

The New Creation

By Rev. Paul S. Rees

Text: "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." —Matthew 18:3.

"If you are attracted by what is new—and most of us are—then surely here is a text that is tailor-made for you. Take this sentence apart, and you will find that Jesus has confronted you with three new things:

First, a new direction—"except ye be converted," or turned around;

Second, a new disposition—"and become as little children";

Third, a new dominion—"enter into the kingdom of heaven."

But immediately we should remind ourselves, I think, that these new things, if they are to be appreciated and experienced, must be seen against the backdrop of certain old things.

For example, there is what might be called the old dilemma; man knows that he is much more than the highest of the animals and yet he knows he is not what he ought to be. Someone has said, "There is one great and universal wish of mankind expressed in all religions, in all art and philosophy, and in all human life; the wish to pass beyond himself as he now is."

Tennyson has given cry to this yearning:

"O that a man would arise in me,

That the man I am might cease to be!"

Thus we have the spectacle of man aware, on the one hand, that he is much more than the highest of the creatures below him and, on the other hand, that he is far from what he ought to be and what he wishes desperately, in his best moments, that he might be.

Yet the old dilemma is not all. There is the old difficulty. It may be stated like this; that arrangements to improve man's character and conduct by improving his relations with his fellow creatures still leave the basic problem unsolved, which is that of making his relations with God what they ought to be.

Man is by nature a creature of God. After the Psalmist exclaimed, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" he quickly added, "Thou hast made him." Never mind for the moment what man has done to himself to spoil this divine product. The point is that man, for all his folly, is God-made.

In this state of nature—wholly apart from what Christians call salvation—man possesses a kind of life which he shares with all his fellows. It is described in the Bible as bios, from which we get our word "biology" or "biological." It is life such as God has creatively and intentionally adapted to the human species. It expresses itself physically, but, far beyond that, intellectually and morally.

Yet this life—and here is something I want to make clear—leaves man only a creature, not a son, of God. Sonship-life is not bios but zoe. This is the life that the New Testament keeps talking about as Jesus Christ gift to those who put their trust in him as their Saviour. It is distinct from, and in addition to, the life of nature which man possesses—the activity of the body, the intellect, and the conscience.

You have it in John 3:16—"that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

You have it in John 10:27, 28, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they

follow me; and I give unto them eternal life."

You have it in Romans 6:23—"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Now we are beginning to get our teeth into this thing that I have called the old difficulty. Man is by nature a creature of God, but not, properly speaking, a son. He is moreover, a self-centered, self-willed creature. This is his sin. This, until he be changed, is his doom.

Nevertheless, in the state of creature-hood, there are many ways in which man can improve himself. Using the natural powers of body, mind, and conscience with which God has endowed him, he can rise to high levels of culture, of art, of industry, of government and of social justice. In short, he can make himself relatively nice.

In fact we Christians are sometimes put on the spot by some huffy individual who says, "Look here, I know a Mr. Pleasant who doesn't profess to be a Christian, and I know a Mr. Touchy who does. Mr. Pleasant has a much more charming manner and a much gentler tongue than Mr. Touchy, who often has to be handled with kid gloves if you don't want to feel the sting of his irritability. I think Mr. Pleasant without a profession is a better Christian than Mr. Touchy with one."

Well, there's always the possibility that a Mr. Touchy is Christian in name only. But it is possible to suppose that he really has given himself to Christ and has received the gift of new life through Christ. If so, there are at least three things to be said about his case in comparison with that of Mr. Pleasant. The first is that Mr. Touchy, if Christ is really manager of him, is on his way to being a much better sample of Christian living than he is now. But that's a story somewhat by itself, involving further and deeper crisis in Mr. Touchy's life, further and richer growth.

The second thing to be said is that drawing a quick contrast between Mr. Pleasant's gentle manner and Mr. Touchy's sometimes grouchy mood is not really getting down to the fundamental issue. The real question is: what would Mr. Touchy's manner be if he weren't a Christian, and what might be Mr. Pleasant's if he were?

The third comment to be made is that if you will take the pains to dig into the matter, you will find that Mr. Pleasant looks upon his niceness as his own. He may not say it in so many words but in reality he takes credit for it. Chances are he takes so much credit, is so self-confident and self-reliant, that he doesn't feel he needs the Saviour, Jesus Christ. That is his pride. That, moreover, so long as it continues, is both his sin and his doom.

Mr. Touchy, on the other hand, assuming that he is a real child of God through attachment to Jesus Christ, is humbled by his lack of Christlikeness, seeks a secret of victoriousness which for the present he doesn't possess, and ascribes every virtue and every victory which his life does manifest not to himself but to the great grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The difference between these two men is therefore so great that the Bible likens it to the difference between death and life. It is the difference between being a creature and being a son. It is the difference between a state of nature and a state of grace.

This brings us to the third of the old things that lie behind the new things of the Christian Gospel. Besides the old dilemma and the old difficulty, there is the old delusion. The delusion is that by some trick of ours, some new effort, some new improvement of ourselves, we can by ourselves build the bridge and walk across it, and so pass from being a creature to being a son.

This mistaken notion is helped along, it seems to me, by the fact, which we have already seen, that man the creature is able to doctor himself up here and there, take on the polish of education and civilization, and, in general, make himself pretty presentable before his fellow creatures. All the while he remains in the state of creature-hood, self-centered, self-reliant, self-complacent. He isn't in the gutter. He doesn't stagger along Skid Row. He languishes within no prison cell. But he is a once-born chap, trying to hire out as his own savior.

I grew up in California. I've been away from it long enough not to brag on it fanatically, but I know it well enough to affirm to all comers that it is a great state. One of its unique features is that it contains both the highest and the lowest points in the United States—Mount Whitney and Death Valley. That means that you can pant in the heat of Death Valley or you can thrill to the bracing air and breathtaking beauty of Mount Whitney, but you are still in the state of California.

Likewise, you may be a vicious criminal behind bars or you may be a college president behind a mahogany desk. In either case, if you have never had your self-conceit shattered, never given up the notion that you can save yourself, never confessed your guilt and pride to God and trusted the grace he reveals in Christ to save you, you are still in the state of a creature. You are not a son. To fancy that you are, or that you have it in you to make yourself one, is a delusion. It is the same delusion precisely that Jesus tried to tear away from the minds of men long ago, when he said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13).

These are the old things—the old dilemma, the old difficulty, the old delusion—of which we must clear the ground if we are going to embrace and realize the glorious new things which Christ sets before us in our text.

WHAT MAKES IT EASY

An old flagman in the service of an Eastern railway was stricken with a heart attack as he was running back along the track to flag a train that he knew was nearly due. Despite extreme suffering that rendered him almost unconscious, he planted his torpedoes on the rails and then rolled to the side of the embankment as the engine thundered by. His first words as he regained consciousness were, "Did I stop them?" When assured that he had, the old man turned over and said, "Well, that makes dyin' easy." He never spoke after that.

Is there anything that can so comfort and compensate the human heart when life flows from it, as the consciousness of some unselfish service or generous kindness performed behalf of others? Someone has said, "God gave us memory so that we could have roses in December." It is self-evident, however, that no one can have roses in December, even in memory, unless he plants and cares for them carefully in their proper season.—The Wesleyan Youth.