwhelmed by His presence.

In Paul's case the encounter with the Lord Jesus was similar. Paul did not know the Lord Jesus at the moment they met, and asked Him: *"Who art thou, Lord?"* To which the Lord Jesus answered: *"I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."* Paul, trembling and full of fear, asked: *"Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"* That question shows a change of attitude, an openness to

obedience and submission.

This attitude is essential for us too in the process of being born again. We must be willing to ask sincerely: *"Lord, what do You want me to do from today on?"* and be ready to keep His word, to belong to Him and to love His word.

Paul's experience was different from Cornelius's. Cornelius was already a humble, God-fearing man, while Paul was a persecutor whom God had to bring down into deep humiliation. At the moment he met God, Paul was seized by the fear of the Lord, a holy fear. Those travelling with him heard the voice but saw no one. Paul received the instruction: *"Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do."* He obeyed and followed these instructions.

We can check whether we have the fear of the Lord by studying Scripture and looking up verses on the subject. By going through these verses we can assess whether we live with a genuine fear of God.

This fear of the Lord **is fundamental to being born again**. We are not talking about a deep, mature fear, but about the fear we need at the start of our spiritual journey, in *"kindergarten,"* which is different from the deeper fear we may have later on, in *"twelfth grade."*

Suppose I take a job today where one of our brothers works, in the warehouse. Will I know where everything is? If this brother says to me, *"Go and fetch the little table, you know where it is,"* or something else, I probably won't know; I'll need to look around and find my way in the store. Why? What does experience, working every day with the boss, do? It develops us, as we discussed earlier. *"If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man."* When is someone perfect? When he is born again? On the first day of his new birth? Or later, at an advanced stage? There are two sets of criteria: one for the new birth and one for graduation.

Let us not confuse the middle or the end of the process with its beginning. If I am not at the finish line, that doesn't mean the new birth hasn't taken place. It happens without any subjective intervention on God's part. It is a natural process. If I meet the necessary conditions, life appears. If I put in water, wheat and soil, the plant will sprout.

But if we let the weeds grow, what happens? In the end the weeds will take over, won't they? But at the start the seed will sprout if we have received the word with joy.

The fear of the Lord: what does it mean? Is it about works or not? It means having a holy fear in your heart. Only with that fear can you fulfil the Word. *"It says of Noah that, moved with fear, he did all that God commanded him."* Being full of holy fear was not enough on its own. After that comes the doing, comes godliness, and so on.

But in the initial phase it is about your decision. Let us stay in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 5. Reading verses 31 and 32: *"Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him."* Amen.

If we look at verse 33, when they heard these words they were cut to the heart and took counsel to slay them. Did they receive the word? Can we speak of a new birth in these people? Were they on God's side or not? God had exalted the Lord Jesus and made Him Lord and Saviour. What did they not receive here? Did they receive Him as Lord? As Master? Because that is really what the word *"Lord"* means: to be Master. They knew very well what it means to have a master.

And then Scripture says: *"We are his witnesses... and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him."*

This is a universal condition. God gives me the Holy Spirit only if I obey Him. What does it mean to obey Him? Does it mean doing works, or have I decided to obey Him? What decisions have I made? What decisions did Paul make? *"What shall I do? What shall I do?"* He was determined to obey. He was determined to act. The starting point is the decision. I cannot influence God with my works.

I cannot bring works of my own in order to be born again, and neither afterwards can I please God by my own works. To please God I must have the works of obedience to the Word, the works of faith.

So I must receive with joy and want to act. God knows if I am not going to act; He doesn't wait to see whether I'll do something. If that were so, He would be a respecter of persons. He would give new birth to some and not to others, and He would wait for them to do something before granting them the new birth. Is that how it is in first grade?

Does the teacher wait to see whether the children know A, B and C and then say, *"Well then, now I'll accept you into first grade"*? Or does she accept them and then start working with them? It works by grace. Because it is grace. *"As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God."* God is objective and does not intervene there. He gave them the right to become children of God if they received the Word of God with joy.

Now let us read from Acts 15, because a problem comes up here. God knows the heart. Let us read Acts chapter 15, verses 7-9: *"And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."*

The conditions for being born again include hearing the word of the gospel and believing it. When we say we believe the Word, it means we accept it; believing and receiving are equivalent ideas. We must not confuse the terms: to believe also means to receive. God, who knows the hearts, bore them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit just as He gave it to us. He saw that Cornelius feared God.

Just as we can check whether a child knows how to read, God checked Cornelius and found that he feared God. God checked Paul too. Before meeting the Lord Jesus, Paul did not fear God. But when he met God, he felt a holy fear, a fear that led him to salvation, not a fear of punishment.

If Paul had been indifferent when he met the Lord Jesus, nothing would have happened. God saw his heart and acted. The jailer in Philippi reacted much as Paul did. In Acts chapter 16, verse 27, we read that the jailer, thinking the prisoners had escaped after he saw the prison doors open, was about to kill himself.

That fear had nothing to do with God; it was rather a fear of the consequences he would face if the prisoners had escaped. Nobody wants to end his life, especially when you are young and have a family, just because something happened at work. You don't want to throw yourself off a balcony over something trivial.

The fear he felt had to do with the possibility of being punished by his superiors because the prisoners might have got away. In this difficult situation Paul cried with a loud voice, *"Do thyself no harm: for we are all here."* Hearing these words, the jailer called for a light, sprang in and, trembling with fear, fell down before Paul and Silas. He brought them out and asked them, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* There it is again, the question: *What must I do?*

Now the jailer's problem with his superiors was solved, because Paul had reassured him, *"Do thyself no harm: for we are all here."* Then the jailer, trembling with fear, asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved. They answered him, *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."* *And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. Amen.*

The conditions of the new birth for the jailer were simple.

After years of attending meetings, we may wonder whether we have had an experience like that of the jailer, this sinful man. What kind of man was the jailer before he wanted salvation? What special qualities did he have that would move God to give him salvation? Was he God-fearing, full of discernment, generous? How did he feel when Paul and Silas were brought in beaten and fastened in the stocks?

Think about what kind of heart this man could have had. Even when you see an animal beaten and tormented, you don't feel urged to torment it even more, do you? But this jailer, who had probably spent his whole life tormenting prisoners, was used to it. The stocks: what do you think they were? If you have ever been in a medieval prison, you know there were instruments of torture. Where else but in prisons would they have been used? The stocks meant the prisoners were fastened by hands and feet, stretched out, with no comfort at all, far from a soft bed.

This was the man who met God, just like the thief on the cross. Exactly the same, with no special quality. Whether you are an executioner in the Emperor's service or a robber on the road, I don't think there is a difference. Being paid by whoever holds power does not justify your actions. You too are a murderer, a plunderer, a torturer. You have no merit before God. And yet God is no respecter of persons; He takes no account of what you have been.

God did not wait long with this jailer to test him. And the grace was not small. How long should He have waited? Seven or eight years to test him, to see whether he was worthy or not? When

did God grant this jailer the new birth?

The word of Scripture tells us he was baptised straight away. What did Paul and Silas do when they saw that he had received the Word into his heart with joy? He had met a first condition: "as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God."

Paul, who knew this standard of God's, that all who receive the Word are given the right to become children of God, applied the Word of God and baptised this jailer. It is written of the jailer that he rejoiced, believing in God with all his house. He rejoiced; he received the Word of God with joy.

Some think he stayed a jailer and carried on torturing people. Really? He received with joy the word of the Lord Jesus that says "resist not evil," and he had a testimony through these men. It was their very testimony that led him to ask, "What must I do to be saved?" He wanted to have their life. How? Singing in chains. What a lofty spirit these men had! It was extraordinary. And he wanted to be saved and to have the life these men had.

Why does God grant salvation so easily to this jailer, who was a scoundrel? And to me, who have been struggling for seven years, ten years? I serve the Lord, I want to get to heaven, I weep, I pray. And I see that my life is far from what it ought to be.

"Is God a respecter of persons or not?" God does not act that way. But perhaps I received the word with joy and yet did not deny myself, and perhaps the fear of the Lord is not before my eyes. Testing the fear of the Lord is unavoidable, because you have to set out on the road, and He has to test me.

If God sees that I don't have the fear of the Lord, I am like a drunkard who rejoices when someone tells him about the Kingdom of God but makes no decision. What has to happen to this drunkard for him to receive the new birth? He too has to tremble with fear and say: What must I do to be saved? Trembling with fear, I ask myself what I must do to be saved. There is a difference, isn't there?

Let us go back to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 13, to better understand the conditions for entering the Kingdom of God. Let us pay attention and avoid confusion.

I admit that I have not yet reached the level of spirituality God wants of me, have I? I haven't managed it. Perhaps I have been held back a year twice over; perhaps I ought long ago to have been a teacher.

The essential condition for being born again is to hear the Word of God; without it there can be no talk of a new birth in Him. Let us examine ourselves a little. Let us see where we stand. We read from verse 44: "And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God."

The Jews, seeing the crowds, were filled with envy and spoke against the things Paul said, blaspheming. But Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly to them: "It was necessary that the word of

God should first have been spoken to you" – or, I could say, it had to be sown first in your hearts. The sower went out to sow the seed. "But seeing ye do not receive Him and His word, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles."

You judge yourselves unworthy. Why? Because you don't receive Him. Nothing more was needed. You only had to receive Him with joy. Verse 48 says: "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord." They glorified the Word of God. And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.

Not many things have to happen, but they have to happen in the right order. We need to ask ourselves: do you receive with joy the beauty of the Kingdom of God? If not, you are far from the Kingdom of God. It isn't the houses or the motorways in Germany that should draw me, but German law. It isn't the streets of gold in the Kingdom of God that should draw me, but the laws of His Kingdom. His ways are perfect, His laws are perfect. Do I want to live by them or not?

That is why there is grace: to begin the work in us. Where does it begin? From the ashes, from the filth. That is where He lifts us up from. We have no quality of our own. The jailer had no remarkable quality, nor did the thief. Cornelius, on the other hand, had things he could have boasted of, but because of this he didn't need to tremble with fear, for the fear of God was already in his heart, a fear he had been cultivating for a long time. Job, like Noah and Abram, also cultivated the fear of God.

It is a good thing that we have cultivated the fear of God; we began the life of faith twenty-five or thirty years ago. It is good that we learned about the fear of God gradually and came to understand it. It didn't have to happen suddenly. For some it may have been a sudden experience, but for others it was a gradual process, as it was with Cornelius. With him, receiving the Holy Spirit was like a breath of wind, and all at once they began to speak in tongues without trembling with fear. Even so, there are steps to follow before we reach perfection.

The book of *Hebrews 5* teaches us: *"When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again… and are become such as have need of milk."* Those people had not been put out of the community, nor had they fallen from the faith. They simply had difficulty understanding and could no longer think straight, because they were not putting the word of God into practice.

May the Lord help us understand that it is quite simple: if we do not love the Kingdom of God and His character – because the Kingdom of God is, in fact, part of His character – then, however beautiful the things set before us, nothing will happen.

If we prefer sin to the Kingdom of God, what can happen? No matter how well we know the Word of God, if we let ourselves be drawn by the world, won't God see that there is nothing of value in us? Can we deceive God? No.

Also here, in *Acts 13:43*, it says: "Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God." The religious proselytes, that is, those who had the fear of the

Lord, were there too. So godliness involves the fear of the Lord, and that is plain to see.

Let us begin reading at verse 15. When the reading of the Law and the Prophets in the synagogue was over, the rulers of the synagogue invited those present to share a message if they had one for the congregation, saying: *"Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on."* Paul stood up, beckoned with his hand for attention and began to speak: *"Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience."*

These words show that Paul was addressing both the Israelites and the proselytes who feared God, that is, *"ye that fear God."* These people were in the synagogue seeking God, not in other places such as taverns, but in a place where the divine presence could be felt.

We remember Lydia and others who feared God and who, before they were born again, born of God, were seeking to know Him. It is our prayer that the Lord will help us understand and drive doubt out of our hearts. God gives us new birth when we meet the necessary conditions. If we seek Him sincerely, He will give us this spiritual rebirth.

God knows the way best, but He shows no favouritism; He is not subjective but objective in all He does. The process of rebirth is the same for everyone, whoever the person. It doesn't matter whether it is one brother or another, or whether Peter was more devoted for twenty years; that is only an advantage, but it is not enough. Peter cannot get God to give him new birth just because he did certain works in His name in his youth. No one can sway God's will. It is essential that we have the fear of the Lord.

Paul – do you remember what he was like? Before he was born again, he was a persecutor of Christians, but as touching the righteousness which is in the Law, he was blameless. He was a Pharisee among Pharisees, set apart by God from his mother's womb, but that was not enough. He needed to meet the Lord Jesus and feel fear in His presence. If he had been arrogant before the Lord Jesus, he would probably have needed another ten or twenty years of experiences to come to the true fear of the Lord. Amen.

To conclude what we have discussed, we can check ourselves:

1. Have I received the whole Word, or are there certain teachings I don't agree with? If so, I do not meet God's criteria.
1. It is important to examine ourselves: do we truly want to live in the same self-denial He showed us by His example? Do we truly have the desire, in our relationship with God, to deny ourselves and give up our limited human values?

Are we truly ready to devote ourselves completely to the teachings of Christ? Are we open to being wholly transformed into new beings? This radical transformation is described in 2 Corinthians 5:17, which says: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

- We can also check ourselves: do we have the fear of the Lord? If you want to enter into a relationship with God, it is essential that you tremble at His Word, as Isaiah 66:2 says: *"But to

this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word."*

Take the example of Job, who was a man who feared God and turned away from evil. Or the example of Noah, who, moved with holy fear, did all that God commanded him. That is a pattern of behaviour we can follow. Or Abraham, who kept everything God commanded him concerning the offering of his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. At the end of what he did, he received confirmation that he feared God, as Genesis 22:12 says. The angel said: "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me."

Source: *Being Born Again* — Unmodified Word
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